



Professor Ralph E. Turner, Durfee Professor of History at Yale University.

1893 - 1964

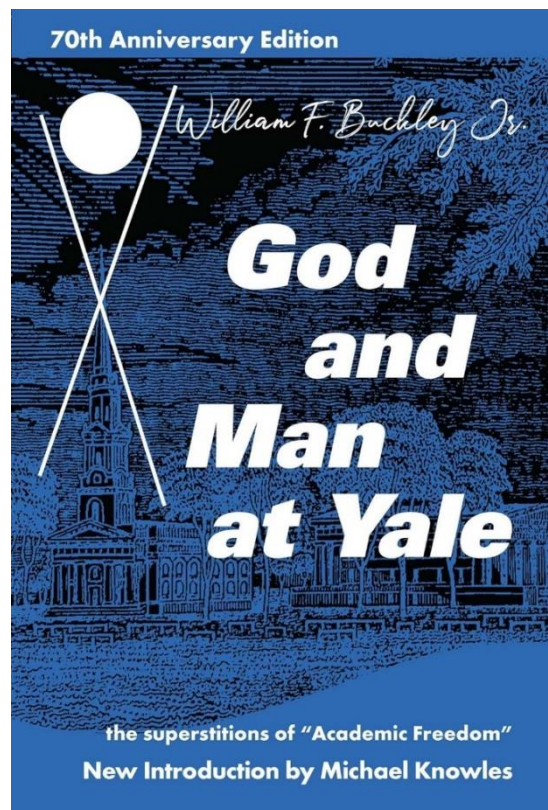
A few days ago, I looked up Professor Ralph Turner who was an outstanding teacher at Yale. I viewed the History courses at Yale like a box of chocolates, each so tempting that it was difficult to decide which would be next in my schedule. In my Senior year (1959), I was lucky enough to select Professor Turner's course which my transcript identifies as History 61; I no longer remember the title. He looked at History from a cultural point of view, drawing from anthropology, biology, psychology, archeology, sociology, and what we now term "evolutionary psychology" to better understand why we behave as we do individually and in groups and how these insights might relate to our contemporary world, at least as it was in 1959.

My Google and Bing searches turned up some intriguing surprises. First, I saw that he had been dismissed from The University of Pittsburg in 1934, in the midst of the Depression and ten years before he began teaching at Yale. Then, I noted that he had run afoul of William F Buckley Jr., denounced in his book God and Man at Yale¹ published in 1951.

As I read about what happened to Professor Turner in 1934 and reviewed 1951's God and Man at Yale, the parallels to today's pressures on the Presidents of the University of Pennsylvania, Harvard, and MIT became obvious. Over the last 90 years, the issues around free speech, learning, tradition, wealth, power, and religion remain similar and, if Professor Turner were still alive, he and the insights of his

research and teaching would remain as relevant today as when I sat in his classroom in 1959.

A brief quote from William Buckley's book will give you the gist of his view: "*Mr. Turner is emphatically and vigorously atheistic. An able scholar, he is nevertheless a professional debunker, a dedicated iconoclast who has little mercy either on God, or on those who believe in Him, and little respect for the values most undergraduates have been brought up to respect.*" Buckley continues: "*Many Yale students laugh off the influence of Mr. Turner and ultimately classify him as a gifted and colorful fanatic. Others, more impressionable, and hence those over whom there is cause to be concerned, are deeply disturbed by Mr. Turner's bigoted atheism and finish the year they spend with him full of suspicions and doubts about religion that they may retain for a lifetime.*"²



When I began to research Professor Turner's time at the University of Pittsburgh, I found that his dismissal had become the subject of investigations by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) and by the State of Pennsylvania. They make fascinating reading. The AAUP study³ is a masterpiece of understated dismay at the conditions at the University of Pittsburgh.

Turner joined the University of Pittsburgh in 1925 as an assistant professor and was promoted to associate professor by 1927. He graduated from the University of Iowa in 1916 and completed his doctorate from Columbia University in 1931 while teaching at the University of Pittsburgh. By 1925, when he joined the University, he was already a published scholar, having produced a textbook America in Civilization⁴ in that same year.

At that time, the Chancellor of the University was John Gilbert Bowman who had been appointed in 1921 when the University was deeply in debt.⁵ Chancellor

Bowman, although appearing to be frail and retiring was very persuasive with Pittsburgh's wealthy elite and had greatly improved the school's finances. By the early 1930's, he was intent on raising funds for what became his obsession, the Cathedral of Learning which was to begin construction in 1936.

