

We are entering into an era as radically different from the modern era as the Renaissance was from the Middle Ages . . .

# NIETZSCHE, GENERATION X, AND THE FUTURE POSTMODERN CURRICULUM

Don G. Smith

I invite you to join me on a speculative journey into the present and not-too-distant future of American public schooling. To properly understand where we are going, however, we must understand where we are. And like it or not, and recognize it or not, we have entered the postmodern era. We are entering into an era as radically different from the modern era as the Renaissance was from the Middle Ages, as radically different from the modern era as the Enlightenment was from the Renaissance. I am reminded of Henry Adams, who, in *The Education of Henry Adams* (1907), wrestled with the attitude that his formal and informal liberal education had proven useless for dealing with the blinding changes of modernization. Now, modernism itself has waned, and the postmodern is in ascendancy. But before going on, let's be clear about how I am defining postmodernism.

I find Peter Sacks' contrasting of modernism and postmodernism most helpful. In his book *Generation X Goes to College*, Sacks contrasts the two world views in regard to nature of knowledge, media and society, and authorities:

## Nature of Knowledge

Traits of Modernism: Trust in reason, objective reality, and scientific method.

Traits of Postmodernism: Tendency toward relativism, subjectivism.

## Media and Society

Traits of Modernism: Belief in progress, perfection of society, the Protestant ethic, and an emancipatory press.

Traits of Postmodernism: Spectacle of mass produced images; dominance of entertainment values.

## Authorities

Traits of Modernism: Trust in democratic institutions, hegemony of producers and elites.

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Traits of Postmodernism: Delegitimization of institutions, sanctity of popular culturalism and popular entitlements: hyperconsumerism; dreams and heroes dead.<sup>1</sup>

Perhaps the greatest prophet of postmodernism was Friedrich Nietzsche. Postmodernism occurs with the arrival of what he describes as *nihilism*. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche writes that nihilism occurs when human beings see no purpose greater than themselves. They lose faith in both the guiding principles of religion and in the guiding principles of the state. Thereafter, people are set adrift. Nietzsche explains the cause of postmodernism's tendency toward relativism and subjectivism:

What has happened, at bottom? The feeling of valuelessness was reached with the realization that the overall character of existence may not be interpreted by means of the concept of 'aim,' the concept of 'unity,' or the concept of 'truth.' Existence has no goal or end; any comprehensive unity in the plurality of events is lacking; the character of existence is not 'true,' is false. One simply lacks any reason for convincing oneself that there is a true world. Briefly: the categories 'aim,' 'unity,' 'being' which we used to project some value into the world—we pull out again; so the world looks valueless . . . Conclusion: The faith in the categories of reason is the cause of nihilism. We have measured the value of the world according to categories that refer to a purely fictitious world.<sup>2</sup>

Nietzsche then describes the nihilist's rejection of modern society's faith in progress:

'Mankind' does not advance, it does not even exist. The over-all aspect is that of a tremendous experimental laboratory in which a few successes are scored, scattered throughout all ages, while there are untold failures, and all order, logic, union, and obligingness are lacking . . . Man represents no progress over the animal.<sup>3</sup>

In regard to postmodernism's delegitimization of institutions and authority, Nietzsche argues that skepticism and libertinism are both consequences of decadence. We no longer believe in legitimate authority or in a set of values that we are willing to defend, live for, and possibly die for. As a result, social institutions lack the power to shape our values and win our allegiance to anything beyond ourselves and our own quest for pleasure.

I wish to make one more thing clear before we go on. I do not believe that Nietzsche has directly influenced postmodernist America, certainly not as Allan Bloom gives Nietzsche credit for doing in his best-selling *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). America does not react to what she reads in books. She reacts to what she "sees" on television. Even newspaper readership is waning, especially among members of Generation X. Therefore Nietzsche's direct influence has been considerably less than Bloom postulates. Nevertheless, I return to Nietzsche because he was such a profound and accurate prophet. So, as he predicted, Western Culture is decadent, in the throes of nihilism—and this nihilistic age has been dubbed it "postmodern." But before going on to a discussion of Generation X and the future curriculum, we need to explore what Nietzsche has to say about the decadence of western culture. Such an exploration is necessary because it throws light on the postmodern current demand for multiculturalism in all facets of life, including the school.

