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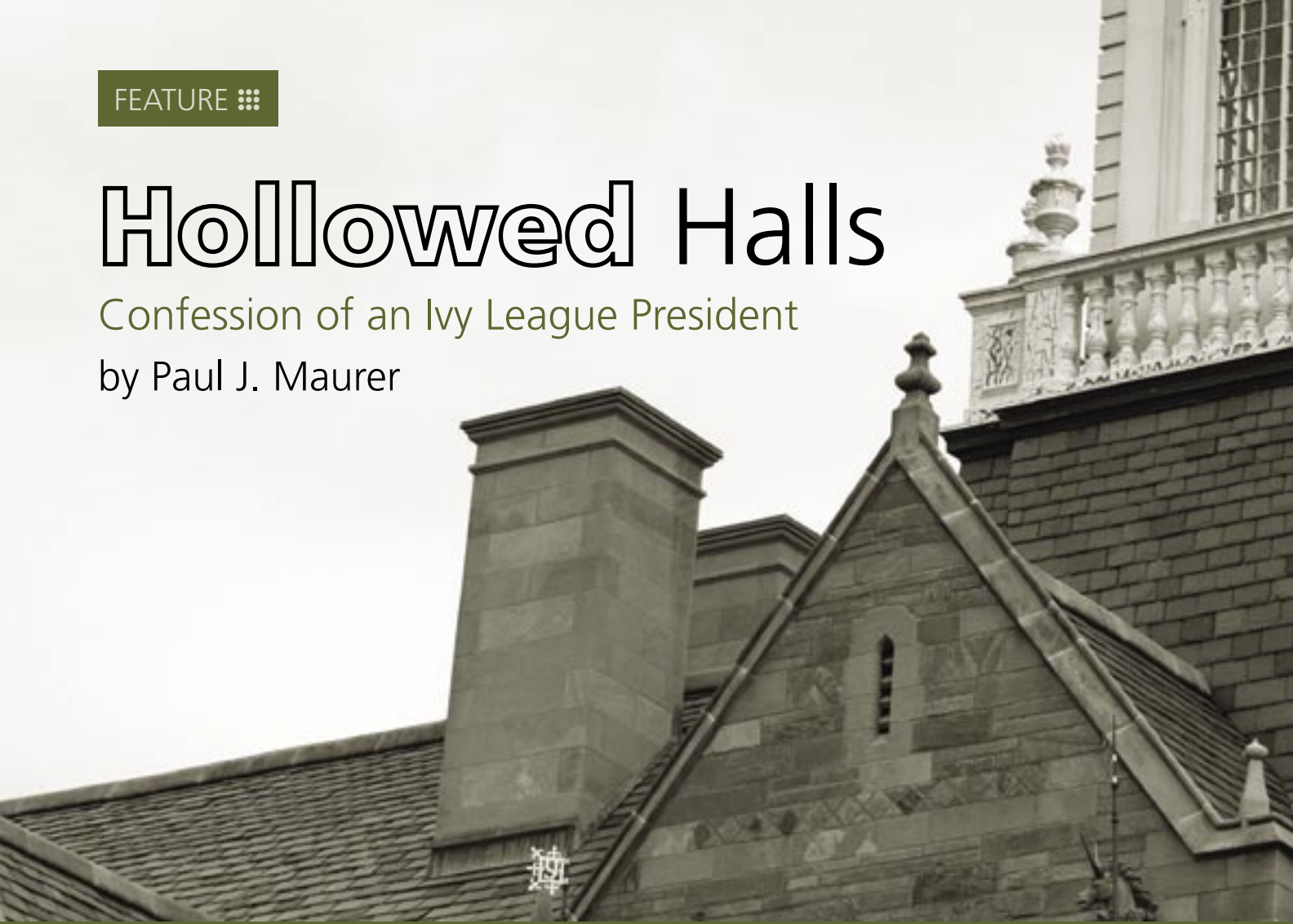
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# Hollowed Halls

Confession of an Ivy League President

by Paul J. Maurer



**N**ot long ago, Richard Levin, the president of Yale, did a remarkable thing. He expressed the hollow core of secular higher education in extraordinarily honest language. While speaking to incoming freshman and their parents at Yale's orientation,

Levin confessed that the \$200,000 Ivy League education they were about to purchase would not help them with the most important part of an undergraduate education—discovering the meaning of life.

