

What Richard M. Weaver Teaches About Being a Doctor of Culture

By

James M. Tallmon, Ph.D.

At

Patrick Henry College

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“We are culture shapers!” Too many of us, I fear, use the word “culture” without taking time to understand what the word means. Do we understand how culture works? Do we have a clear understanding about what constitutes a healthy culture? Wouldn’t humility suggest that we consider what potential side effects may attend our attempts at cures to societal ills? As Christians we presume our efforts to heal our broken culture will be blessed and our intentions rewarded. I was just out marching against abortion today. Is the March for Life, a 40-year old strategy that aims to influence our culture through a pro-life message, doing more good than harm, or vice versa? If there were no doubt, we ALL would have been out there on the National Mall this morning! Beyond this single issue . . . imagine a society without gambling, without pornography, prostitution, drugs, smoking, or even dancing! Exhilarating, no?

(display Sharia Law Zone poster)

Please tell me you would avoid the methods of Islamofascists to “influence the culture for Christ.” At the very least, we need to be very clear that, according to the mission of this august institution, we are to temper our cultural influence by *privileging liberty*. Minus that understanding we are little better than Christian fascists.



Now, understanding culture in the anthropologist’s way—language, geography, religion, social networks—lacks potency. T.S. Eliot, in his “Notes Towards a Definition of Culture” draws a distinction between *material organization* and *spiritual organism*, then posits that, “These things [language, customs, religion] are simply the parts into which the culture can be anatomised as a human body can.

But just as a man is something more than an assemblage of the various constituent parts of his body, so a culture is more than the assemblage of its arts, customs, and religious beliefs” (198). Cultural dynamics are subtle, complex, and nuanced. Eliot writes further,

[C]ulture is the one thing that we cannot deliberately aim at. It is the product of a variety of more or less harmonious activities, each pursued for its own sake: the artist must concentrate upon his canvas, the poet upon his typewriter, the civil servant upon the just settlement of particular problems The point at which we can arrive, is the recognition that these conditions of culture are ‘natural’ to human beings; that although we can do little to encourage them, we can combat the intellectual errors and the emotional prejudices which stand in their way. For the rest, we should look for the improvement of society as we seek our own individual improvement, *in relatively minute particulars* (“Notes, 92, emphasis added).

Richard M. Weaver, likely influenced by Eliot, wrote a great deal about culture and the improvement of society. Weaver, one of the seminal thinkers in American philosophical Conservatism, wrote, lectured, and exercised influence among the intelligentsia about the time William F. Buckley, who started *National Review*, got his start. Weaver was a contemporary of Russell Kirk's. Together they helped form the Intercollegiate Society of Individualists (which later became the Intercollegiate Studies Institute.) Their common concern with the influence in academia of the new liberals, empiricists, and egalitarians, of a thoroughgoing modernism, compelled Weaver and Kirk. Throughout his too brief career, Weaver clearly models for and teaches the young conservative (for he frequently spoke to groups of young Republicans, or chapters of ISI, or other serious-minded college students,) he constantly teaches about cultural dynamics, cultural critique, and the cultural role of rhetoric. In his essay, "The Image of Culture," for example, Weaver posits that evidence can be proffered for both sides of the question regarding whether or not culture is in decline or ascending; decaying or flourishing, but "both arguments cannot be equally valid." He goes on to point out that those who argue that culture is improving, ground their claims in non-serious, transitory, and superficial considerations, while the conservative critic, who has a stake in the "redemption of society," tends to focus on permanent things, like "the nature of man and the problem of value." Weaver further juxtaposes these competing perspectives in terms of pessimism and optimism (interesting side-note: Weaver coins the term, in *Ideas Have Consequences*, "Hysterical Optimism." ☺) So, Weaver critiques culture by considering methods for effecting the redemption of society, by ascertaining how well the prevailing "image of man" comports with the traditional view, that man is "a little lower than the angels." His insights into cultural cohesion are equally profound.

