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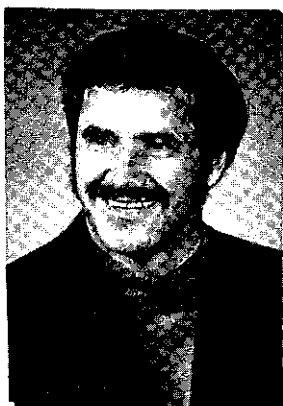
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What Reading Is Good Reading?

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Mike Vanden Bosch received his A.M. in English and his Ph.D. in English Education from the University of Iowa. He wrote his doctoral dissertation on the effects of pop culture on the values of teenagers.

Teachers concerned about getting students to read books must face the question of "Why read?" before they can answer intelligently the question of "Read what?" Whether they are looking for a book to teach to the entire class or are searching for a book for one bright student, the questions must be faced in that order. And teachers in so-called "free reading" courses had better ask such questions too.

Well then, why read? Not merely to gain experience vicariously, but to learn from the experience of others. Not merely to learn to appreciate fine phrasing and well-formed sentences, but to examine whether the fine phrases and sentences are profound insights or mere sophistry.

Not merely to become "well-read," but, rather, to become a better person.

These reasons may seem overly practical to some and pietistic to others, but if books have power to mold thinking, we must recognize that they can direct our thoughts for good or for evil. Surely, if reading Hemingway leads a student to be less concerned with his own private morality, such reading has hurt rather than helped this student. Surely, if reading Sartre or Camus makes a student emotionally distraught, such a student would be better off not reading Sartre or Camus.

This should be self-evident to both the secular teacher and to the Christian teacher. But the Christian teacher especially

should be concerned about how a book will affect a student's thinking, his morale, and, yes, his morality. For to choose to teach books or plays or stories without concern for the mental, emotional, and spiritual welfare of the student is to teach subject matter without concern for the person. It is saying that the purpose of reading literature is not to bring glory to God but to bring glory to good writers. It is saying that the end of learning is knowledge, but not wisdom.

Having said all this, I recognize that some will respond, "The truth can't hurt students. They must find out what life is like, and they might as well find out now." There might be some validity to this argument if authors always presented the whole truth. But that is seldom the case.

Let me illustrate. Let's say a student chooses (as many high school students have in recent years) to read *Demian* by Hermann Hesse. In this book, Sinclair, the young protagonist, learns that Abraxas is the name of a godhead whose "symbolic task is the uniting of godly and devilish elements." This turns out to be the god that Pistorius, Demian, and Demian's mother idolize also. In fact, Pistorius says, "Morality has always seemed to me insufferable. I can't express it very well—do you know that there must be a god who is both god and devil at one and the same time?" (p. 103).¹ The logical extension of this view is the advice for living that Pistorius offers to Sinclair:

Give in to the fire, in to the clouds, and as soon as the inner voices begin to speak, surrender to them; don't ask first whether it's permitted or would please your teachers or father or some god. You will ruin yourself if you do that (p. 113).

That this advice is bad should be evident to any Christian, but Sinclair heeds it, as is indicated by the advice Sinclair himself gives to Knowler, who had been planning to commit suicide: "We aren't pigs as you seem to think, but human

beings. We create gods and struggle with them, and they bless us." And later he says, "An enlightened man had but one duty—to seek the way to himself, to reach inner certainty, to grope his way forward, no matter where it led" (p. 131).

Later Demian elaborates on this same philosophy of life when he says:

You are only afraid if you are not in harmony with yourself. People are afraid because they have never owned up to themselves. A whole society is composed of men afraid of the unknown within them. They all sense that the rules they live by are no longer valid, that they live according to archaic laws—neither their religion nor their morality is in any way suited to the needs of the present (p. 140).

The romantic bias of this view of life should be apparent to any reader, but some readers may be disposed to accept such a philosophy of life, to their eventual dismay. I submit that a teacher who ignores this possibility and merely lets a student report on such a book, or perhaps even teaches the book just to expose his students to romanticism, is guilty of leading his students into temptation without showing them the way out.

The romantic bias is even more blatant in Demian's interpretation of the Cain and Abel story. His interpretation overlooks the sin of Cain and instead elevates Cain's pride to a god. Hesse seems to admire Cain and Demian because they "worship whatever Nature has put in them." Such deified individualism, instead of being exposed in the book, is advocated. A teacher must consider this before recommending the book to a potential convert—that is, to any reader.

Of course, the book makes some good points. Demian says, for example, that For 100 years Europe has done nothing but study and build factories! They know exactly how many ounces of powder it takes to kill a man but they don't