The Cathedral was to be a 42-story skyscraper in the center of Pittsburgh to house the university's offices, classrooms, and auditoriums. Mostly completed by 1937, it is said to be the tallest educational building in the Western Hemisphere.⁶ In Chancellor Bowman's imagination, it was to be a great transcendently beautiful



cathedral-like building to lift the eyes of a drab Pittsburgh from earth to heaven.⁷

The original draft of the AAUP report contained a paragraph that was removed in the final version. I include it here: *"In the world of the existing Pittsburgh with its extremes of riches and poverty, its unrelieved dirtiness and ugliness, its ruthless materialism and individualism, its irrepressible industrial conflicts, its lack of any integrating principle other than the sign of a dollar, the Chancellor moves with one driving motive: to wring from the community the money essential to the development and support of the kind of university which his mind conceives as the ideal for this particular city."*⁸

While focusing on fundraising, the Chancellor abolished tenure and placed all instructors and professors on one-year contracts, from June to June. Sometimes, contacts were not renewed until just before the start of the September term. Faculty dismissals were "alarmingly high."⁹ This was in the depth of the Depression when jobs were very scarce. The Chancellor's view of his faculty was that they should be respectful of authority; patriotic and reverent¹⁰ and that the university's mission was to produce students in the same mold.

Professor Turner was a popular teacher with very large classes in courses that were not mandatory for any group of students. He taught more than three thousand

students during his years at Pittsburgh and was regarded as an excellent teacher by almost all faculty and students. Seniors voted him “ their most popular professor.”¹¹

Over the years, very few students or parents complained about his teaching.¹² The AAUP Report noted that a student reported that she “was greatly disturbed when, in the course of a class discussion, the statement was made that there were different versions of the Garden of Eden story.”¹³ The AAUP Report also records that he was requested by the administration to temper his discussions on the subject of the evolution of man and that he did so.¹⁴ In Professor Turner’s above discussions with the administration, “a statement was made to him to the effect that Pittsburgh was in many ways a ‘fourteenth-century community.’”¹⁵

As I remember his teaching in 1959, there was little if any disparagement of formal religion. Any discussion of religion was related to other factors such as economics, science, tradition, lifespan, nature, medicine, competition, leadership, physical geography, legal systems, kinship, or natural resources.

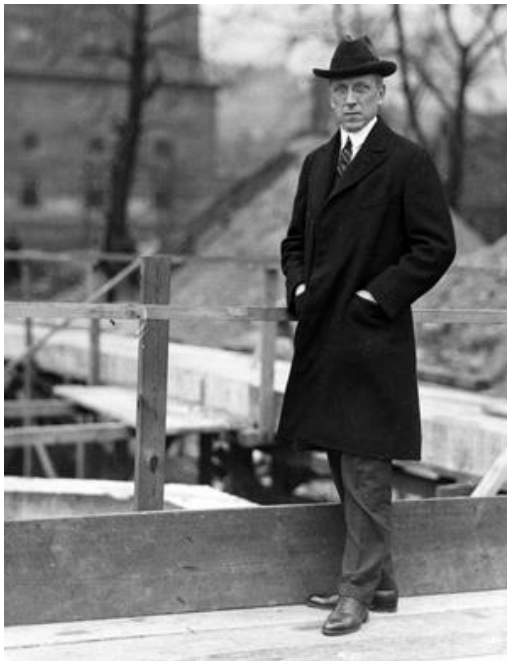
One area where he engendered criticism from the administration and Chancellor Bowman resulted from his interest in social legislation including old age pensions, unemployment insurance, regulation of sweatshops, and restrictions on child labor. This interest coincided with the Presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the regulations, programs, and reforms of the “New Deal.”

For a few months early in 1933, Professor Turner was State Chairman of the Pennsylvania Security League which lobbied aggressively for social reform. That same spring his contract renewal was held up and he was asked to choose between political action and his teaching career. Accordingly, he resigned from the Security League, but his contract renewal remained in limbo. In addition, his expected promotion to full Professor was put on hold. After several more weeks, he did receive his contract renewal but not his promotion. He was informed that his political associations had injured the University “downtown,”¹⁶ referring to the business community.

A year later, in April “he delivered a paper entitled “History in the Making in Western Pennsylvania” to the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania.¹⁷ He was highly critical of laissez-faire liberalism, and also spoke about the political and economic control of Pittsburgh and the surrounding area by the local business elite.” Several

business leaders attended the lecture and others heard about it afterward. At the University, the consensus was that he had delivered a very thorough and academic analysis to an audience that was not accustomed to such candor.

On June 30, 1934, Professor Turner was informed by the chairman of the Department of History that, although his contract had been renewed in May, he would receive his salary for a year but would not be allowed to teach. No reason was given. Turner took this as a dismissal and arranged to see Chancellor Bowman.



Richard P. Mulcahy, a historian studying the Turner case noted that: *“The confrontation between these two men made a sharp contrast. Bowman looked every inch the ethereal college professor. He was a tall, thin, and shy man with grey hair and pince-nez, bearing a strong resemblance to Woodrow Wilson. Turner was a much younger and thickset man with broad shoulders, who resembled more the popular image of an ironpuddler than a college professor.”*¹⁸

In judging faculty, Bowman “evaluated personal style. Little things, such as whether a man's necktie matched his suit, or if he wore a hat, were important factors in his eyes. To Dr. Bowman, personal taste reflected profoundly on an individual's personality.”¹⁹ Friends testified to the AAUP Committee that the Chancellor thought Professor Turner was “not an acceptable dinner guest because he argued too vigorously.”²⁰ Turner, born on a farm near Cedar Rapids, Iowa, was reported to be energetic in his speech with a quick response and sometimes argumentative in conversation.