Consider the famous opening lines of WB Yeats' "Second Coming":

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer,
Things fall apart: the centre cannot hold:
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,*

Weaver ponders precisely how the "center holds." Weaver's trenchant cultural analysis is unparalleled! What Weaver dubs the "Tyrannizing Image," is a vision that exercises centripetal force (holds things together) and tyrannizes individuals in the sense that cultural identity demands conformity. It is an affront to individual autonomy. And, finally, the concept of cultural self-determination. "Such centripetalism is the essence of culture's power to cohere and to endure." And "For this reason it

is the very nature of culture to be exclusive. Without the power to reject that which does not understand or acknowledge its center of force, it would disintegrate. . . . We might say that a culture continues by attracting and attracts by continuing.”

Weaver observes of the “tyrannizing image,” that, in its function as a center of authority, there proceed from it “subtle and pervasive pressures upon us to conform and to repel the unlike as disruptive. So culture too is faced with the metaphysical problem of freedom and organization, which rules out the possibility of uncircumscribed liberty. Like all forces which shape and direct, it must insist on a pattern of inclusion and exclusion. This is a necessity of integral being and a fundamental fact to deal with in any plan for its protection.” Protecting culture, so it can continue and flourish, is a key concern of the cultural conservative. Without this firm foundation, civil society is impossible.

“Inclusion and exclusion”? (How out of step with contemporary societal norms can one get!?) Weaver also wrote, in the second chapter of his famous *Ideas Have Consequences*, an essay I think you read in one or more of Dr. Mitchell’s classes: “Distinction and Hierarchy.” Again, hierarchy is anathema to post-modern egalitarians. They can abide neither individuals who distinguish themselves nor those whose elevated status bespeaks social hierarchy, let alone some supposed core around which citizens are compelled to conform! But the organic vision of Christ’s many-membered body simply does not work without hierarchy. Weaver does homage to this biblical presupposition when he asserts, “a culture is a means of uniting society by making provision for differences. Differences do not create resentment unless the seed of resentment has been otherwise planted.” How do the members know their place without distinction and hierarchy? How can the body function harmoniously when members do not understand that some receive more honor than others and that upon lesser members we rightly bestow greater honor? Minus distinction and hierarchy the body would be spastic; uncoordinated; rendered dysfunctional. So, embracing egalitarianism, rejecting distinction and hierarchy, is not really an option for us. Weaver helps us understand the problem of so doing better than any other thinker of his day.

This vision and these insights constitute a highly integrated and fully articulated program of and vision for a cultural renewal, as it were, grounded in a traditional metaphysic which Weaver develops over time, and in multiple essays.¹ Also in “The Image of Culture,” Weaver discusses the thorny problem of critiquing culture while being immersed in it. How does one

¹ Be sure and purchase *In Defense of Tradition* Weaver’s lesser and unpublished works, collected and lovingly edited by Ted J. Smith. Sadly, Smith labored for years to gather Weaver’s lesser known essays and speeches, noted that most popular scholarship on Weaverian thought is confined to his easily accessible published works, and therefore noted that it was imperative for we conservatives to expand both the understanding and the influence of Weaver’s works . . . then he died. So the “expansion project” has stalled. Who will take up Smith’s challenge?

get “outside” the culture sufficient to render objective critique without, ironically, cutting oneself off? I will not here attempt to explicate this particular feature of Weaver’s model of cultural critique. It is offered at this time to complete a sampling of the breadth and depth, prescience and potency of Weaver’s views on cultural dynamics and cultural critique. Weaver’s cultural critique employs the “*imago dei*” as its touchstone.

The University of Oklahoma invited Weaver to conduct an advanced summer seminar in rhetoric of which “Language is Sermonic” is the keynote address, delivered “on a torrid July” in 1962. Weaver died in 1963, so this is among his most mature essays. He here completes a critique of the General Semanticists,² begun in “The Cultural Role of Rhetoric” and advanced in “*The Phaedrus* and the Nature of Rhetoric,” in which he fleshes out those primary truths that constitute the optimal matrix within which rhetoric flourishes. “They are, in summation, that man is not nor ever can be nor ever should be a depersonalized thinking machine. His feeling is the activity in him most closely related to what used to be called his soul. To appeal to his feeling therefore is not necessarily an insult; it can be a way to honor him, by recognizing him in the fullness of his being.”

