

*50th Anniversary Edition*

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.

GOD

&

MAN

AT

YALE





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# GOD AND MAN AT YALE

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*The Superstitions of "Academic Freedom"*

WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY JR.



*Gateway Editions*

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# Table of Contents

Title Page

Dedication

The Revolt Against the Establishment: God and Man at Yale at Fifty

Introduction

Foreword

Preface

Chapter One - RELIGION AT YALE

THE DEPARTMENT OF RELIGION

THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

DEPARTMENT OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

Chapter Two - INDIVIDUALISM AT YALE

THESE ARE CHANGING TIMES

UNFAIR DISTRIBUTION OF INCOME

THE INCOME TAX

THE INHERITANCE TAX

PRIVATE PROPERTY RIGHTS

PRODUCTION AND EMPLOYMENT—RESPONSIBILITIES OF

THE STATE

NO LIMIT TO GOVERNMENT SPENDING

BIG BUSINESS AND MONOPOLY

THRIFT AND WELFARE

THE TEACHERS OF ELEMENTARY ECONOMICS

THE DEPARTMENT

EVIDENCES OF COLLECTIVISM IN EXTRACURRICULAR LIFE

Chapter Three - YALE AND HER ALUMNI

Chapter Four - THE SUPERSTITIONS OF "ACADEMIC FREEDOM"

1. THE TEACHER'S QUALIFICATIONS

2. DOES YALE PRACTICE "ACADEMIC FREEDOM"?

3. TRUTH AND VALUE

4. TRUTH WILL OUT

5. DOES YALE OBSERVE "ACADEMIC FREEDOM" IN

SELECTING AN ADMINISTRATION?

6. THE GOALS OF YALE

7. SOME OBJECTIONS TO VALUE INCULCATION

8. THE HOAX OF ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Chapter Five - THE PROBLEM OF THE ALUMNUS

Appendix A - Religion and Sociology

Appendix B - Sample Communications Relating to the Kennedy Controversy

Appendix C - Philosophy and Religion

Appendix D - Religion and Psychology

Appendix E - Cuninggim on Religion at Yale

Appendix F - Undelivered Address

Appendix G - Colleges and Universities Using the Basic Economics Textbooks

Notes

Index

Copyright Page

***For God  
For Country  
and for Yale  
. . . in that order***



# **The Revolt Against the Establishment: *God and Man at Yale at Fifty***

*by Austin W. Bramwell*



The year 2001 marked the golden anniversary of the publication of one of the seminal books in modern American conservatism, William F. Buckley Jr.'s *God and Man at Yale*. Without it, one could fairly say, the conservative movement would not exist today. Soon after winning national attention with this controversial polemic, Buckley deployed his youth, charm, and intellect to unite a motley crew of cantankerous intellectuals into a viable conservative movement. Less than a generation after Lionel Trilling famously opined that "in the United States at this time liberalism is not only the dominant but even the sole intellectual tradition," Buckley had in large part caused the liberal consensus to unravel.

For all its fame, however, *God and Man at Yale* is as noteworthy as a failure as it is as a success. Buckley's call for Yale alumni to withhold financial support until Yale ceased to undermine her students' faith in Christianity and the free market went almost entirely unheeded; today Yale is more secular and left-wing than ever. Nonetheless, it would be a mistake to view the book as a mere historical artifact, for Buckley's tocsin rings as loudly today as it did then, and the controversy over the book's argument is well worth revisiting.

So decisive has been the rout of Christianity at Yale that anyone under the age of fifty now can hardly imagine how Buckley's book could have caused as much controversy as it did, much less why Buckley should have become at the time the object of such intense vituperation. McGeorge Bundy called Buckley a "violent, twisted, and ignorant young man," and questioned both the "honesty of his method" and the "measure of his intelligence." Frank Ashburn, founder of the Brooks School, called him "Torquemada, reincarnated in his early twenties," and insinuated that he should be wearing not academic robes but those of the Ku Klux Klan. Henry Sloane Coffin, the former president of Union Theological Seminary who chaired a blue-ribbon committee to respond to

Buckley's charges, wrote snidely that Buckley, a Roman Catholic, "should have attended Fordham or some similar [Catholic] institution."

