

Creedal Culture and Education

By Bojidar Marinov – [bio](#)

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"Except ye believe, ye shall not understand."

Augustine said these words when commenting on John 7:17, interpreting the words, "if anyone is willing to do His will" as meaning, "if anyone believes." And Augustine said that belief is the prerequisite to "know of the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself." Faith is the tool to understanding teaching. Augustine also referred to the Old Testament, Isaiah 7:9, which he interpreted to mean, "If you don't believe, you won't understand." Many years later, Anselm of Canterbury expanded on the statement, agreeing with Augustine that "I believe that I may understand," and developed a Christian epistemology based on self-conscious faith which produced rational understanding of reality (as over against the mystical, irrational faith of his predecessor, Eriugena). This new epistemology earned him the fame of being the father of scholasticism, an intellectual movement in the church which unfortunately ended in complete theological confusion and irrelevance, but not before it produced some of the finest minds and works of Christendom-like Thomas Aquinas and Erasmus of Rotterdam-and also laid the intellectual foundation for the theological studies of the Reformation.

The church wasn't always faithful to this principle of faith as the foundation of knowledge. Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism crept into the church from the very beginning, and dominated the academic endeavor and the system of education. Despite the imperfections, this was a revolutionary change from the Classical view of knowledge and learning. The perfect Classical man couldn't be "prejudiced" by his beliefs; he had to approach reality "as a child," without any *a priori* beliefs or presuppositions, and thus learn and acquire knowledge. Augustine rightly interpreted the Bible's injunction: What is not of faith is sin, and therefore knowledge that is not based on faith is not righteous knowledge. Understanding came only from faith; and, as Anselm showed in his writings, understanding could then expand upon faith and discover the world as it is, not as what the fallen human heart and mind sees it.

The "I believe" phrase which Augustine and Anselm used was not used arbitrarily. Neither did it have just a generic meaning, something like the modern concept of vague, general belief in a God who is seldom defined in either His person or His work in history. Augustine lived and worked in an era entirely characterized and influenced by the church councils. Between A.D. 50 and the time of Augustine, there were at least a dozen smaller councils and two ecumenical Councils (Nicaea, A.D. 325 and Constantinople, A.D. 381). Augustine himself laid the theological foundation for the Council of Ephesus in A.D. 431 (a year after Augustine's death) by his treatises on the Trinity and on the Pelagian heresy. And the specific "product" of the Councils were the creeds; statements starting with *credo*, "I believe," and outlining the specific points of the Christian faith.

"I believe," *credo*, had a very specific meaning for him and his contemporaries: It meant a *creed*, a specifically worded confession of faith which described who God was, and what He has done in history for the redemption of the world, as well as the specific expectations of the future. "I believe" couldn't mean just "I have some feeling about some vague reality out there"; it meant very specifically, "I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of Heaven and Earth, and in Jesus Christ His only Son and our Lord," etc., etc. "I believe" had specific meaning, boundaries, and applications, and when Augustine said, "You must believe in order to understand," he meant that specific meaning, boundaries, and applications, and nothing less than that.

Anselm himself, devoted to building clear and logical Christian apologetics based on faith, did not mean faith "in general." In fact, in his time, the eleventh century A.D., "faith" was *the* faith, the *Holy* Faith of the Fathers, defined by the Creeds. All pagan religions extinguished and defeated, "faith" meant only the Christian faith, and the rest was "faithlessness." And for a scholar like Anselm, that faith had to be clearly defined, communicable, and communicated, for it to be able to produce the "understanding" he wanted to build in his works. Again, he had to go back to the creeds, not to a vague and undefined "faith," which deserved rather the name "superstition," not "faith."

And for both men, that faith that produced understanding was not simply an academic exercise; they had formidable enemies to deal with in practice. Augustine had against him the still powerful remains of the old paganism, as well as the new heresies, Gnosticism and Arianism, and especially the heresy of Pelagius which was so attractive to many because of the strong moral character of its author, Pelagius. For most of his literary career Augustine was fighting on all fronts to preserve orthodoxy, while at the same time striving to build its foundation. (Very symbolically, he died in Hippo besieged by the Arian Vandals.) Anselm's time was free of paganism and heresies, but he had to fight the statist agenda of the English kings inherited from the older tribal laws of Normans, Saxons, and Franks. Two exiles and almost constant opposition to build the church into a universal body subject only to King Jesus-against the attempts for royal control over it-forced him to carefully define and formulate his beliefs, as only opposition and tribulations can do. For the two men, Augustine and Anselm, faith had to be specific, clear, and a tool for action; otherwise they wouldn't have the moral fuel to stand firm against all odds.