Yale has been accused of hollow excellence before, but Levin is probably its first president to publicly admit to the charge. In 1951, as a freshly minted graduate of Yale, William F. Buckley, Jr., blistered his alma mater for removing God from his education. In *God and Man at Yale*, Buckley accused the Yale faculty, acting in the name of academic freedom, of persuading undergraduates to be atheists.

In that book, Buckley provided a guided tour through the academic departments at Yale, showing how individual faculty members, including those in the Religion Department, were not even neutral, but actually hostile to religion. Faculty with a pro-Christian bias were "not easy to find," he wrote, suggesting that some were unwilling to express their religious views openly. He charged Yale's faculty with advancing secularism, and asserted that students who came to Yale,

students, he said, is help in asking good questions.

Levin's confession was not built around Buckley's nearly sixty-year-old critique, however, but around a much more recent publication: a 2007 book by Yale faculty member Anthony Kronman, titled *Education's End:*

*Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life.* This book is part of a growing body of work that describes how higher education has lost its way. Perhaps Levin's honesty is simply an offshoot of Kronman's carefully argued indictment of higher education.

## The Age of Piety

Kronman, a former Dean of Yale Law School who currently teaches in Yale's

Directed Studies Program, argues that the history of education in the United States, with regard to teaching the meaning of life, can be divided into three periods.

The first period, which he calls the "age of piety," began with the founding of Harvard in 1636 and lasted until the beginning of the Civil War. American colleges throughout this period not only integrated the question of the meaning of life into every facet of their curriculum, but they did so with an explicitly Christian worldview. Christ was acknowledged as sovereign over all creation, and all knowledge was understood as emanating from this starting point.

A review of the founding of Harvard shows that the college began as two things: an academically rigorous institution, and a distinctively Christian one. Nearly all of Harvard's founders had been educated at Cambridge or Oxford, and, as one might expect, their own education served as a model for the college they built. These Puritan divines were clearly focused on what they saw as the goal of higher education: the shaping of students' souls.

So while Harvard's graduates would enter a variety of careers, their time on campus was not focused on professional training or the mere transmission of knowledge. In Kronman's words, Harvard was "above all a place for the training of character, or the nurturing of those intellectual and moral habits that together form the basis for living the best life that one can." The students were seen as individuals whose minds *and* souls would be shaped during their years on campus.

Harvard was not the only college with this view of

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even those with strong religious convictions, would find little help in their attempt to discern life's meaning.

## A Notable Admission

The critique of a young college graduate is easy to dismiss on the basis of inexperience; after all, the ability of a young man—even a brilliant one like Buckley—to appreciate the complexities of life is still in the early stages of development.

That is what makes Levin's confession so notable. Long-standing university presidents (Levin has served as Yale's since 1993) don't normally allow that, despite tuition of over \$40,000 per year, their faculty cannot provide any guidance on the highest, and traditionally central, aspect of undergraduate education. Yet Levin admitted that Yale has nothing substantive to say to its students about the meaning of life. The best its faculty can offer its

its mission. Most American colleges during this 230-year period had a similar focus. Thus, Kronman calls it the “age of piety,” and I believe it was the golden era of Christian education.

## The Age of Secular Humanism

Kronman’s second period lasted about one hundred years, from the end of the Civil War through the late 1960s. During this period, although faculty members continued

The American Heritage Dictionary defines **nihilism** as the “rejection of all distinctions in moral or religious value and a **willingness to repudiate all previous theories** of morality or religious belief,” and this is exactly how Kronman describes **today’s academy**.

to maintain the moral authority and confidence needed to lead students to think deeply about the meaning of life, they gradually eliminated God as ground zero. Kronman calls this period the “age of secular humanism” and suggests that within its first fifty years, the way was paved for the complete destruction of the way things had been done for two centuries prior.

One of the major factors driving this change was the rise of the German model of scientific research, which was imported to American educational institutions. This new method of education was centered on research and the quest to produce new knowledge; no longer was it deemed sufficient to study the brightest and most influential thinkers of the previous two millennia. Colleges, now becoming universities, moved away from a curriculum that assumed a divine Sovereign as the starting point for education, and toward curricula based on the sovereignty of the human mind and its freedom to chart its own course. The effect was the demise of a “prescriptive” curriculum, along with the rise of academic specialization.