Weaver continues:

the most obvious truth about rhetoric is that its object is the whole man. It presents its arguments first to the rational part of man, because rhetorical discourses, if they are honestly conceived, always have a basis in reasoning. Logical argument is the plot, as it were, of any speech or composition that is designed to persuade. Yet it is the very characterizing feature of rhetoric that it goes beyond this and appeals to other parts of man’s constitution, especially to his nature as a pathetic being, that is, a being feeling and suffering. A speech intended to persuade achieves little unless it takes into account how men are reacting subjectively to their hopes and fears and their special circumstances. The fact that Aristotle devotes a large proportion of his *Rhetoric* to how men feel about different situations and actions is an evidence of how prominently these considerations bulked even in the eyes of a master theorist.

Weaver’s discussion of the cultural role of rhetoric couples it, in the Weaverian taxonomy, very closely with the soul of man, and, therefore, with ethics. Language is sermonic because it cannot but show us “better versions of ourselves.”

² The General Semanticists attempted to “scientize” language, in order to reduce misunderstandings because they viewed misunderstandings as the root cause of war. So they wished to contribute to world peace by extricating from language elements that contributed to confusion; namely, emotion; pathos. Weaver was repulsed by their project. Not that he loved war; but because he loved the spiritual element of language. He feared the Semanticists would, despite their good intentions, denude language which would, in turn, denude the human soul.

In my Rhetoric class, I assign Weaver's "*The Phaedrus and the Nature of Rhetoric*" for its value as commentary on Plato's *Phaedrus*. I will leave discussion of that particular Weaver piece for our 100 point discussion board! I bring it up here to underscore that, if "*The Phaedrus and the Nature of Rhetoric*" elucidates *The Phaedrus*, "The Cultural Role of Rhetoric" serves as a prequel to "*The Phaedrus and the Nature of Rhetoric*." The insights Weaver develops there regarding the relation of dialectic to rhetoric, illustrated as they are by means of the Trial of Socrates, are unequaled in the Western tradition and will figure prominently into the Rhetoric course. Insofar as the aim of Rhetoric class is to help students cultivate wisdom and eloquence, and dialectic and rhetoric are the instruments by which liberally educated students are and have been, since ancient times, exposed to arts of wisdom and eloquence, "The Cultural Role of Rhetoric" is vital to your rhetorical education. These three essays, and that Platonic dialogue, taken together, will give you a solid foundation in the field and will, further, equip you for human excellence. What is more, insofar as Weaver dwells for much of "The Cultural Role of Rhetoric" on how the decay of our culture is "closely connected with the decline of rhetoric," our understanding of culture will also be enhanced as we study rhetoric.

I could no doubt deliver a worthwhile lecture focusing solely on this important essay, but we only have one hour! So, let me simply read the conclusion (and Weaver writes *one mean* conclusion!):

In brief the dialectician of our day has no adequate theory of man. Lacking such a theory, he of course cannot find a place for rhetoric, which is the most humanistic of all the disciplines. Rhetoric speaks to man in his whole being and out of his whole past and with reference to values which only a human being can intuit. The semanticists have in view only a denatured speech to suit a denatured man. Theirs is a major intellectual error, committed by supposing that they were going to help man by bringing language under the surveillance of science.

There is never any question that rhetoric ultimately will survive this scientific attack. The pity is that the attacks should ever have been made at all since, proceeding from contempt for history and ignorance of the nature of man, they must produce confusion, skepticism, and inaction. In the restored man dialectic and rhetoric will go along hand in hand as the regime of the human faculties intended that they should do. That is why the recovery of value and of community in our time calls for a restatement of the broadly cultural role of rhetoric.

And now for my, somewhat less elegant, conclusion!