In a world in which all metanarratives or comprehensive explanations of life are suspect, it seems necessary to place all "voices" and all "narratives" on equal footing. The Western perspective which trusts reason, objective reality, and scientific method should be constantly challenged in society (and in the classroom) by the subjectivism of chosen minority classes, by

the anti-rationalism of radical feminism, and by the voices of those who view "objective reality" as simply the hegemony of the status quo. But why have the children of western culture turned on their cultural heritage with such vengeance? Nietzsche suggests that western culture has become decadent, no longer willing to struggle for its own existence. Western culture, due to pervasive nihilism, now considers itself indefensible and unworthy of transmission. In the collective, Western culture has been shown unwilling to mount any sustained or comprehensive defense against the direct challenge of postmodernism. *Postmodern* has become the descriptor of the West in its decadence.

In *Curriculum Development in the Postmodern Era*, Patrick Slattery writes that "holistic perspective is essential for the emergence of compassion, optimal learning environments, nonviolent conflict resolution, just relationships and ecological sustainability."<sup>4</sup> Many representative postmodern multicultural texts make clear that a holistic perspective must be a non-Western perspective. This is the case because multicultural postmodernists argue that Western culture is the world's primary source of hard-heartedness, oppressive learning environments, violent conflict resolution, unjust relationships, and ecological destruction. As the student's chanted a few years ago with Jesse Jackson at Stanford, "Hey hey, ho ho, Western culture's gotta go!"

A fair examination will, of course, reveal that Western culture has generated its share of negative influences. Yet the same fair examination will also reveal the greatness of Western culture. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. writes:

Whatever the particular crimes of Europe, that continent is also the source—the unique source—of those liberating ideas of individual liberty, political democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and cultural freedom that constitute our most precious legacy and to which most of the world today aspires. These are European ideas, not Asian, nor African, nor Middle Eastern ideas, except by adoption.<sup>5</sup>

Anyone familiar with history should also in fairness note the atrocities committed in Asia, Africa, the Middle East, etc., by indigenous cultures. The point here is that generations of Americans are now being reared and schooled to view all cultures, all people, and all world views as equal (or at least to view other cultures superior to Western Culture). Generation X, for example, is unwilling to discriminate among governmental, economic, and ethical systems. As Generation X condemns ethical distinctions as closed-minded, it condemns aesthetic ones likewise. Who is to say whether or not Shakespeare is aesthetically superior to a Harlequin Romance? It is all just a matter of opinion, says Generation X, reflecting the current climate of opinion. Furthermore, since white males have historically been the opinion-makers of Western culture, everything they opined regarding the traditional literary canon is subject to deconstruction. Unfortunately, a critical mass of parents, teachers, and school administrators (all victims of the same nihilistic schooling) are unable and unwilling to defend liberal education as we have known it. Hence, postmodernism becomes the prevailing cultural interpretation by default.

So what will be the characteristics of the future curriculum? In an effort to throw light on that question, we shall examine the following curricular areas: 1) the basic skills, 2) the arts, 3) history, 4) the sciences, and 5) philosophy and religion.

The basic skills, of course, are those of reading, writing, speaking, thinking, and ciphering (or mathematics). As communication skills, these basics depend on the mastery of linguistic and mathematical communication.

According to Nietzsche:

We believe in reason: this, however, is the philosophy of gray concepts. Language depends on the most naive

prejudices. Now we read disharmonies and problems into things because we think only in the form of language—and thus believe in the 'eternal truth' of 'reason (e.g., subject, attribute, etc.); We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language. We barely reach the doubt that sees this limitation as a limitation. Rational thought is interpretation according to a scheme that we cannot throw off.<sup>6</sup>

According to Nietzsche, reason depends on language, and because language produces distortion due to perspective, the search for undistorted truth is illusory. Because language makes survival possible, we must use language knowing that we traffic in untruths for pragmatic reasons. As Tracy B. Strong writes ". . . the present structure of human understanding forces men to continue searching for that which their understanding tells them is not to be found. This is the epistemology of nihilism."<sup>7</sup> (Strong, p. 77).