Eventually, as the natural and social sciences were purged of all their moral and theological presuppositions, the humanities, by default, became the lone venue for any serious discussion of the meaning of life. I say “by default” because it was the only major branch of the academy that

did not aggressively pursue value-free education. Although many faculty in the humanities abandoned normative teaching, the discipline as a whole did not demand that they do so.

Further, to proponents of secular humanism like Kronman, it is possible, even preferable, to explore the meaning of life without religious foundations, and to do so in an organized way. Meaning and purpose become broader and more subjective, but not irrelevant.

In fact, Kronman’s definition of secular humanism rests on three assumptions: (1) There are elements of human nature that are common to all; (2) nevertheless, human nature is not fixed, but is open and agile, thereby elevating the individual and encouraging the formation of a life that is uniquely one’s own; and (3) there is no need to endorse the idea that God is the starting point in higher education.

These assumptions serve as the ground rules for what he calls the “great conversation” in the liberal arts classroom, in which the

great works of the past are discussed and debated. Students are to consider themselves respectful latecomers to this evolving conversation, but legitimate and full participants nonetheless. They are to derive meaning from participation in the great conversation. This is the sort of education Kronman advocates.

## The Age of Nihilism

The third period Kronman delineates began in the late 1960s and extends to the present day. Kronman describes these past forty years in higher education as a time when the basic assumptions of secular humanism have come under attack. The idea of *any* common aspects of human nature is now seen by many as implausible. There is hostility toward the great conversation, particularly since it is rooted in the intellectual and artistic achievements of the West. The great thinkers are no longer considered exceptional, but just one group of voices among many other, equal-



ly valid voices. There is no longer any canon of great thinkers.

Kronman devotes entire chapters to the research ideal and to political correctness, two central culprits in what he considers the self-destruction of colleges and universities and the “crisis of authority” in the humanities. He believes that few faculty members in the secular academy today see themselves as having either the competence or the duty to guide students in discovering the meaning of life. We have little reason to doubt him.

Though Kronman does not give this period a name, I would suggest the “age of nihilism.” The American Heritage Dictionary defines nihilism as the “rejection of all distinctions in moral or religious value and a willingness to repudiate all previous theories of morality or religious belief,” and this is exactly how Kronman describes today’s academy.

He believes that while parents still send their children to college with the expectation that they will receive (among other things) guidance on the meaning of life, the secular academy has, in fact, lost all ability to deliver on this central part of its mission.

## A Vain Hope

It is clear, however, that Kronman believes this mission can be recovered, but only through the revival of secular humanism; he does not favor a return to anything like the age of piety, for, at best, he sees no role for religious faith in the great conversation, and at worst, he sees faith as an impediment. As a consequence, his analysis, though thoughtful in many respects, completely disregards the one hundred or so Christ-centered colleges and universities in the United States that do hold the question of life’s larger meaning as central to their mission.

These Christ-centered schools (as distinct from the many formally church-related schools that have drifted from their orthodox roots) believe that education is more than the transmission of knowledge and professional training. While they take academic rigor seriously and graduate



highly employable students, they also, as during the age of piety, set out to shape the souls of their students. At such colleges, the educators seek to develop a certain kind of person for church and society.

This is something Yale is unable to do, and President Levin admitted as much in his speech. In telling his audience that the best the university could do was help students ask good questions, he largely confirmed Professor Kronman’s argument. In fact, Levin’s tour through Yale’s academic departments hauntingly paralleled Buckley’s of almost sixty years ago.

Even so, Levin expressed the hope that, somewhere along the way, students would reflect deeply on the meaning of life. Doing so, he told them, “may prove to be the most important and enduring accomplishment of your Yale education.”

But how can President Levin, or any college leader, reasonably expect students to understand something that is neither discussed, debated, researched, presented, nor even assigned in their courses? One wonders how he expects students to figure this out, when he admits that the faculty at Yale can offer no more than the ability to ask penetrating questions. Asking the right questions is central to intellectual development, to be sure, but the absence of any guidance in finding answers surely does not serve the students well.

Levin is a smart and accomplished leader. His (to date) sixteen-year tenure at Yale makes him the longest-serving president in the Ivy League. His willingness to admit that the emperor has no clothes, while notable, may stem from the knowledge that the emperor’s position is nevertheless secure: Levin is confident that families will continue to send their children to Yale and pay the price required to do so. As long as students get the brand name with the diploma, the content apparently no longer matters. ☉