If these attacks seem personal, that is because they were. All of the major players in the effort to discredit Buckley hailed from old-line Yale families. Many of them, including Coffin, Bundy, and Ashburn, belonged (like Buckley himself) to Skull and Bones. Charles Seymour, the president of Yale while Buckley was an undergraduate, was himself a Bonesman, while A. Whitney Griswold, the Yale president when the book was published, came from a Bones family. Buckley's attackers thus saw themselves as custodians of a great tradition; their religion was liberal Protestant, their outlook modern, and their sensibility elitist. To them, Roman Catholicism, like Evangelical Protestantism, was the religion of the lower classes—publicly tolerated but privately derided. Buckley in consequence was not so much a Torquemada as a latter-day Alaric who, upon being invited into the very citadel of northeastern WASP prestige, had the *gaucherie* to question its continued legitimacy.

Part of the difficulty in understanding the controversy over *God and Man at Yale* is that the class distinctions that made Buckley such an unwelcome guest have become blurred since the 1960s. Students today associate religious conservatism with Establishment stuffiness, whereas in truth the leaders of the American Establishment at mid-century contemned both religious enthusiasm and religious orthodoxy. To be sure, the social prestige of men such as Bundy and Coffin could only exist within a Christian society whose mainline churches dominated the universities, and in turn, the government and the culture. Ironically, had the old Yale scions only followed Buckley's prescriptions, they might not have seen their regime crumble around them in the 1960s. Perhaps an even greater irony is that Buckley's urbanity and charm have made him perhaps the last living icon of the traditional high-WASP temperament.

In 1951, however, he was but a barbarian who had somehow found his way into the inner temple. His arguments in *God and Man at Yale* were straightforward: first, Yale was undermining students' faith in Christianity; second, Yale was promoting economic collectivism; and third, alumni should exert their influence to reverse the course of pedagogy at Yale. His critics refused, however, to take these points at face value, but rather insisted that the book was not what it seemed. Fulminated Ashburn, "[*God and Man at Yale*] stands as one of the most forthright, implacable, typical, and unscrupulously sincere examples of a return to authoritarianism that has appeared. Under the guise of liberty it attacks freedom; under the guise of knowledge it denies the privilege of free investigation and dissent; under the guise of defending capitalism

and religion it uses the technique of Dr. Goebbels; under the guise of academic freedom it hides the somber robes of theocracy.”

How did a book about pedagogy at Yale inspire a philippic against totalitarianism? Ashburn was not alone in leveling such charges at Buckley; every one of his critics construed the book as an attack not only on Yale, but also, despite Buckley’s professed belief in democracy and freedom, as a veiled attack on the very nature of a free society. Certainly they could not have inferred this insidious purpose from the substance of Buckley’s arguments. In reaching the book’s first two conclusions, Buckley was scrupulous almost to a fault in examining Yale department by department, professor by professor, in order to assess the effect each was having on students’ spiritual lives and political convictions. Indeed, much of the debate over the book focused not so much on questions of fact but on questions of interpretation. Buckley found that the drift of Keynesian economics was collectivist; his critics insisted that Lord Keynes merely defended the free market from itself. Buckley presupposed that Christianity entailed adherence to the orthodox tenets of the faith; his critics thought that mere interest in Christian spirituality sufficed to demonstrate the strength of religion on campus. Although in each case Buckley upheld the more rigorous view, the differences were surely not so great as to put him in the camp of Dr. Goebbels.

*God and Man at Yale*’s third charge—that alumni should exercise control over the teaching at Yale—was more controversial still. Buckley deconstructed the idea of academic freedom from two angles. First, pure academic freedom was a mirage, he claimed, for Yale would (quite rightly) never allow an anthropologist to teach theories of Aryan racial superiority. Thus, the question was not whether academic freedom should be restricted, but to what extent. Second, romantic notions to the contrary notwithstanding, truth does not always win out in the free marketplace of ideas. Both Italy and Germany, Buckley observed, had the option to elect democratic leaders or authoritarians, but both chose the latter rather than the former. If we indeed know that democracy is superior to totalitarianism, then we have a duty to defend and advance this truth rather than to maintain a falsely “open” question. In sum, Buckley argued, Yale should restrict academic freedom such that Christianity and political freedom always upheld.