Mathematics, too, is a language, that enables human beings to make sense of their world. Though mathematical and verbal language put human beings on the moon, for postmodernists the same holds true for numerical symbols as for alphabets. Both are survival tools that tell us nothing about "reality." According to Nietzsche, we must understand that language is a survival tool that accounts for the genealogy of world views and philosophical systems. Or, as Strong writes, "The language game and the genealogical investigation are analogous and are in the service of a similar purpose: the liberation of men from the unknown chains that bind them prisoner to a particular and destructive manner of viewing the world."<sup>8</sup>

Today, we hear that the reason-dependent perspectives of Western culture are destructive approaches to viewing the world and that alternative perspectives are necessary. After all, every perspective is ultimately illusory, so why should Western perspectives ultimately hold sway? Hence, the call for dogmatic pluralism and multiculturalism. In his essay "What's All the Fuss about This Postmodernist Stuff," Barry W. Sarchett<sup>9</sup> appeals to Ferdinand de Saussure's structuralist theory of language and to Jacques Derrida's poststructuralism in an effort to demonstrate the indeterminacy of language. It seems that words mean whatever the powerful deem them to mean, and these words construct "realities" and perspectives that maintain the power of the status quo. Language, while serving as a tool for survival, also serves as a tool of power and oppression. Since language dictates how we think, the basic skill of reason is on just as precarious a ground as that of language. As postmodernists, multiculturalists, and pluralists argue, reason, though a survival skill, is also a tool of power and oppression.

So what does the future hold for the basic skills? Well, if it follows that language and thinking are necessary for survival, but that they do not lead us to an understanding of reality, there will be an uneasy mixture of the three R's along with an attempt to empower the unempowered by means of downplaying such concepts as "correct and incorrect usage" and "rational and irrational thought." We have already seen examples of this trend in many elementary school language arts teachers' dismissal of "correct" spelling as an imperative. According to postmodernist thinking, it is more important to allow the free and full expression of students without encumbering them with stifling concerns about correctness. We have seen the trend exemplified in teachers' reluctance to correct students who reach conclusions not supported by relevant data. After all, according to postmodernist theory, data is just indeterminate language, so students should be encouraged simply to reach "their own" conclusions irrespective of what reason would dictate. If language and reason are mere tools that don't tell us anything authoritative about a real world, then "correct opinions" are arbitrary, and one opinion is just as good as the next. Such approaches probably go far in accounting for the twenty-

year decline in language and reading scores on ACT and SAT tests.

The most recent example of the postmodern trend in basics education is the move by the Oakland (California) School District to classify "ebonics," or Afro-American dialect (or black slang), as a separate language. Of course, if language is indeterminate, the Oakland School District can call a dialect a language, slang a dialect, or a language slang if they so choose, but the more significant issue is that the acceptance of ebonics defies the logic of language. For example, if singular subjects do not require singular verbs and plural subjects plural verbs, then communication is hampered because the structure of that communication is illogical. Here, the survival function of language might be called into question. If in a job interview a Black student says, "I be really interested in this job," the student will probably not get the job (unless some pluralistic-minded university professor is doing the hiring). Therefore, the push for ebonics as a legitimate language might be short lived. Certainly, the attempted legitimization of ebonics has been a well-deserved target of widespread scorn and ridicule from both Whites and Blacks. I predict, however, that the postmodern climate might prevail here. If so, Black students will circumvent secondary and post-secondary language requirements by claiming that they are already bilingual and need not study a "second language." Thereafter, personnel managers in the private sector will be sued for refusing to hire Black applicants who speak "incorrect English." The foundation for such outcomes resides in the conclusion that correctness is a tool used by the status quo to retain its power by oppressing those who do not adopt their ways of doing things and their ways of interpreting the world. I might pause to alert school board members and administrators that such challenges are in the offing. How will you respond?

We turn now to the future of the arts in formal education. Education in the arts today is undergoing rapid change. The most obvious example is literature study. As Gerald Graff writes in his preface to Richard Ohmann's *English in America: A Radical View of the Profession*, "The late Irving Howe is said to have remarked that whereas the radicals of his day wanted to change the world, the radicals of today just want to change the English department. Yet Howe of all people should know better, for changing the world by changing the English department is not the far-fetched project that his witticism makes it sound." In the postmodern age, the arts are not concerned with aesthetics; they are concerned with politics—perspectives meant to support or challenge the status quo. "Silenced" minority and feminist voices compete for a place in the canon at the expense of works considered great for centuries. Construing the arts curriculum as a tool for political power and social change is only one trend devoted to the radical alteration of the arts curriculum. The other is the contention by Generation X students that old books are hard to understand and irrelevant to today's world. After all Shakespeare wrote differently than contemporary newspaper columnists write and he did not comment on American racial relations; and Milton did not address the Vietnam War or unemployment in the twenty-first century! Also, unlike the television and movie screens and newspapers, great books require self-discipline and serious attention on the part of the student. For those reasons, the great books are not entertaining enough, and if a book is not immediately entertaining, it is not good or worthy of Generation X's time investment. Generation X wants to be entertained, and English departments around the country are eager to oblige. Consider Jon Anderson's article in the Chicago Tribune titled "English Classes of Tomorrow will be Business as Unusual." Anderson writes:

In an era of electronic innovation, one might expect 9,000 English teachers to stand defiant against the

decline of the printed world sort of a Chancer's Last Stand mindset.

But no. The mood at this week's gathering of the National Council of Teachers of English, where one session was called 'Reading Television With a Writer's Eye,' was more 'if you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em.'<sup>11</sup>

In the article, Anderson invites Beverly Ann Chin, President of the National Council of Teachers of English, to give her vision of the English classroom in the year 2025:

Waving her hands, Chin pictured a room with books, computers, CD-ROMs and other technology linking students throughout the building and around the world.

Students would talk on-line about books they had read, then share their own poems and stories, opening the world to each other, she said.<sup>12</sup>

Other innovations of the future will apparently include "Humorology," an educational approach that allows students to study stand-up comedy by learning to judge the effectiveness of comedians. We will be doing a fine job of creating media literacy and computer literacy, but apparently very little to promote general literacy or cultural literacy (as defined by E. D. Hirsch). The emphasis will be on helping students understand how words on television, in movies, and in emerging technologies "effect their own ideas, opinions and choices."<sup>13</sup> Note the emphasis on the students' own feelings and opinions, for these will be the focus of the curriculum in the next century. A picture might be worth a thousand words, but, unfortunately, if words are indeterminate, so are pictures and other images. Everything boils down to the perspective of the student, and since there are no privileged perspectives (or narratives) in postmodernism, all perspectives are presumably equal. The vast majority of students will agree that most writers in the traditional literary canon are difficult and boring—so, enough said. The future English curriculum will focus on popular culture—popular books, films, and television shows that are easy and entertaining.

And what will happen to the great works of Western culture. We need look no further than Harold Bloom's recent prediction:

The study of Western literature will also continue, but on the much more modest scale of our current Classics departments. What are now called 'Departments of English' will be renamed departments of 'Cultural Studies' where Batman comics, Mormon theme parks, television, movies, and rock will replace Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, and Wallace Stevens. Major, once elitist universities and colleges will still offer a few courses in Shakespeare, Milton, and their peers, but these will be taught by departments of three or four scholars, equivalent to teachers of ancient Greek and Latin.<sup>14</sup>

Other areas of the arts such as dance, film, painting, and music will go similar routes, yielding to what is entertaining, current, pluralistic, and multicultural.

We turn now to history. According to Nietzsche, since there are no correct starting points for asking historical questions, there can be no such thing as historical truth. Since "facts" are shaped by people's perspectives, there can be no permanent facts. History is simply constructions of the past based on the perspectives of the present. Since perspectives change with time, both what we consider historically significant and what we consider historically true changes with time. This is the postmodern position.

Nietzsche considered history noxious to life if approached from an antiquarian perspective, which seeks to cultivate an appreciation of the past for its own sake. Though often misused, antiquarian history does bind people to the past. With some reservations, Nietzsche is more favorably inclined toward

monumental history, which seeks to provide people with models of greatness through a depiction of great people, events, and periods of the past. He is most favorably inclined, however, toward critical history, the study of history for the purpose of dissolving the past: "Man must have, and from time to time use, the strength to break up and dissolve the past, in order to live: he does this by bringing it before the bar of judgment, interrogating it remorselessly, and finally condemning it. Every past, however, is worthy of being condemned for human affairs are always such that it is in them that human strengths and weaknesses become powerful."<sup>15</sup>

Though some advocates of history endorse monumental history, many of these do so with the desire to infuse young people with a sense of patriotism and dedication that postmodernists consider unmerited by the nation itself. Generation X, which distrusts the motives of history advocates, tends to agree with Nietzsche. Though some advocates of history endorse antiquarian history, Generation X considers such an approach a dull, boring, waste of time—a wallowing in dry dates and meaningless names for the sake of some nebulous educational goal. It seems that critical history is favored today by many pluralists and multiculturalists because it can easily be used to denigrate and condemn Western culture. Advocates of critical history call to judgment the people, events, and eras of Western culture, expose the bigotry and cruelty of each, and pass sentence: "Hey, hey, ho ho—Western culture's gotta go!" Generation X is mildly interested in this approach because it distrusts the veracity of what they were taught in their early years about the greatness of our nation and our culture. Still, none of the three perspectives we have reviewed is currently inspirational enough to coax most members of Generation X to study history willfully and seriously.

