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2-18-2008

February 18, 2008: Anthony Kronman—Education's End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life

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2/18/2008--Again commenting on a book I have not read. The most recent Yale Law Report contains a two column description of former dean, now Yale Law Professor, Anthony Kronman's new book on education and the meaning of life. Kronman calls for universities to be the spiritual leaders they used to be, and that America needs for them to be again, by abandoning the research ideal to return to the great questions the Humanities used to ask, such as the meaning of life. Higher education should not just be for knowledge, but also for exploration of life's meaning and mystery. Life's meaning used to be an academic subject for study and could be again. I don't know how the book treats religion, but the blurbs in Amazon and the short story in Yale Law Reports suggest that Kronman wants a return to secular humanism as a source of study (the phrase "secular humanism" is in the story as Kronman's goal for recovery). Here are the authors he cites: Kierkegaard, Sartre and Gabriel Marcel (as sources for a 1965 course he took entitled, Existentialism); Plato, Descartes and other "great works of literary and philosophical imagination that we have inherited from the past." It is beyond dispute that much of American education has abandoned the question of the meaning of life, and similar pursuits, and that the culture has suffered for it. But the study of the meaning of life could not possibly be exclusively secular. Much of what the West learned about the meaning of life comes from the Christian tradition (and to some extent Judaism). For all I know, Kronman agrees with that. But it is worth putting forward expressly. What the New Atheism does not understand is that when you banish religion, or try to, you are banishing the depth of life as well. Undoubtedly, it is possible to live a meaningful life without traditional religion. But it is not possible to do so while holding a dismissive attitude toward religion. The reason is that living well requires answers to questions religion asks extremely well, such as the meaning of life. If Our Religions are mere superstition, as the New Atheism suggests, their questions must be meaningless. The problem with American education is not too much emphasis on research. That is a symptom of something more fundamental. The problem is that educators feel they must avoid deep questions out of a commitment to avoid traditional religion. Research just fills the resulting void. Much as shopping, entertainment and advertising fill the rest of American life. The antidote, if there is one, is a return to religion as a starting point. We secularists can't be religious in the traditional sense, but we can't be fully human without engaging the religious questions.