

THE NAZARENE COLD WAR WITH REASON:  
A CONSIDERATION OF THE 1952 PHILOSOPHY OF EDUCATION FOR THE CHURCH  
OF THE NAZARENE.

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The United States and the (now defunct) USSR had a very strange relationship after the second world war. Although they fought as allies during that conflict, any kindly diplomatic language about the other during the war was mostly lip service to serve greater ends, the defeat of the Axis powers. In fact, well before the rise of Nazi Germany, The US and the USSR were already actively engaged in a cultural war, both decrying the danger and political inadequacy of the other. That cultural war stands as both a background to the church's 1952 statement, and as an apt (and in some pockets on-going) metaphor for the Nazarene church's suspicion of reason, especially as it applied to the philosophical under-pinnings of science. In this essay I shall address three major themes. First, I shall discuss presumptions about relating the idea of a soul to a self as presumed in that document. Next, I shall discuss underlying worries of the Nazarene statement regarding pragmatism as a kind of out-cropping of materialism. Finally, I will consider the statement's stance on Evolution, and identify what I take to be some of the key worries of the educational statement's framers.

Just as taking a strong, unambiguous stance on political philosophy was a quintessential way to differentiate one's self from "the Reds", so too were strong stances on the underlying philosophical assumptions which seemed to lead to such a mistaken view also required: As the 1952 statement reads, "The antithesis of the philosophy of Nazarene education is that of materialism. From these have come behaviorism in psychology, denying the reality of the self or soul [...]" Of course, 'Materialism' was a power word in Marxist/Communist thinking, and had taken on semantic shades well beyond that of merely affirming humans as made of physical matter. That materialism denies the reality of the *soul* might be demanded, if one stipulates the soul as being some kind of ghostly, non-physical Cartesian entity. But that materialism denies the reality of a *self* is nothing but old-school, metaphysical fear-mongering. One can perfectly well jettison the whole idea of ghostly souls and yet still affirm the existence of a self (as the brain) and the resurrection of a material body at The Last Judgment.

Part of this peculiar worry over whether the self or soul was real had its basis in *ad hoc* commitments that many early 20th century holiness intellectuals had to a position called 'Bostonian personalism'. This philosophy was a kind of potpourri mixture of theology, philosophy, and science, all in one movement, a convenient stew-pot philosophy for a self-described stew-pot nation. It holds that ultimate value and reality are found in the category and reality of personhood. God has this absolutely, not surprisingly, yet humans also have it, either

derivatively or analogically (depending on the flavor of personalism preferred). Persons are both subjectively real (as each of us feel) and objectively real (existing in the strongest metaphysical sense). Thus, given these commitments floating around the Nazarene intelligentsia at that time, it is no surprise that explaining human and animal behavior strictly in terms of conditioning, without appeal to thoughts or feelings would be, at the very least, an unattractive thesis when put forth by the behaviorist psychologists. Furthermore, still influential at this time would have been an evolving strain of positivism, drawn (whether correctly or not) from the early writings of the philosopher Wittgenstein. Advocates of positivism would have doubted that such metaphysical phrases like "mental entities" and "souls" were even meaningful language, much less real items to be found among the furniture of reality. That behaviors can be observed, quantified, and influenced by empirical methods is no longer controversial. Yet claiming that the collection of actual and potential behaviors *just are* what we mean by a self is a position that has passed out of fashion, mostly because scientists have "opened the box," so to speak, with real-time MRI scans and neuro-pharmacological studies of the brain.

Another feared implication of materialism (so understood) was "pragmatism in philosophy, denying a realm of ultimate, stable, and final truth," again to quote from the 1952 statement. Like personalism, Pragmatism too would fall under the category of an American, stew-pot philosophy, with several purveyors and flavors. Pragmatism arises around 1870, and is considered a unique American contribution to the broader development of Philosophy as a discipline. It is especially ironic that Pragmatism was listed as a threatening position, since its most famous purveyor, William James, held that "once we use what he introduced as the 'pragmatic method' to clarify our understanding of truth, of free will, or of religious belief, the disputes—which we despaired of settling intellectually— begin to dissolve." On James' view, then, "Pragmatism is important because it offers a way of overcoming the dilemma, a way of seeing that, for example, science, morality and religion are not in competition."<sup>1</sup> But another purveyor of American pragmatism, John Dewey, is probably responsible for why the Nazarene theologians drew their target as they did. Dewey thought that the pragmatic approach "requires that we locate the conditions of warrant for our value judgments in human conduct itself, not in any *a priori* fixed reference point outside of conduct, such as in God's commands, Platonic Forms, pure reason, or 'nature,' considered as giving humans a fixed *telos*."<sup>2</sup> That kind of talk

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<sup>1</sup> Goodman, Russell, "William James", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Winter 2009 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2009/entries/james/>.