In response to the "crisis" ignited by Generation X's ignorance of history, the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools published *Building a History Curriculum: Guidelines for Teaching History in Schools* (1989). Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission then edited a book called *Historical Literacy: The Case for History in American Education*,<sup>16</sup> which reprints the Commission's 1989 study along with responses from scholars and teachers committed to the importance of history in the K-12 curriculum—and beyond. Among those making powerful and heartfelt arguments for the importance of history is Professor Michael Kammen, Newton C. Farr, Professor of American History and Culture at Cornell University, who writes that we should study history "To avoid the tendency to ascribe equal value to all relationships and events. Worse than no memory at all is the indiscriminating memory that cannot differentiate between important and inconsequential experiences."<sup>17</sup>

The trouble today is that nihilistic Generation X has bought the postmodern viewpoint which proclaims all relationships and events equal. Everything depends on one's "appropriation" of those events as either important or unimportant in one's own life. All is a matter of individual perspective.

Cajoling students to study seriously when truth does not exist and when all is a matter of mere perspective is a daunting (and probably impossible) task. Granted, history has been often taught atrociously in the past by teachers who neither understood nor loved history themselves, and oftentimes the driest textbooks have been used to transmit Euro-American history. Still, the problem today is one that a change of method will not cure. Postmodernism calls into question the very importance of history itself.

Still, engaging teaching methods can entertain, and here the advocates for history may have a chance. If history can be made more entertaining, there is a small chance that students will sit and absorb it. And the fact of the matter is that history can be made that entertaining. But in this post-literate age, his-

tory in the schools must rely on the visual image—on the film or television program.

As increasing numbers of Americans are getting their history from made-for-television movies and from the cinema of directors such as Oliver Stone. The difficulty is that these visual reproductions of history routinely and admittedly sacrifice accuracy for entertainment value. In postmodern America, however, accuracy is Out; entertainment value is In! In the future curriculum, accuracy (or truth, if you will) shall be sacrificed for entertainment value. Keep the kids awake and interested so they don't drop out and/or cause trouble! When faced with hard choices of this type in the past, American schooling has usually taken the path of least resistance. Of course, historical novels, which we must accurately classify under the arts, usually sacrifice historical accuracy for the sake of telling a good story. It is true that those novels have inspired some to value history and indeed to become historians, but in the future, history, as part of the curriculum, will be engulfed by the arts and nullified as a separate discipline. There will be no admission that this has been done, but the result will be the same. What Americans know of history in the future will depend on how screenwriters and directors re-create history for an entertainment-minded audience. History as a discipline will cease to exist at the K-12 level (much as geography has), and, undoubtedly, to some extent even in "higher education." Generation X would not have it any other way.

The natural sciences present a problem for pluralists and multiculturalists, and for those who would cater to the whims of Generation X. Political freedom depends on a foundation of economic freedom, and economic freedom in the future will depend increasingly on advancing technologies. Of course, the foundation of advancing technologies is the natural sciences. Unfortunately for Generation X and their fellow travelers in the educational establishment, the natural sciences cannot be made as easy and enjoyable as the pabulum which increasingly substitutes for the arts. The arts are disciplines, but, according to multiculturalists and some in the science community, they are "soft disciplines." Natural science is a "hard discipline." An American student's "creative" conclusion based on nothing but ignorance will not compete effectively with conclusions reached by disciplined students from other nations. Here lies the tension in the curriculum battle being fought today between those who wave the "Nation at Risk" report and warn us of a "rising tide of mediocrity" and those who argue that the curriculum should become a multicultural and popular culture free-for-all. The same people who encourage more minority members and women to become scientists are often the first to "debunk" the sovereignty of reason in the marketplace of ideas that science depends on. Yes, some scientific discoveries have originated in creative thought by scientists (i.e. Newton) who were as much alchemists as they were scientists. Yet, there is no denying that objectivity and reason form the foundation of science and make predictability and proof possible.

