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THAT ELUSIVE "PLUS-FACTOR" IN CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

During the events of the chaotic summer, I was reminded of Charles Dickens' description of the French Revolution. Do you recall these words at the opening of A Tale of Two Cities? "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the day of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us..." That description heaps paradox upon contradiction. But we sense that Dickens has captured here the spirit of crisis and is "telling it the way it is." Ours too is a day of paradox and contradiction, of dreadful fears and enormous possibilities. What should education be like in a time like this? And what is the role of the church-related college today?

In his stimulating book The Secular City, theologian Harvey Cox says that there is no such thing as a Christian college. The idea that there can be is medievalism. The term Christian, he says, cannot be used to refer to universities any more than to observatories or laboratories. "No one of the so-called Christian colleges that now dot our Midwest is able to give a very plausible theological basis for retaining the equivocal phrase Christian college in the catalog. Granted that there may be excellent traditional, public-relations, or sentimental reasons for calling a college Christian, there are no theological reasons. ...The idea of developing "Christian universities" in America was bankrupt even before it began." (p. 221)

Now some of you may find yourselves in the unusual position of emphatic agreement with an important contemporary theologian. But I think Harvey Cox is wrong on this point. I believe that there can be such a thing as a Christian college, and that it can be defined and described, at least in rough outline. Let me try.

A Christian college is one which identifies itself as Christian in desire and intent, and which seeks to follow Christian principles in the conduct of its affairs. The key characteristic, you note, is intention of direction, not perfection of performance. If we use a moralistic definition, then of course there are no fully Christian colleges, for none of them even approaches perfection. But for that matter, neither do Christian people, and we have a term without any concrete referent. It is better to speak of the general orientation, or of the basic intention, of the college.

As I see it, the label Christian should not restrict, but should expand the horizons of the educational enterprise. The first obligation of any college is to provide the highest quality of academic program of which it is capable. Beyond this elementary goal, the Christian college has an additional responsibility--a concern (broadly interpreted) for the life of faith, of spirit, and of morality. As Arland Christ-Janer says, "The nature of institutional aspirations contains one of the identifying marks of the church-related college. It should care about the individual in his human condition and try to make relevant for him the divine-human relationships in the most intelligent and persuasive forms." ("The Church College--Priorities and Tasks," Trustee, March, 1967)

According to a report of the American Council of Education, 86% of American freshmen this fall rank high on their list of college objectives the desire to develop "a philosophy of life." (Pantagraph, 9/1/68) But a recent Danforth Foundation study observes, "It is now assumed by most colleges that this goal is attained indirectly and fortuitously, that it is not an objective toward the achievement of which the student can be assisted in an

orderly way. According to Danforth researchers Pattillo and Mackenzie, "This assumption is fallacious." (800 Colleges..., preliminary report, p. 62)

James Billington discussed student unrest in a brilliant Life magazine essay last spring. Listen to a few of the key points made by this Princeton University history professor:

Our collegiate discontent...is a consequence of a spiritual poverty in academia that, in some ways, is as explosive as the material poverty in the ghetto. Rebels in the cities have kept "soul" alive; the modern American university seems to have lost its soul amidst unprecedented material growth. ...The blunt fact is that liberal education is largely dead. ...The humanistic ideal of involving the whole man in the quest for order and beauty through the ennobling exposure to other men's accomplishments has been mostly replaced by the training of task-oriented technicians. ...We are providing a generation of scholars who prefer to provide definitive answers to small questions rather than tentative answers to important ones. In the process, the undergraduate, hemmed in everywhere by narrow compartments, feels fragmented and frustrated.

...Both the subject and object of humanistic study are the whole man--where mind and passion meet, where creativity and criticism interact. Humanistic studies--history and philosophy, arts and letters--directly involve men in the anguish, achievements and aspirations of other people, and in enduring human questions of artistic form, moral value and personal belief. These questions, dealing with the quality of life, are relevant to everyone--and not merely to departmental specialists. ...Many of the most sensitive students simply feel spiritually starved; they protest against the failure of the arid classroom to provide the humanizing education that the college catalogue has promised. ...These restless students have begun the needed work of regenerating the American university by confronting it with the need for more commitment, not just more committees. (Life, May 24, 1968)

To support his view that humanitarian education is now being neglected, Billington claims that of every \$1000 of government funds given for basic research in 1966, \$1 went to the humanities. The record of private research foundations is better: there the ratio is 23 x 1, in favor of the sciences.