In response, Buckley’s critics only blustered. Bundy, after falsely accusing Buckley’s father of sending a copy of *God and Man at Yale* to every Yale alumnus, wrote that “Mr. Buckley does not seem to know what academic freedom is” and that “he leaps from one view to another, as suits his convenience.” Never, however, did Bundy bother to define *his* understanding of academic freedom, nor did he respond to either of Buckley’s principal arguments for restricting

academic freedom. The same went for Ashburn: “[Buckley’s] thesis, stripped to its essentials, is that the way to academic freedom is dogmatism and that the way to save capitalism is by way of indoctrination.” Ashburn’s only follow-up, however, was purely ad hominem: “[Buckley’s] point of view [is] shared, of course, by Marshal Stalin as a staunch supporter of what millions of people sincerely call democracy.”

Ashburn and Bundy could not respond to Buckley’s arguments for the simple reason that their own position was deeply mired in contradiction. While they agreed with Buckley that Yale was or should be a Christian university, they also believed that, as Coffin put it, “[i]n the ideal university all sides of any issue are presented as forcefully as possible.” If Yale were equally open to all ideas, it could not also promote Christianity above all other comprehensive worldviews; if Yale were devoted to promoting Christianity above all other comprehensive worldviews, it could not also be equally open to all others. Buckley’s critics could defend Christianity or they could defend openness, but not both. Contrary to Bundy’s assertion, it was he and not Buckley who leapt from one view to the other, as suited his convenience.

Hindsight reveals that, as Buckley no doubt suspected, Yale’s elite preferred openness to Christianity. In the late 1960s, Yale president Kingman Brewster (who himself came from a family of Bonesmen) took liberal modernism to its logical conclusion and, finding no grounds on which to oppose violent student radicals, propitiated them, going so far as to opine at the time of the Bobby Seale trial that a black man could never get a fair trial in the United States. McGeorge Bundy, in turn, rushed to Brewster’s defense. Alas for Yale, since the Great Disruption on American campuses, the university has suffered a marked decline in prestige. Having lost its unrivaled social cachet, Yale has struggled to keep up with Harvard in becoming an elite research university and has failed to reestablish an identity for itself (other than, perhaps, as a haven for an obstreperous homosexual community).

In a sense, then, Buckley’s critics were right to infer from *God and Man at Yale*’s attacks on openness in the academy an attack on the open society in general. The conflict over the role of the university paralleled a conflict over the nature of American society just as much in the early 1950s as it did in the late 1960s. Buckley had a radically different understanding of the nature of totalitarianism from that of his critics. In his most notorious passage, he wrote that “the duel between Christianity and atheism is the most important in the world... [and] the struggle between individualism and collectivism is the same struggle reproduced on another level.” Elsewhere, he quoted approvingly Yale president Charles Seymour, who as late as 1937 could respond to the events

in Germany by proclaiming that Yale had a duty to fight “selfish materialism” through the “maintenance and upbuilding of the Christian religion as a vital part of university life.” In other words, according to Buckley, totalitarianism arises from a philosophical denial of God which leads to a denial of any higher authority for human institutions. The state thus has absolute authority over all other institutions—family, church, market—all of which can be manipulated for the social or scientific ends of the state.

Though these comments had little to do with the central argument of the book, they set in high relief the most fundamental differences between Buckley and his critics. Ashburn and Bundy thought that the problem of totalitarianism arises not from the dominance of a secular orthodoxy, but rather from the dominance of any orthodoxy whatsoever. Their argument is familiar to the point of banality: anyone who makes an exclusive claim to the truth will then attempt to impose this truth upon everyone else. All dissent will be eliminated, to the point where a single orthodoxy is imposed, as in a one-party totalitarian government. Buckley’s understanding of a free society would require that a certain public orthodoxy—which celebrates the West’s Christian and liberal heritage—be upheld. Not only are an “open society” and the “free society” not identical; in Buckley’s view, it was the “open society” which paved the way to modern totalitarianism.