<sup>2</sup> Anderson, Elizabeth, "Dewey's Moral Philosophy", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2010/entries/dewey-moral/>.

would certainly make church leaders nervous; such, then, is probably why the very next phrase in the statement of education continues, "...and humanism in religion, denying the supernatural."

In marking the difference between James and Dewey, it should be noted Pragmatism cuts both ways as regards religion. Intellectuals in the Nazarene church had the opportunity and rational basis to bring-in Pragmatism in support of Christian education, but instead opted to completely reject the movement. Among the reasons were likely too close a family resemblance of its empiricist approaches to community and politics as akin to what advocates of Marxism and Communism were claiming at the time. As examples, Joseph Stalin, still in office at the time of the Nazarene educational statement, was acting as Secretariat General of the USSR; and in his *Concerning the Agrarian Question* was especially concerned with what was "the practical basis" and the "practical point of view" and the "practical differences" of action, and explicitly downplayed appeal to principles in land division and control.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, in his *Speech at the Opening of the 'Conference of Communists of the Tyurk People of the R.S.F.S.R.'* he emphasized "practical work", "practical struggle", and "practical experience".<sup>4</sup> Other era-specific appeals to Pragmatism-friendly vocabulary use by subordinate and lesser Communist leaders could easily be adduced.

Finally, some remarks should be made about the educational statement's view of evolution. Here it states, "Naturalistic evolution is accepted as the explanation of the universe as a growing, developing process finally resulting in man,[...]" Any discussion of the meaning of Evolution must rightly be sensitive to context. The document might be referring here to the particular molecular and biological coding system for inherited traits of organisms; or, it might be speaking more widely of natural selection; or, perhaps there is yet some even broader view being addressed.

The first sense should be precluded, for it was only then discovered eight years earlier, in 1944, that DNA holds the genetic information of all biological systems. And it would still be a year after the educational statement that the molecular structure of DNA would be conclusively demonstrated by James Watson and Francis Crick. It would have been too soon for any deep implications of this to have percolated into the structured thinking of systematic theology. (We are not so comfortably naïve about this today.)

The second sense should be precluded also. Had the statement spoken of "a growing, developing process *recently* resulting in man," this would have been a more straight-forward scientific claim

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<sup>3</sup> Joseph Stalin "*Works*, Vol. 1, November 1901 - April 1907", Foreign Languages Publishing House, Moscow, 1954)

<sup>4</sup> *Works*, Vol. 5, 1921 - 1923, Ibid.

about Biology and its foundational assumption concerning natural selection by means of descent with modification. But that is precluded by the most interesting component of this definition, the injection of the word 'finally', which carries an additional connotation of *telos*.

Thus, the preferred sense of the term 'Evolution' being addressed here concerns a broader claim about developments of history in the most cosmological sense. Saying that evolutionary forces shape the patterns of biodiversity observed in nature is a far more constrained and less controversial claim than saying that these forces are an explanation of the dynamic structure of the whole universe.

But in 1952, large macro-theories of the development of history were still in vogue. That nature had its own kind of historical development was one essential integrating claim of Darwin's observations. But also in the air would have been Henry Bergson's theories of a vital life force (*elan vital*) operating within history, along with a more mystical (if circumlocutious) version of a similar idea (Orthogenesis) purported by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Both these latter views would find the true way of knowledge in the broadest themes of the historical development of what is real (or, better, Real). Yet the patron saints of Communism, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels also had macro-theories of historical development, if much more earthly ones, and these rode under the religiously disconcerting title of Historical Materialism. Karl Marx's notion of history emphasized the idea that forms of society wax and wane as they support or threaten the development of human productive power. This fully and secular humanist version of historical development could only have worried Nazarene intellectuals and, as with pragmatism, appeared to have driven them to take a total vaccination against any pan-metaphysical theory of Evolution.

Today, however, the issue within the Nazarene church over Evolution seems to hinge more acutely upon anthropological views of human development and distinction rather than upon the cosmological development of the universe. It would remain to be seen how the church would respond should hypotheses about an evolving inflationary multi-verse in Physics turn out to be as empirically overwhelming as has molecular genetics in Biology.