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Brave New World

Aldous Huxley
Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2006
\$13.95, 259 pages

Reviewed by Abigail Hasebroock

In the 1965 *Declaration on Christian Education*, Pope John Paul VI stated, "Men find that the remarkable development of technology and scientific investigation and the new means of communication offer them an opportunity of attaining more easily their cultural and spiritual inheritance and of fulfilling one another in the closer ties between groups and even between peoples. (Vatican Council II, 1965, n. 2)"

The advent of science is both compelling and controversial; science allows us to preserve culture, history, and, in some cases, religious tradition, while also creating avenues for modern socialization and interaction. But what happens when science becomes perverse and triumphs over Christian morality? Aldous Huxley presents this futuristic dystopian society controlled by science, not virtue, in his 1932 novel *Brave New World*.

Approaching its 80th year of publication, *Brave New World* explores a potentially frightening reality that is not incomparable to our world today. This anniversary reprinting creates an opportunity for modern readers to revisit a novel that has poignant messages that may be used in Catholic secondary education classrooms. Set in the World-State, a peaceful global society, citizens of the city of London are focused solely on consumption of goods and hedonistic pleasure. The World-State appears to be a utopia, but 10 men control this dark society, precisely and measurably. The first belief of this society, the consumption of goods, was immortalized thanks to Henry Ford, the American inventor of the assembly line and mass production. Ford is a mythologized Christ figure for the society, to the point where the measurement of time is no longer A.D. (Anno Domini) but calculated as A.F. (After Ford). The sign of the cross has become the sign of the T, a gesture of remembrance for Ford's Model T car. Ford is so revered that the society is constructed around genetically bred humans who are conditioned to be of a certain intelligence and social class, who are also predetermined to fulfill certain occupational needs.

Consequently, as humans are decanted in a lab, the concept of family disappears—there are no mothers or fathers, and the idea becomes an obscenity in an effort to have complete loyalty to the State. Pregnancy is regarded as a crime and an ailment because it never happens. Since no one can get pregnant, there is no monogamy, and promiscuity becomes an understood virtue. Children learn their “moral education” through a process called hypnopaedia, or sleep teaching, in which they hear repeated phrases like “Everyone belongs to everyone else,” and “Science is everything.” Each facet of life is so precisely controlled that the people are never exposed to original thinking or creative expression.

The effects of such rigorous conditioning have serious psychosomatic effects on the people. Humans are taught to enjoy everything in common, because “solitude breeds instability.” Men and women regularly attend the feelies, films that engage all senses, rather than build unique interpersonal relationships. When the humans feel overwhelmed, they take a hallucinogen called soma that allows them to enter a dream-like holiday, and return from tranquility without the side effects of a hangover. Humans rely so steadfastly on soma that they barely participate in their own reality. They are disillusioned and unaware of the ways in which the leaders are manipulating them. That is, all except for Bernard Marx.

Bernard Marx, a specialist in sleep teaching, is a highly intelligent member of the elite class, but is small in stature and considered to be deformed. He enjoys being alone and dislikes sports, which makes him unpopular among the women. He is relatable because of his individuality and nonconformity, and readers root for him to be the catalyst for change. Initially, Bernard seems appeased with his different nature, but it is slowly revealed that he is affected by his non-acceptance. Bernard realizes the faux pas in human conditioning and desperately wishes to do something to gain popularity.

Bernard and his pseudo-love interest, Lenina Crowne, travel to a “savage reservation” in Sante Fe, North America. This savage reservation is an isolated territory surrounded by electrical fences, and is strictly for those who are not born in the utopia. Interestingly, Huxley presents the savages as comparable to Navajo Indians in appearance, social organization, and the unfortunate addiction to alcohol. Huxley’s commentary on Christianity is paradoxical here because the reservation is for outcasts plagued by various indecent diseases; however, amongst this unhappy, imperfect society are strong remnants of a recognizable form of Christianity in the crucifix, an image of an eagle, and a notable sense of community. There Bernard meets a young savage named John,

who has a strong sense of morality and a peculiar interest in Shakespeare. When Bernard learns of John's tumultuous upbringing, he decides to bring both John and his mother, Linda, back to the utopia in London. When the savages enter the brave new world, the society becomes upset and drastic actions are taken to ensure stability.

Other parodies of Christianity emerge when Bernard takes part in a solidarity service, similar to a modern prayer service. A group of six men and women sing hymns and take communion of soma, rather than wafers and wine. The frenzy rises until the group collapses into a rapturous debauchery, except that Bernard does not fully connect in this moment. He has the ability to question, to probe deeply, and realizes how dishonest his actions are, exhibiting qualities of an earnest Christian. One must wonder how Bernard acquired his social awareness despite extensive conditioning, and whether we today are victims of mental conditioning or capable of rationalizing in our own way.

There is no question which side Huxley falls on in the debate between science and religion. The cost of a utopian world with no war, poverty, disease, or social unrest is too great; by using science as an instrument of power, humans misused biology and psychology to achieve peace. Humans had to give up love, art, religion, and history as a consequence. Ultimately, humans gave up their freedom, and they never grew or changed. Each person lost their individual identity amid a materialistic, fast-paced world.

Despite the potential abuses of science, Pope Paul VI iterated, "children and young people must be helped, with the aid of the latest advances in psychology and the arts and science of teaching, to develop harmoniously their physical, moral and intellectual endowments" (Vatican Council II, 1965, n. 6). To an extent, this is the primary essence of *Brave New World*, as individuals are subject to the latest scientific advancements and nurtured physically, taught morally, and prescribed intellectually. However, Pope Paul VI believed that science should help the youth form a unique identity, which is contrary to the applications of psychology in *Brave New World*. Science, properly combined with education, can produce individuals with a strong conscience and moral values, but it is clear that these ideas are distorted and adversely modified in the World-State. The authors of education, according to the *Declaration of Christian Education*, are the family, community, and Church; none of these are positively present in *Brave New World*. Lastly, an education should foster the ability to judge rightly, inquire, have dialogue, and live altruistically; yet it is clear that choice is not an option for the citizens of London.

The advancement of science in *Brave New World* manipulated Christian

values and shows only glimpses of religion as we know it. Huxley wrote this novel as a warning, and perhaps a reflection on the motives of scientific advancement and genetic engineering in the 20th century. This novel can be used in secondary classrooms to highlight Catholic values of family, morality, and the importance of respecting the life and dignity of every human person; with focused dialogue around these core values, students can compare and contrast the quality of life in *Brave New World* with the condition of our society today.

References

Vatican Council II. (1965). *Gravissimum educationis* [Declaration on Christian education]. Retrieved from the Vatican website: www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_gravissimum-educationis_en.html

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