Which understanding was correct? Theory and history vindicate Buckley. Ashburn’s liberalism shares with “selfish materialism” an antipathy to markets, or at least to any claim that the state has only a limited right to interfere in the market. As in communist or fascist ideology, all institutions are understood as mere human inventions, and individuals do not have any rights apart from those granted by men. Thus, no institution or person has any authority independent of or prior to the state. Bundy, Ashburn, et al. may have objected to full-blown collectivism, but they could only do so on prudential grounds. Buckley’s “individualist” notion that the state’s authority has moral limits was alien to them.

Consequently, it was not the secular liberals with their gentlemanly theories of engagement and détente who at length brought about the defeat of communism in our time, but leaders such as Thatcher, Reagan, and Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II), all of whom shared the conviction that the Soviet Union was the “evil empire” of the century just past. Without the fundamentally moral attack on communism that Bundy et al. found so apparently distasteful, its defeat would have been impossible. Interestingly, just as it took an outsider such as Buckley to reveal what was going on at Yale, so it took an outsider such as Reagan to bear witness to the true nature of communism. Only by ignoring the wisdom of this country’s secular liberal elites and taking their case directly to the

people could Buckley's and Reagan's conservative movement have succeeded. Buckley may have first learned about the moral flaccidity of the American elite from his Yale mentor, the "Appalachians to the Rockies" American, Willmoore Kendall; but he also experienced that lack of moral resolve firsthand in the controversy over *God and Man at Yale*.

The only question remaining is why the WASP elites ever adopted a philosophy—that of the open society—that not only harmed their country but also undermined their very position as leaders of a Christian society. Part of the reason may have been nothing more than social snobbery. The more enthusiastic the religion of the masses became, the more modernist and liberal became that of the upper crust. This explanation, however, is not decisive, for it sometimes happens, as in the Victorian era, that the upper classes, which can always afford to flirt with libertinism, nonetheless adopt the rigorist morality of the lower or middling classes.

The best explanation may be simply that the last scions of the old-line WASP families were mediocre men. They found the philosophy of the "open society" congenial because it did not demand much of them. They preferred governance to politics, policy to ideology, and prudence to moral aspiration. Buckley offended them because he called them to a higher duty than they were prepared to assume. Little did they realize, however, that the moral capital from which they drew their authority—built by the generations of men who had founded, defended, and advanced this nation—was nearly depleted. Buckley the "barbarian" was, despite their protestations, their last, best hope to defend the heritage that they took for granted.

After half a century, *God and Man at Yale* remains a testament to the power of one man to stand up for the truth. Few realize today what courage it must have taken for Buckley to write such a book, knowing how much it would offend the very men who had tapped into the Yale elite. Buckley's philosophy of "Christian individualism," which combined a distrust of the omniscient state with a defense of the truths of the Judeo-Christian tradition, remains as much the core of American conservatism—and, indeed, of the American tradition—in our own time as it did in 1951. Let us hope that fifty years from now Buckley's exemplary defense of the American patrimony will continue to inspire.

*Austin W. Bramwell, currently a student at Harvard Law School, graduated from Yale in 2000. He was an Honors Fellow of the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, whose flagship journal, The Intercollegiate Review, originally published a version of Mr. Bramwell's anniversary assessment of God and Man at Yale.*



# Introduction to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition

*by William F. Buckley Jr.*



I was still familiar with the arguments of *God and Man at Yale* when Henry Regnery, its original publisher, asked whether I would furnish a fresh introduction to a reissue of it. But I had not seen the book since I finally closed its covers, six months after its publication in the fall of 1951. It had caused a most fearful row and required me over a period of several months to spend considerable time rereading what I had written, sometimes to check what I remembered having said against a reviewer's rendition of it; sometimes to reassure myself on one or another point. The prospect of rereading it a quarter century later, in order to write this introduction, was uninviting.