Of course, some effort has been made to portray natural science as a relativistic study, the most notable being Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970).<sup>18</sup> Essentially, Kuhn argues that science periodically undergoes paradigm shifts such as that from the pre-Copernican paradigm of the solar system to the Copernican, or from the Newtonian paradigm to the Einsteinian. Each paradigm contains within itself the terms, definition, and accepted facts that validate the paradigm. When a paradigm shift occurs the self-authenticating terms, definitions, and accepted facts change. The incommensurability of paradigms therefore renders natural science relative.

Kuhn, however, refused to go too far in throwing out logic and observation. Defending himself against critics, he argues that "To say that, in matters of theory-choice, the force of logic and observation cannot in principle be compelling is neither to

discard logic and observation nor to suggest that there are not good reasons for favoring one theory over another."<sup>19</sup> But radical relativist Paul Feyerabend bars no holds in his assault on a systematic rational method. He writes:

The idea of a fixed method, or of a fixed theory of rationality, rests on too naive a view of man and his social surroundings. To those who look at the rich material provided by history, and who are not intent on impoverishing it in order to please their lower instincts, their craving for intellectual security in the form of clarity, precision, 'objectivity', 'truth', it will become clear that there is only one principle that can be defended under all circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: *anything goes*.<sup>20</sup>

In effect, Feyerabend conducts a Nietzschean genealogy of natural science and finds its conclusions as relative as those of history and the arts. Defenders of objectivity and logic attribute the paradigm shifts in science to the self-correcting power of objectivity and logic—an argument for open-mindedness in natural science, but not an argument for intellectual anarchy. Intellectual anarchy, however, is the position of Generation X, and schools are faced with the problem of what to do with natural science in the postmodern curriculum. What will schools do?

This author posits that natural science will be the final modernist vs. postmodernist battleground. National security, economic vitality, and technological progress require that America produce scientists (and technicians familiar with science)—and, regardless of what intellectual anarchists say, scientific progress depends on objectivity and logic. As postmodernists ask us to see it, we can live with an ethical decline, but we cannot live with the technological decline that makes the ethical decline possible! We have for sometime experienced a decline in the number of natural science majors, which should surprise no one because schools are failing to adequately teach the basics of mathematics and the discipline of science itself. Note also the test results showing our students' appalling ignorance in the realm of science literacy.

Business, industry, and the military call for reforms while intellectual anarchists in the teaching profession call for more of "anything goes." We have already reached a critical mass of intellectual anarchists in the humanities, and in time the same will be true in the natural sciences. I predict that the problem will be eventually addressed by raising the pay of natural scientists so as to keep America sufficiently stocked and competitively vital. Science, however, will be a discipline cut off from the curriculum of the masses. It will be as esoteric an offering as traditional literature. Only the pay incentive will keep science departments from going the way of classics departments. The resulting danger (if anyone cares) will be in the growing masses of people who will have little idea of how their world works and why it works that way.

We turn now to philosophy and religion, the latter for which Nietzsche reserved some of his most vitriolic criticism. Since Nietzsche was himself a philosopher he maligned the thinking of most philosophers before him rather than philosophy itself. But Nietzsche left no religious edifice standing during his Sherman-like "march to the sea" of cultural genealogy. For Nietzsche, religion represented the ascendancy of "slave morality," belief systems invented and propagated by the weak in order to control the strong. Nietzsche recognized, however, that in the modern world "God is dead." By that he meant that for modern humanity the belief in a supreme being who supervises our lives is dead. The death of God is therefore the most important of several factors ushering in the nihilistic age.

Nietzsche would approve of the fact that most K-12 curricula have ignored religion since several chilling Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s and 1970s. Though the Supreme Court

clearly permits the teaching of non-devotional comparative religion, I would predict that K-12 curricula will continue to ignore both philosophy and religion. After all, according to postmodernists, philosophy and religion all rely on indeterminate language—and worse, they touch on areas of national "touchiness"—areas that people are not advised to discuss in polite company. Postmodernists would have us forget the fact that every discipline has a philosophical foundation and that religion itself has a strong philosophical component.