The creeds of Christendom thus became the foundation of both men's understanding. When they said "I believe," they meant *credo*, the creed. Christian epistemology was based on the Christian creeds; and therefore the whole Christian worldview had to be based on the creeds. The two men lived in a culture that could be defined as a *creedal culture*, based entirely on specific, communicable and communicated faith. And therefore their learning, understanding, and wisdom were *creedal*, that is, based on the creeds. The Christendom that emerged from their work, and from the work of the other Fathers and teachers of the church, was similarly a *creedal culture*; it was defined by a faith-or, rather, the Faith-not by geography, or blood, or force, or the blind clash of historical forces. There certainly were many old pagan and classical influences, but in general, by common consent, learning, education, and understanding were based on faith. Whatever was not of

faith was sin, and therefore for the civilization to avoid sin, it had to define itself and everything it did, and everything it knew and understood, in terms of the faith.

It is important to note that it is not the faith itself that built Christendom. An individual can have personal faith in the Redeemer, but that of itself won't make him a Kingdom-builder or a culture-warrior. More is necessary than simply faith; a new system of thought and knowledge is needed which will lay that faith as a foundation upon which the structure of knowledge and wisdom is built. Faith that does not produce theoretical understanding and practical blueprints for action is an irrelevant faith, a simply mental consent to propositions, but not faith of the heart. That's why Augustine and Anselm, and those who followed them, did not stop at simply faith, but insisted that *faith produces understanding*, which is needed for the righteous to build the Kingdom. I believe, with a specific objective: *in order to understand*.

Consequently, Christianity lost the cultural war not when the faith was lost; in fact, there has always been in the society a strong element of personal, individual faith. It was when Pietism convinced the church that faith doesn't have to lead to understanding, and certainly doesn't need to lead to a *comprehensive* system of knowledge about reality, that Christianity lost its power and its cultural momentum. When the practical, comprehensive worldview of the society got divorced from the *credo*, from the faith of the Bible, a large part of life was now left to seek other foundations, not faith. But whatever is not of faith is sin. And therefore, even the most pious Christians were misled by Pietism to only apply the categories of sin and righteousness to their personal lives, but never apply them to their cultural practices, and to the cultural practices of the society. Culture now could be based on anything else but faith.

The Reformed churches resisted this trend for longer than any other brand of Christianity. By the mid-twentieth century, though, they succumbed to the broadly evangelical influence. That's why, when in 1959 Henry Van Til published his book, *The Calvinistic Concept of Culture*, it was deliberately ignored in Reformed circles. No wonder. Its main thesis was that "culture is religion externalized." To accept this thesis was to accept the thesis of Augustine and Anselm that faith rules over all of life. The Reformed seminaries in the late 1950s couldn't afford this old-fashioned concept to raise its head again. Faith had its own limited realm; the rest was left to natural law, humanistic law, socialism, paganism, or to the theologically correct but highly vague idea of "general equity."

If Henry Van Til's book was deliberately ignored, another book, *Foundations of Social Order* by R. J. Rushdoony, was ignored because it went way beyond anyone's ability to grasp its thesis. It was published in 1968, nine years after Van Til's book. By that time Reformed theology was dead in all the Reformed seminaries; only vestiges of it remained.

The Foundations of Social Order was, and remains, the most unique book ever written in the history of Christendom. Nothing like it has been written before, and nothing like it has been written since. Christian and non-Christian historians have generally agreed on at least one thing about creeds and history: they are not connected in any meaningful,

comprehensive way. A few non-Christian historians-Harold Berman and his *Law and Revolution* being a good example-have mentioned that the Christian creeds have been instrumental in shaping the legal views and therefore the legal structure of the West. But a general study of how the creeds formed the West and its unique outlook has always been lacking; the reason being that both Christian and non-Christian authors are eager to constrain the significance of the creeds to the church and the history of theology. Even Philip Schaff in his three-volume work, *The Creeds of Christendom*, confines their value and use to the church.¹ The view of the creeds has been dualistic; creeds were separated from history, and history was left to follow its own course, independent from the development of Christian theology and the perfection of the faith of the saints.