Please note how the object of Weaver's cultural criticism, following Eliot's suggestion, discussed above, is negative schools of thought, positions, or movements. Weaver is supremely vigilant when it comes to spotting, exposing, and rooting out images of man that denude or debase humanity; that "eat away at the fibre of our society." A naturalism that equates man with animals; a scientism that reduces him to machine, a semanticism that denudes his soul, and the Madison Avenue vision of "mass man" whose excellence is realized through consumerism. In this, he models for contemporary conservative Christians how to conduct cultural critique with aplomb. This is important because it is NATURAL for activists to gravitate toward grand, utopian, affirmative ideals, but, just as a physician, by and large, treats particular conditions that threaten bodily health, the doctor of culture should focus on those ideas, viewpoints, programs, and schemes that compromise the health of the body politic. Preventative medicine is good; proactive measures can be taken, good habits can be cultivated, but, by and large, the art of medicine focuses on treating particular issues. In fact, harnessing medical science to perfect human nature through an affirmative, ideological and intrusive program has a name. A name we all know. Many understand, thanks to Gene Edward Veith and Jonah Goldberg that eugenics was championed by American progressives, and we *all* know it was practiced, unfettered, by national socialists. This is why culture shaping, for the conservative, ought be viewed as a negative enterprise. Because the odious fruit of the affirmative/progressive, doctrinaire approach, is utopianism, and social engineering, at best; genocide, at worst.

This insight provides a hedge against central programming. It follows that the best tack for doctors of culture is a "negative," rather than an affirmative one. Negative in the sense that, rather than aim at the improvement of society in the ideologue's way, those who wish to conserve the forms of traditional culture should determine what "cultural conditions" must obtain, then work *against*, expose, and critique them. Conservative culture shapers ought be neither ideologues, social engineers, nor utopians! So we avoid these pitfalls when we study the lessons taught by Weaver, Kirk, Eliot, Chesterton, Solzhenitsyn, and the like. And we have positive examples.

Consider Christ: Jesus did not come to establish His Kingdom on earth. He came to deal with the sin problem. True, He did institute sacraments around which Christians build community, and He gave us His Word, to build our faith. However, by and large, His work was to address those conditions, both juridical and attitudinal, that prevented us from enjoying His divine "culture." Consider the Founders, who designed a system of government to secure the blessings of liberty and promote the general welfare by making "ambition check ambition." There's is decidedly not an ideological and utopian scheme!

Having noted the primarily negative thrust of culture shaping, for the sake of balance, it would be good to close with a brief consideration of the positive aspects of how *culture shapes us*. The final chapter of Richard M. Weaver's posthumous collection of essays, *Visions of Order: The Cultural Crisis of our Time* does so brilliantly.

[C]ulture is an intermediary between man and his highest vocation, which in some form or other is a matter of the spirit. But it is not the nature of the mass of men to be spiritual at every moment in the saint's way. Part of their devoir they can pay through due observance of and due tribute to the forms of their culture. . . . There is always in cultural observance a little gesture of piety, a recognition that there are higher demands on man along with the lower. While culture is not a worship and should not be made a worship, it is a kind of orienting of the mind toward a mood, a reverence for the spirit on secular occasions. . . . these ideals are expressed in a thousand kindly and attractive forms in the creations of a culture . . . ("The Reconsideration of Man,"152-3).

Culture enculturates *by* elevation, *through* vocation.

C.S. Lewis elevated his culture by means of both fantasy literature and prose; through both rhetoric and dialectic. We who would restore culture should approach the task with imagination as well as reason; addressing contemporary issues with both direct, logical appeals and non-direct imaginative ones. Furthermore, as we effect cures, let us bear in mind that the marketplace of ideas is not the only place where culture happens. It happens in the publishing house, in the classroom, the board room, the dining room, the theatre, in vacation bible school, in the recording studio, even in Hollywood! In the Beltway, from the bench, and even in the parochial school on the high plains near the Rocky Mountains! As we pray, as we eat, and as we gather. In short: as we live in the world, as salt and light. So, let us live in love, serving those with whom God has stationed us; in society, in family, in church, and in work. By so doing, we will influence the culture for *Christ* in a thousand kindly, ordinary, substantive ways, as His many-membered body. We will influence the culture for *Liberty* insofar as our efforts are motivated by that distinction, derived earlier from T.S. Eliot, between material organization and spiritual organism. That is, we will avoid social engineering, indeed fascistic, schemes by avoiding the siren song of triumphalism. The astute reader of Weaverian thought will be equipped to influence our beleaguered culture with wisdom and eloquence over and against coercion and compulsion. That is the aim of Rhetoric class and Rhetoric class, therefore, contributes to the mission of Patrick Henry College as much as any other single course.