Party has in the last two years mounted splendid and (for politicians) philosophically rich campaigns in defense of heterosexual marriage, mothers-at-home, and the very definition of “family.” The managerial elites have howled, but ground may have been won back. Gottfried also dismisses the possibility that new immigrants might come to the defense of the old morality. “In-group cohesiveness,” he says, “has not caused them to rally to the threatened social traditions of their hosts.” But this is not always true. One notable example occurred several years ago in Britain, when the government issued the “Swann Report,” calling for an end to the teaching of Christian faith and the practice of Christian worship in the state schools. While the frail Anglican Church wavered in its own defense, it was the Islamic Academy of Cambridge and the Islamic Cultural Centre in London which aggressively lobbied to retain Christian teaching and worship in the state schools, as symbols of the need for a school curriculum that respected the sacred.

My philosophical dissent from Gottfried’s analysis comes on the question of whether there ever was a sustainable Whig liberalism. The whole bourgeois liberal revolution—including the turn to competitive labor markets, the liberation of the individual from feudal restraints, the assault on the patriarchal family, and the challenge to religious authority starting in areas such as usury—set forces in motion that could not be stopped. The Whiggish worlds of early nineteenth-century England and America or of the last decades of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were not stable societies, but rather communities caught in a slowed transition, held back to some degree by inherited class stratifications, but ones already doomed in the long run. This, not the passage of time, is the real reason for the impossibility of their duplication in our age.

Paul Gottfried’s After Liberalism is a powerful and disturbing book, a major work of political philosophy for an age where truth and clear thought are rare. All who read it will gain fresh insight into this nation’s moral and intellectual disorders, and also its political paralysis.

Unhappy Worshiper in “The Last True Church”
BRYCE J. CHRISTENSEN


IF THE 1960s WERE—as historian David Courtwright has suggested—“the hinge of modern American history,” then Alvin Kernan has much to tell us in these memoirs about just what was set swinging during this tumultuous era. For as a professor and an administrator at Yale University, Kernan witnessed up close the cultural revolution wrought during this tempestuous decade. True, it was not until nearly the end of the decade in question that the “trouble and disorder” which had erupted on other campuses first began “to threaten the stability of the Ivy League.” But by the fall of 1969, “the old academic order was obviously disintegrating everywhere,” even in the previously secure halls of Yale.

The most publicized events in the breakdown of academic order at Yale were those surrounding the trial of Bobby Seale, the gangster drug lord and leader of the Black Panther Party, for the torture and murder of a follower suspected of having turned police informant. Kernan

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Modern Age
details the fractious campus drama acted out by “radical blacks, angry faculty, outside militants, and outraged students.” Under his intelligent scrutiny, much of the revolutionary ardor of the “very weird cast of characters” who gathered in New Haven to protest on behalf of Mr. Seale dissolves into “showbiz and hype,” more of a carnival staged by people “out looking for a little excitement” than an earnest attempt to overthrow a political regime which they loudly denounced as oppressive and corrupt. Still, for all its silly histrionics, the campus revolution did reflect “a direct challenge to the rational principles on which Western society was built,” the outbreak of “a great culture war.” And very early on in this culture war, perceptive observers such as Kernan realized “how little...the university could count on some of its own to share in the defense of its traditional values.” With frightening rapidity, university administrators “lost [their] ability to defend [the university] against a group of militant students in possession of a deeply known, unquestioned, gnostic truth.”

Since he himself held administrative responsibilities at the time, it is entirely predictable that Kernan would resist the allegation that university administrators “simply lost their nerve in the late 1960s and gave the store away.” But since he was also a prominent professor of literature, it may come as a surprise that Kernan owns up to the responsibility he shares with other professors of literature who unintentionally fostered the campus rebellion which so overwhelmed the university community. In thrill to the theorizing of Lionel Trilling, Kernan and his literary colleagues attempted during the 1950s and 1960s to add to the canon such works as Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy, Freud’s Civilization and Its Discontents, and Kafka’s Metamorphosis in an attempt to prod students “to ask every question forbidden in polite society.” Their pedagogical aim was “to get [students] to look critically at such optimistic ideas as progress and rationality.” But such teaching merely inscribed “a bitter line of hostility to civilization” in students who went on to become “the vanguard of the Great Refusal and the New Left,” the implacable foes of “the old meritocratic and scientific university.”

Nor as Kernan relates his later career at Princeton does he shrink from confronting the long-term effects of the forces he helped let loose. “The causes that the students tried to force on the universities in the sixties by activism,” he laments, “were largely put in place by government in the seventies and eighties by fiat.” This “ politicization of higher education” stripped administrators of their traditional authority and turned them into “crisis managers trying to satisfy conflicting constituencies (and comply with federal and state regulations).” These conflicting constituencies—defined by the imperatives of class, ethnicity, gender, and ideology—largely destroyed the civil comity of the university, with each academic faction “insist[ing] with a raspy rhetoric, that the university purge itself of its sins and force the world to do likewise.”

The “raspy rhetoric” of the professors in Kernan’s own discipline of literary criticism persuaded students that “all writers are politically subversive” and that when they approach a work of literature, their task is to “read only until [they] find the victim.” Debased by this kind of ideological theorizing, the typical academic literary conference metamorphosed into “a white-male-bashing gala.” The radicalism prevalent in literary criticism soon spread across the campus to such a degree that “anyone with doubts tended just to shut up.” Consequently, “small groups of activists acquired power on campus far in excess of their numbers,” power sufficient to “turn tyrannical” in the enforcement of “political cor-
rectness" on students and faculty alike. When confronted by such activists, weary university administrators "tended to give in to preserve the peace and...simply to buy their way out of trouble."