Rushdoony challenged that outlook, and he is the first author ever to create a systematic study of how the creeds of Christendom became the foundation for the worldview of Western civilization. Based on his Reformed faith, he clearly saw that *ideas have consequences*, and that the transformation of the pagan empire into the civilization of Christendom had its foundation in the formulation of what Christians believed about God, Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, about the two natures of Christ, the history and the nature of redemption, the church, etc. The creeds were not just for the church; they were the foundations of social order as we know it today, in every area of life. What we believe about politics-and therefore how we act in the political realm-will be determined by what we believe about the Trinity and the nature of redemption. What we believe about economics-and therefore how we act in the economic realm-will be determined by our beliefs about God, Jesus Christ, and His salvation. What we believe about any area of life, be it science, family, education, technologies, international relations, psychology, arts, etc.-and therefore how we act in all these areas of life-will be determined by our creeds. When Christianity set out to create a creedal culture, that creedal culture was not to be limited to the church and the personal faith of the individual. Anything not of faith was sin; and therefore everything had to be based on faith, and that faith had to be carefully formulated and communicated. Everything, including politics, and economics, and law: all life had to be based on faith, and therefore creeds mattered to all of life.

Rushdoony didn't limit his analysis to one book only. His life work can be summarized with one sentence: *application of faith to all of life*. Therefore, it was to be expected that when he approached the subject of education, he would use the same principle: discover and analyze how the faith of men informs their view of education, their system of education, and their goals for education. His book, *The Messianic Character of American Education*, exposed the "faith" principles behind our modern public education; it is based on a secular "creed," not on any rational ideas, as claimed. But even more important, Rushdoony not only exposed the religion behind public education, he also laid the foundation for a Christian curriculum. In *The Philosophy of Christian Curriculum*, he was the first of the Christian educators in the twentieth century to actually go back to the tenets of the faith to find out how a Christian education is to be built. He made sure that before he went to the specific technical issues for studying individual subjects, he had the principles for the overall method, system, and goals of education grounded in our faith, as informed by the gospel. Chapter 4 of the book was especially informative for those who

went to work in that field, as one can judge by its title: "The Curriculum and the Resurrection."

A mother who has school-age children wrote me recently to express her disappointment with the modern curricula offered on the homeschool market. She had a "feeling," she said, that all that was offered-whether full programs or specific plans for specific subjects-was just the same non-Christian stuff, with the same non-Christian philosophy in its foundation, with the same non-Christian presuppositions, baptized in Bible verses and Biblical rhetoric but lacking the essence of the Biblical worldview. Some curricula went directly to the Classical world-literature, art, and poetry-for information and learning, as if the Greeks and the Romans can give us something which Christianity can't. Others use modern math, science, or history textbooks that don't even make the effort to claim they are Christian. Others revolve around a specific political or historical or ecclesiastical point which the authors claim to be a Christian issue without proving so from Scripture. The mother said she couldn't identify what exactly makes her believe that there was a problem with all these materials-for she admitted to not being trained enough to recognize hidden presuppositions and philosophies-but her intuition was telling her so.

Her intuition is correct. I have observed the same problem. My children have been enrolled in an online school for some of their subjects-they wanted to experience the thrill of intellectual competition with other children-and in many instances they saw their instructors fall short of a Biblical understanding on many of the issues. The economics and business classes were a serious failure: the instructors did not have any idea of what Biblical economics was, taught definitions and laws that came right out of Paul Samuelson and John Kenneth Galbraith, and treated taxes and government intervention in the economy as a technical, not an ethical issue. The school was nominally Christian, and all instructors were professing Christians. My children, having grown in a family where Biblical economics, social theory, and law are part of our family devotions, were not in danger; they could easily identify the fallacies, and where they couldn't identify them, they at least had enough Biblical sense to smell a rat. But most of the other children had no training that would protect them against the un-Biblical presuppositions and views of the equally untrained teachers.

There are many more examples throughout the nation of Christian school and homeschool curricula and study plans that are un-Biblical. Something is missing in our Christian education. And what is missing is ... the Christian faith. And I don't mean the Christian faith as individual faith of parents, children, and teachers. I mean the Christian faith as the foundation of our curriculum and our system of acquiring and teaching knowledge and understanding. Our curriculum is not based on *credo*, on "I believe" as a concrete, communicable, and communicated faith which starts from the very being of God, His works in history, and His promise for the future. At the end, as the mother I mentioned above has noticed, the education professing Christians give to their children is simply a version of secular education baptized in Bible verses and prayers.