In the exit interview, Chancellor Bowman did not give a specific reason for the dismissal but offered “The University can carry on its policy better with you away from here,” and added, “There is discontent in the community.” Later in the interview he stated, “The Board of Trustees is a group of businessmen and among them there is a great deal of discontent.”²¹

The trustees were mostly prominent and wealthy Pittsburgh elite with names including Mellon, Scaife, Follansbee, Lockhart, Falk, and Heinz.²² So far as I can discover, none of them were women. Many of them belonged to the Duquesne Club and were also associated with the prominent churches in the city. Any defections from these contributors might have slowed or stopped completion of the Cathedral of Learning and Chancellor Bowman was clear in his admonitions that no actions of faculty or staff could be allowed to disappoint this group.²³

Seventeen years later, in 1951, when Willam F. Buckley, Jr. published God and Man at Yale, his criticism of Professor Turner and many other faculty members was similar. In Buckley's view, the purpose of Yale should be to imbue its students with the values of its founders, Board members, and alumni. By this, he meant Christianity and free market capitalism as opposed to atheism and socialism.²⁴ In effect, he wanted to make Yale a "safe space"²⁵ for those who believed as he did. Alumni were asked to pause their contributions to force the removal of teachers and textbooks that disagreed with these values.

As it turned out, God and Man at Yale got a great deal of attention in 1951 but did little to change things at Yale. The book came out during the McCarthy era and the life of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HCUA) so we can surmise that the Buckley book may have caused professors and staff at Yale to be somewhat more cautious. Buckley's attacks likely enhanced Professor Turner's on-campus popularity. There is no evidence that the book had any significant influence on alumni contributions. Professor Gaddis Smith did mention in an article in the Yale Alumni Magazine in 2008, that: "*God and Man* did not cause Yale to reexamine its principles, but it did lead to more extensive and effective communications with alumni."²⁶

Now, in 2024, most of us know about the recently forced resignations of the Presidents of Harvard and the University of Pennsylvania. Again, very wealthy donors and generally conservative public and political figures were eager to force universities to accede to their demands, echoing the events of 1934 and 1951.

My curiosity about Professor Turner certainly had interesting results. As might be expected in thinking about universities and education, the protagonists in each era are similar. Of course, the political, social, and economic issues of any period will be echoed on university campuses making them inevitably a microcosm of the

greater society. Students are young, passionate, diverse, making new friends, and exploring new concepts.

All the more reason for us to follow the advice of Dr. Claudine Gay in her letter of resignation from the Harvard Presidency: “to affirm our enduring commitment to open inquiry and free expression in the pursuit of truth”²⁷ by ensuring the rule of law, free speech, academic freedom, and protection from threats and violence on our campuses.

It is interesting too, that, though Chancellor Bowman looked down on Professor Turner as a social inferior, Turner ended up as a vastly respected Yale Professor with a long list of accomplishments, publications, accolades, and honors, more than rivaling those of the Chancellor.

¹ William F. Buckley Jr., *God and Man at Yale* (Regnery Gateway, 1951, 2021)

² Buckley, 12

³ Himstead, Wolfe, Bullitt and Wittke, *American Freedom and Tenure: University of Pittsburgh* (Bulletin of the American Association of University Professors, Vol. 21, No. 3, March 1935), 224-266

⁴ Ralph E. Turner, *America in Civilization* (New York, F. S. Crofts & Co., Inc., 1925)

⁵ Richard P. Mulcahy, *The Dark Side of the Cathedral of Learning: The Turner Case* (Western Pennsylvania Historical Magazine, Vol. 69, No. 1, January 1986), 42

⁶ Cathedral of Learning, University of Pittsburgh, https://calendar.pitt.edu/cathedral_of_learning

⁷ Himstead, AAUP, 262

⁸ Mulcahy, 50

⁹ Himstead, AAUP, 250

¹⁰ Curtis J. Good, *The Dismissal of Ralph Turner: A Historical Case Study of Events at the University of Pittsburgh* (AAUP Journal of Academic Freedom, Volume 3, 2012), 11

¹¹ *The Plank at Pitt*, (Time Magazine, July 16, 1934),

<https://content.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,787913-1,00.html>

¹² Himstead AAUP, 226

¹³ Himstead AAUP, 243

¹⁴ Himstead AAUP, 227

¹⁵ Himstead AAUP, 227

¹⁶ Himstead AAUP, 229

¹⁷ Good, 8

¹⁸ Mulcahy, 37

¹⁹ Mulcahy, 43

²⁰ Himstead AAUP, 246

²¹ Himstead AAUP, 231

²² Mulcahy, 38

²³ Himstead AAUP, 240

²⁴ Osita Nwanevu, *Political Correctness*, (Harper’s Magazine, March 2016), 4

²⁵ Nwanevu, 5

²⁶ Gaddis Smith, *William F. Buckley: the ideologue*, (Yale Alumni Magazine, May/June, vol LXXI, No 5), <https://yalealumnimagazine.org/articles/2105>

²⁷ Claudine Gay, *Resignation Letter*, (New York Times, January 2, 2024),

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/02/us/clauidine-gay-resignation-letter-harvard.html>

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