The role of the sciences is, of course, extremely important in our time. But the Christian college insists that education must include also some confrontation with the ultimate questions. Jose Ortega y Gasset asks:

How can we live deaf to the last, dramatic questions? Where does the world come from, whither is it going? What is the distinctive power in the cosmos? What is the essential meaning of life? Confined to a zone of intermediate and secondary themes, we cannot breathe. We need a complete perspective, with foreground and background, not a maimed and partial landscape, not a horizon from which the lure of the great distances has been cut away. (What Is Philosophy?)

In their Danforth report, Pattillo and Mackenzie discuss their idea of a "free Christian college"--free because it does not control thought, Christian because it does have a definite commitment. This is how they describe their ideal.... Most of the faculty share the religious purposes of the college and consider them important in the life of the school. Students are attracted by the dual emphasis on academic excellence and religious vitality. The college surrounds its students with opportunities for full development--intellectual, religious, moral, artistic, social. While chapel attendance may not be

required, the chapel is a focal point of student and faculty interest. Worship is viewed as important. ...The courses in religion are rigorous and stimulating and are an integral part of the academic program. The college does not tell its students what they should believe, but it does expect them to grapple with the basic religious and philosophical questions and try to arrive at a position of their own. Much attention is given to the relationship between religion and the intellectual problems of our day. Religion and liberal learning are regarded as mutually supportive.... The authors add that it is good to have on the faculty a number of constructive critics of religion, to challenge both colleagues and students. (800 Colleges, p. 68)

You will note that a Christian college is not described here as one which has compulsory chapel, or as one which has a religion department. A decreasing number of church-related colleges require chapel, and it is often the chaplain who urges the abolishment of this requirement. And certainly in these days the presence of a religion department implies nothing about church relationship or general Christian orientation. Colleges are simply recognizing that without a knowledge of a culture's religion, it is difficult to understand a culture, that a man is not fully educated if he remains ignorant about contemporary religious thought. Three-fourths of American colleges now offer religion courses. And a fifth of our state universities even have their own departments of religion. (Time, "Education," 2/4/66)

Students often remark that they do more real learning outside the college classroom than in it. Are they kidding us? Are they self-deceived? What if they're right? Some studies indicate that as far as basic life attitudes are concerned, formal classwork produces little change. Is it perhaps true that George is learning more about Christianity in his mid-night arguments with his roommate than he'll ever get out of Religion 100? Is Sally perhaps gaining insight into political process through participation in Student Senate that she cannot get from courses in the area? Is Joe coming to understand human psychology better through dealing with his fraternity brothers than he would by additional reading assignments? Is Jane wasting her time in hours of browsing when her term paper is already overdue?

If one thinks of himself primarily as a classroom instructor, assigned to appear and disappear at certain appointed intervals, it can be distressing to realize how much learning occurs on campus without direct faculty supervision. We need to be concerned with the whole atmosphere of the total campus environment. Everything that happens around here contributes--either positively or negatively--to what our students are learning!

Depending upon your subject field, some of the great issues of life may appropriately be discussed from time to time in the classroom. Some teachers will find it more appropriate to talk of these matters in moments of personal counseling, or with a group of students in a faculty home, or across coffee in the Dugout, or through encouraging worthwhile extra-curricular activities. My point is simply that education at a Christian college does not stop with the classroom; it begins there. I like the way Earl M. Hunt, Jr. puts the idea: "The Christian campus exists for the sake of the student. His academic trepidations, his luckless romances, his inbred laziness, his vague and sometimes topsy-turvy moral values, his apprehensions, his vulgar rowdiness and his roseate idealism are all of vast concern and grave consequence to every member of the faculty and staff." (President's Bulletin Board, March-April, 1966)

Now just what are some of the practical implications of a Christian orientation in an academic community? Let me mention four characteristics that may possibly--hopefully--be nourished and strengthened by Christian resources and insights.