This situation, of course, did not come out of nowhere. It is the product of at least two centuries of *creedless* Christianity or, rather, Christianity which has lost its understanding

of the significance of the creeds for the building and formulation of its presuppositions and worldview. Over the last two hundred years, "faith" has come to be defined as some kind of mystical gnosis, a "relationship with Jesus," an unnatural experience which supposedly places the individual on a higher plane, above the material world of everyday activity, social interaction, and cultural endeavor. While some churches still recite the early creeds, and even include in their service responsive reading of questions and answers of sixteenth and seventeenth century catechisms, there is no systematic teaching how these creeds and catechisms are supposed to build the understanding and the worldview of the church members outside of the church, in real life. Consequently, Christian teachers and professors-and creators of curricula and textbooks-seldom stop to formulate their worldview, and then self-consciously build their curricula and textbooks on the basis of that worldview. At the end, the product is education which bears the name "Christian" but has all the characteristics of the pagan education in the broader culture.

Redeeming education will take much more than simply pulling Christian children out of public schools and teaching them at home or in Christian schools. It will take much more than adding the Bible to the curriculum, or peppering the textbooks with Biblical verses. It will take a return back to the *credo* as the self-conscious foundation of all thought and action.

At least three principles need to be restored in education:

It will take, *first*, a clear realization of the importance of the nature of God for both the method and the content of the education. The Trinity, the principle of the equal ultimacy of the One and the Many,² must be laid as the foundational principle for the learning plan for every discipline. I have explained in another place³ the difference between what I call "Greek" and "Roman" methods of learning and education. Each one of these methods is based on elevating either the one or the many in importance. A Christian curriculum must be specifically geared toward both treating every subject as a world of its own, a legitimate separate part of God's creation, with its own harmony, beauty, laws, and legitimacy, deserving to be studied and enjoyed for the sheer joy of observing God's order in thinking and knowledge; and at the same time, it must be able to show the relation of that subject to all other subjects and knowledge, and its usefulness to exercising righteous dominion over the earth.

Second, a clear understanding is necessary of how education must be built on worshipping God and not man. As Rushdoony pointed out in *The Foundations of Social Order*, by elevating the principle that the "Word *became* flesh," and was not merely "united to man" (as in Nestorianism), worship of man was condemned. Modern education looks at man as the active agent in learning and education; the Word is simply "united" to man's mind. But such foundation for learning is tantamount to worshipping man, by elevating man to the position of a creature freely able to reach and get knowledge. This denies revelation as the foundation of all knowledge; logic, rational method, empirical method, scientific method, and other methods are the true foundation.

And *third*, the curriculum must be specifically geared toward building a free man. By declaring Christ to have two natures, divine and human, the early Councils denied the state, or the church, or the family, or any other human institution, the right to speak authoritatively in any absolute sense. This meant that man and his mind were not to be defined by any human institution. Education's goal, then, is to train the child to first seek knowledge under God, and then on the basis of this to learn and train how to act and interact in the human society. Much of modern education—Christian or not—subjects education to the needs of a specific institution (church, family, state) or gives education pragmatic goals (be a good citizen, be a successful entrepreneur, build a career, have academic excellence). But institutions and economic/political excellence must always be secondary, and "seeking the Kingdom and its righteousness" must come first, for an education to be truly Christian.

While we have made a lot of progress in terms of opposing the education of the secular state, our modern Christian education is still far from where it is supposed to be. And the greatest problem is we have creedless Christianity which can't define what it believes in. As long as we have that, we will have creedless education which is based not on faith but on inherited presuppositions from our pagan world. And whatever is not of the Faith, is sin.

A Reformed missionary to his native Bulgaria for over 10 years, Bojidar preaches and teaches the doctrines of the Reformation and a comprehensive Biblical worldview. He and his team have translated over 30,000 pages of Christian literature about the application of the Law of God in every area of man's life and society, and published those translations online for free. He currently lives in Houston with his wife Maggie and his three children.

1. Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 6th ed., 1996), 8-9.

2. R. J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy*.

3. Bojidar Marinov, "Math Education: The One and the Many."
(<http://bit.ly/MathOneMany>).

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