During his years in academe, Kernan saw professors likewise trying to buy their way out of trouble, giving out unearned A's and B's to avoid the wrath of students now quick to file lawsuits against those who damaged their fragile self-esteem. The sorry result was "the breakdown of the authority that a realistic grading system once conferred on teachers and institutions." With both administrators and faculty having forfeited their traditional dignity, the university was soon pervaded with "ill will and distrust...a smog of suspicions." It greatly grieves Kernan that "that feeling of great achievement [which once characterized the university] is gone now almost without a trace, disappearing into its own impossibility." He writes with great sadness of how "relativism and politicization...filled the vacuum when the old dreams of absolute truth and great learning failed," leaving the university "fragmented, nervous, uncertain, demoralized."

To readers familiar with higher education in contemporary America, Kernan’s depressing litany of academic ills will come as no surprise. What will come as a surprise is the absurdly Panglossian conclusion which he appends to an otherwise damning expose. In his concluding paragraphs, Kernan concedes that the modern university has developed "some very rough edges and a strident ideology." Yet he warns his readers that "it would be a waste of time and patience to keep on wrangling with one another about whether the old ways were right and the new ways are wrong. What we can do is accept that we have a new, democratic kind of higher education, one that will fit the interests and values of twenty-first-century America in many fundamental and important ways." Given the gravity of the institutional failings which he himself has identified, how can Kernan possibly counsel readers to accept the modern university as a worthy guide for the future of American society?

To answer this question, we might possibly consider how much Kernan’s attitude toward the university resembles that of Wayne Booth, another prominent literary critic who has likewise decried the irrational politics so prominent in academe since the 1960s but who also has stopped well short of challenging the prerogative of the university to shape America’s future. For in the lives of both Booth and Kernan, we see an intellectual pilgrimage in which inherited religious doctrines have given way to a dubious secular faith in the human intellect, a faith in which the university itself serves as a surrogate church.

Both Booth and Kernan grew up in small Western towns (Booth in Spanish Fork, Utah; Kernan in Saratoga, Wyoming), which they left far behind when they moved east to make their careers in academe. Raised as a Mormon, Booth abandoned his childhood faith while an undergraduate and passed through "a period of what [he] called atheism." Kernan likewise informs us that as an undergraduate he was "atheistical-Protestant" in his views. Booth explains that he eventually came to worship "a God who is the totality of Reason in Action in the World" and accordingly to "make a church out of the home of reason—the college, the university." For Booth, the university deserves homage as "the last true church." Though less explicit in spelling out the quasi-religious function of the university in his life, Kernan writes with great feeling in describing the reverence with which he first contemplated the "Georgian brick buildings and nineteenth-century Gothic stone" of Williams College, which he attended as an undergraduate, and he acknowledges that when he later considered the possibility of
becoming a college president, he dreamed of serving as “an apostle of the intellectual life.” Kernan apparently aspired to a lofty ordination in “the last true church.” By converting the secular university into a surrogate church, Booth and Kernan may have assuaged their inner hungers. But they severely compromised their perspectives as critics of academe.

Because he never mistook the university for a church nor a university administrator for an apostle, John Henry Cardinal Newman was able to warn—more than 150 years ago—against the philosophical confusion of those who would invest an unwarranted faith in secular education. Newman soberly anticipated that as the academic community repudiated the Church’s ecclesiastical authority and rejected the sacred prerogative of theology to act “as umpire between truth and truth...assign[ing] to all their order and precedence,” students who passed through university classes would increasingly become “victims of an intense self-contemplation” because they would make “their own minds their sanctuary.”

In the academic malaise which Kernan so richly documents, we see ample evidence of the baleful effects of such self-contemplation and self-worship. But the flaccid conclusion to his memoirs tells us only too well that he can see no good way to avoid these evils. He may complain (as Booth has occasionally complained) about this or that doctrine or practice in his surrogate church. But so long as the university represents for them the most sacred of human associations, neither Kernan nor Booth will ever give a truly thorough-going critique of higher education nor challenge the authority of secular intellectuals to lead and shape society. How could they? What source of authority or intellectual life remains for secular apostates from “the last true church”? It comes as no surprise that while Booth has deplored the “warfare of fanatical sects and schisms” within his surrogate church, he has continued to deliver “academic sermons,” hopeful that “this church may have a future after all.” In the same spirit Kernan speaks of academe as a world he and others have “railed against many times but have never quite been able to leave.” No wonder that although he concedes that “[his] heart is with the old academic order,” he cannot agree with those who view the changes since the 1960s as “an educational catastrophe.” “The new democratic universities,” he writes, “will in time make necessary compromises and settle into their own institutional forms to educate people to their own ends.”

Such intellectual lassitude makes it difficult to credit Kernan—for all his well-justified complaints about the modern university—with the virtues of integrity or valor. It is therefore difficult to view him as a genuine heretic within his surrogate church. For the heretic, as Professor George Panichas has argued, often “embodies the religious spirit in concentrated form” and may deserve our respect as one who “courageously accepts the consequences of his actions,” even when he has not earned our assent.1 Never bold enough to nail his theses to the door of the secular cathedral nor to look for a higher seat of authority and truth, Kernan looks not like a heretic, but merely like a carping and querulous former priest, unhappy about changes in the liturgy but nevertheless unwilling to withdraw his credence from the increasingly bizarre rituals of a church offering neither salvation nor truth.

1. The Critical Legacy of Irving Babbitt (Wilmington, Delaware, 1999), 88-89.