Granted, my reluctance was mostly for stylistic reasons. I was twenty-four when I wrote the book, freshly married, living in a suburb of New Haven and teaching a course in beginning Spanish at Yale University. I had help, notably from Frank Chodorov, the gentle, elderly anarchist, friend and disciple of Albert Jay Nock, pamphleteer, editor, founder of the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists, a fine essayist whose thought turned on a single spit: all the reasons why one should be distrustful of state activity, round and round, and round again. And help, also, from Willmoore Kendall, at that time a tenured associate professor of political science at Yale, on leave of absence in Washington, where he worked for an army think tank ("Every time I ask Yale for a leave of absence," he once remarked, "I find it insultingly cooperative").

Kendall had greatly influenced me as an undergraduate. He was a conservative all right, but invariably he gave the impression that he was being a conservative because he was surrounded by liberals; that he'd have been a revolutionist if that had been required in order to be socially disruptive. Those were the days when the Hiss-Chambers case broke, when Senator McCarthy was first heard from, when the leaders of the Communist Party were prosecuted at Foley Square and sentenced to jail for violating the Smith Act. That

conviction greatly incensed Kendall's colleagues, and a meeting of the faculty was called for the special purpose of discussing this outrage on civil liberties and framing appropriate articles of indignation. Kendall listened for two hours and then raised his hand to recite an exchange he had had that morning with the colored janitor who cleaned the fellows' suites at Pierson College.

"Is it true, professor"—Kendall, with his Oklahoma drawl, idiosyncratically Oxfordized while he studied as a Rhodes scholar in England, imitated the janitor—"Is it true, professor, dat dere's people in New York City who want to . . . destroy the guvamin't of the United States?"

"Yes, Oliver, that is true," Willmoore had replied.

"Well, why don't we lock 'em up?"

That insight, Kendall informed his colleagues, reflected more political wisdom than he had heard from the entire faculty of Yale's political science department since the meeting began. Thus did Kendall make his way through Yale, endearing himself on all occasions.

Kendall was a genius of sorts, and his posthumous reputation continues to grow; but not very long after this book was published he proposed to Yale that the matter of their mutual incompatibility be settled by Yale's buying up his contract, which Yale elatedly agreed to do, paying over forty thousand dollars to relieve itself of his alien presence. Willmoore Kendall went over the manuscript of *God and Man at Yale* and, as a matter of fact, was responsible for the provocative arrangement of a pair of sentences that got me into more trouble than any others in the book. Since any collusion or suspected collusion in this book was deemed a form of high treason at Yale, I have always believed that the inhospitable treatment of Kendall (after all, there were other eccentrics at Yale who survived) may in part have traced to his suspected association with it and to his very public friendship with me (he became a founding senior editor of *National Review* while still at Yale).

You see, the rumors that the book was being written had got around. They caused considerable consternation at Woodbridge Hall, which is Yale's White House. Yale had a brand-new president, A. Whitney Griswold, and he had not yet acquired the savoir faire of high office (when the controversy raged, Dwight Macdonald would comment that Yale's authorities "reacted with all the grace and agility of an elephant cornered by a mouse"—but more on that later). I remember, while doing the research, making an appointment with a professor of economics who privately deplored the hot collectivist turn taken by the economics faculty after the war. At Yale—at least this was so when I was there—the relation between faculty and students (properly speaking I was no longer a student, having graduated in the spring) is wonderfully genial,

though (again, this is how it *was*) there was no confusing who was the professor, who the student. I told him I was there to collect information about the left turn taken in the instruction of economics, and he reacted as a Soviet bureaucrat might have when questioned by a young KGB investigator on the putative heterodoxy of Josef Stalin. He told me, maintaining civility by his fingernails, that he would simply *not* discuss the subject with me in any way.