Philosophy has few professional K-12 proponents; it never has had many proponents, and for the foreseeable future will not expand its base of support. The fact that it is a difficult subject relying strongly on abstract reasoning makes it off-side for K-8 students. As fundamental as philosophy is for comprehensive, integrative thinking, it remains largely ignored even at the highest levels of American education. Combine these facts with the postmodern crisis among professional philosophers themselves and one sees clearly that philosophy will continue its slow descent into educational irrelevancy.

Where religion is concerned, postmodernists are committed to banishing from the public consciousness anything suggesting the possibility of commitment to a power higher than humanity. Such commitment suggests allegiance to metaphysical, epistemological, and axiological absolutes and universals. The study of religion demonstrates that vast numbers of people from a variety of cultures have historically committed themselves to such religiously-based absolutes—a fact that one would never conclude from reading contemporary American K-12 history textbooks. The only thing to which most postmodernists desire commitment is postmodernism itself. In other words, they desire non-commitment so as to foster toleration and nonjudgmental attitudes—as long as such toleration does not extend to the foundations of Western culture. Many postmodernists, of course, take the obvious minority and feminist perspectives as axiomatic and philosophically unassailable. If my description of postmodernism appears equivocal, it is because postmodernism anti-intellectual bias makes it off-side for 9-12 students. As fundamental as philosophy is for comprehensive, integrative thinking, it remains largely ignored even at the highest levels of American education. Combine these facts with the postmodern crisis among professional philosophers themselves and one sees clearly that philosophy will continue its slow descent into educational irrelevancy.

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## CONCLUSION

Board members, administrators, and teachers of the future must face one hard fact—we are in a postmodern age, an age predicted with great accuracy by Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century. As we enter the twenty-first century, Nietzsche's predictions have broadly been proven correct.

What we call Generation X is a postmodern generation of students that distrust authority and intellectual discipline. They demand that their every unfounded whim be taken as seriously as the conclusions of academicians who have given their lives to specialized studies, and they demand that their teachers entertain and amuse them.<sup>21</sup>

There will still be individual defenders of Western culture, but the most influential social institutions (the family, the schools, the government, the news media, the entertainment media, and the economic system) will reinforce postmodernism. Of course, isolated institutions of Western culture (e.g. the Catholic Church) have defended the existence of absolutes ever since the Middle Ages. As Robin M. Williams reports in his book *American Society: A Sociological Interpretation* (1970),<sup>22</sup> there existed before the late 1960s a set of generally-held American values identifiable as personal achievement, work, moral concern and humanitarianism, efficiency and practicality, progress and material advancement, equality, freedom, and nationalism. For defenders of universals and absolutes, truth is not a captive of time and place. Such defenders still exist and will continue to exist in isolation. Things are changing, however. As sociologist Daniel Bell revealed in his book *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* (1976),<sup>23</sup> the need to expand capitalistic markets has "necessitated" barrages of ads from Madison Avenue encouraging Americans to have a good time, travel, drink beer, smoke cigarettes, and continually enjoy life. The hedonistic values promoted by capitalism conflict with many of the values described by Williams. In some ways, postmodernism represents the victory of post-'Sixties self-centered individualism over those virtues of pre-'Sixties: personal and public responsibility.

Because school officials have throughout the twentieth century increasingly given in to student demands for laxity, it is obvious to me that board members, administrators and teachers of the future will consciously or subconsciously promote a postmodern view aimed at giving students what they want rather than what they need. The stream is postmodern. Those swimming against it will be subject to interrogation, ridicule, and worse. As for the curriculum of the future "anything goes."

## ENDNOTES

1. Peter Sacks, *Generation X Goes to College* (Chicago and LaSalle: Open Court, 1996).
2. Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Will to Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1968), p. 13.
3. *Ibid*, p. 55.
4. Patrick Slattery, *Curriculum Development in the Post-modern Era* (New York: Garland, 1995), p. 171.
5. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. *The Disuniting of America* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), p. 127.
6. Nietzsche, p. 283.
7. Tracy B. Strong, *Friedrich Nietzsche and the Politics of Transfiguration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977, expanded edition 1988), p. 77.
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16. "Paul Gagnon and the Bradley Commission on History in the Schools (Ed.) *Historical Literacy*. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1989).
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20. For repeated examples of this phenomenon, see Peter Sacks' *Generation X Goes to College*, cited above.
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