It was not so, however, in the research dealing with the treatment of religion at Yale, perhaps because I ambushed my Protestant friends. I asked the then president of Dwight Hall, the Protestant student organization, if he would bring together the chaplain and the half dozen persons, staff and undergraduate, centrally concerned with religion to hear one afternoon my chapter on religion at Yale. Everyone came. I read them the chapter that appears in this book—save only the paragraph concerning Yale's chaplain, the Reverend Sidney Lovett. (I did not want to express even the tenderest criticism of him in his presence.) Three or four suggestions of a minor kind were made by members of the audience, and these corrections I entered. I wish I had recorded the episode in the book, because a great deal was made of the alleged singularity of my criticisms and of the distinctiveness of my position as a Roman Catholic. All that would have been difficult for the critics to say if they had known that the chapter had been read out verbatim to the half dozen Protestant officials most intimately informed about the religious life of Yale, all of whom had acknowledged the validity of my findings, while dissociating themselves from my prescriptions.

I sent the completed manuscript to Henry Regnery in Chicago in April, and he instantly accepted it for publication. I had waited until then formally to apprise the president, Mr. Griswold, of the forthcoming event. We had crossed paths, never swords, several times while I was undergraduate chairman of the *Yale Daily News*. The conversation on the telephone was reserved, but not heated. He thanked me for the civility of a formal notification, told me he knew that I was at work on such a book, that he respected my right to make my views known. I was grateful that he did not ask to see a copy of the manuscript, as I knew there would be eternal wrangling on this point or the other.

But a week or so later I had a telephone call from an elderly tycoon with a huge opinion of himself. William Rogers Coe is mentioned in the book. He advised me that he knew about the manuscript and had splendid tidings for me: namely, I could safely withdraw the book because he, Mr. Coe, had got the private assurance of President Griswold that great reforms at Yale were under way and that conservative principles were in the ascendancy: so why bother to publish a book that would merely stir things up? I

gasped at the blend of naïveté and effrontery. But although I had observed the phenomenon I was not yet as conversant as I would quickly become with the ease with which rich and vain men are manipulated by skillful educators. As a matter of fact, men who are not particularly rich or vain are pretty easy to manipulate also.

I did attempt to make one point in a correspondence with Mr. Coe that especially bears repeating. It is this, that a very recent graduate is not only supremely qualified, but uniquely qualified, to write about the ideological impact of an education he has experienced. I was asked recently whether I would “update” this book, to which the answer was very easy: this book cannot be updated, at least not by me. I could only undertake this if I were suddenly thirty years younger, slipped past the Admissions Committee of Yale University in a red wig, enrolled in the courses that serve as ideological pressure points; if I listened to the conversation of students and faculty, participated in the debates, read the college paper every day, read the textbooks, heard the classroom inflections, compared notes with other students in other courses. For years and years after this book came out I would receive letters from Yale alumni asking for an authoritative account of “how the situation at Yale is now.” After about three or four years I wrote that I was incompetent to give such an account. I am as incompetent to judge Yale education today as most of the critics who reviewed this book were incompetent to correct me when I judged it twenty-five years ago. Only the man who makes the voyage can speak truly about it. I knew that most of my own classmates would disagree with me on any number of matters, most especially on my prescriptions. But at another level I’d have been surprised to find disagreement. Dwight Macdonald was among the few who spotted the point, though I don’t think in his piece for the *Reporter* on the controversy he gave it quite the emphasis it deserved. But he did say, “. . . Nor does Buckley claim any sizable following among the undergraduates. They have discussed his book intensively—and critically. Richard Coulson (’52) notes in the Yale Alumni Magazine that ‘it is a greater topic of serious and casual conversation than any philosophical or educational question that has been debated in quite a few years.... In contrast to many of their elders the majority has not been blinded with surprise or carried away with rage at either Buckley or the Corporation by his claim that individualism, religion and capitalism are not being propounded strongly both in and out of the classroom. The undergraduate feels that this particular observation is correct.’”

Well then, if this is so, why republish *God and Man at Yale* in 1977, if it tells the story of Yale in 1950? The question is fair. I suppose a sufficient reason for republishing it is that the publisher has experienced a demand for it. Not, obviously, from people who