1) The Christian college should display a special concern for each student as a unique person, whatever his problems, foibles, or potentialities. The belief that all men are God's creatures and subjects of His loving concern may contribute to the quality of faculty-student relationships. In their Danforth study, Pattillo and Mackenzie admitted skepticism over this traditional claim of church colleges; it does sound like a notion hatched in a public relations department. But after surveying hundreds of colleges, these scholars concluded that the religious dimension in many colleges does seem to make for greater faculty interest in individual students, and for a more responsible attitude toward students. (p. 33)

2) The church-related college should take a particular interest in major human problems and world needs. Christians believe that the law of love is somehow central in the universe, and that God himself expects loving concern as the chief principle for ordering all human relationships. In no area is the need more obvious; but in no area are men more ignorant of the practical techniques for reaching their announced goals. During the recent Democratic Convention I heard more about the urgent need for love and compassion than during any church conference that I remember. Even a crusty old atheist like Bertrand Russell says that Christian compassion is the only thing that can prevent a return to barbarism. (The Impact of Science on Society, p. 59) Can Christian colleges and scholars pioneer in the discovery of new tools and techniques by which men can learn to relate to each other more positively and constructively? Whenever the command of neighbor-love is taken seriously, that belief can evoke humanitarian sensitivities, motivate practical decisions, and even determine vocational choice.

3) A Christian college has a special reason to protect academic freedom. Theoretically, the Christian believes that God Himself is Truth, and that all the truth we discover in the universe helps men to understand the divine nature better. Since God is the creator of the world and the author of knowledge, nothing that is discovered to be true can damage genuine faith.

There's more religious freedom at a Christian college than is sometimes found elsewhere. There's freedom to discuss the big issues, unhampered by any church-state restrictions. And there have been periods when narrow, dogmatic, militant atheism dominated much of the academic world, preventing a free and open examination of theological questions. This is not much of a problem in this decade, though it may be again sometime. Faculties which never consider God in their frame of reference cannot escape the charge of indoctrination; they may be indoctrinating atheism by silence, as they proceed day after day and year after year on the conviction that God either does not exist or does not matter.

Not only should the church-related campus respect religious freedom, but in times of crisis it may be the guardian as well of unpopular political and social ideas. Albert Einstein once confessed that, to his surprise, it was the church--not the great universities nor the great newspapers--that stood squarely across the path of Hitler's campaign to suppress truth. (Time, 12/23/40, p. 38) The church has not always behaved so gloriously. But it has nevertheless produced more than a few courageous spirits and martyrs. When the descendents of Joe McCarthy attempt intimidation, when super-patriots demand that professors sign loyalty oaths, when legislative committees in Ohio and California presume to dictate who is permitted to speak on campus, when simplistic politicians gain enormous popular support, when an Orwellian version of 1984 appears closer than ever before, I believe that academic freedom is more secure in the Christian context than in the hands of state legislators.

4) The Christian university should encourage a sense of humility in relation to knowledge and mystery. The Christian view of man as a finite, fallible creature may serve as a wholesome check upon intellectual pride and arrogance. We are men and not gods. Our knowledge is partial and temporary--never final and absolute. Our tiny systems--economic, political, social, and religious--all "have their day and cease to be." We must ever remain open to new truth, to new insight, and sometimes to permanent mystery. To represent reality adequately, we should speak in the classroom not only of the things we know, but also of the things we do not know. We should never leave the impression that we possess most of the final answers, and that if the semester were just a few days longer, our students could soon know everything, too. Let us admit the limitations of our subject matter, our methods, our knowledge.... Looking back upon his student years, Alfred North Whitehead once noted, "There is not a single concept of Newtonian physics which was taught as a whole truth, that has not now been displaced. ...This experience has profoundly affected...everything else in the universe for me." In a similar expression of profound humility Thomas Aquinas completed his massive masterpiece in theology and sighed, "It reminds me of straw." We live mostly with tentative answers.

Perhaps any quality college should reflect these characteristics: a genuine concern for every student; a passionate commitment to serve humanity; a rigorous commitment to academic freedom; a profound humility before knowledge and mystery. Perhaps any college should. But the Christian college does have definite and major theological reasons why it should emphasize these things. Dr. Gordon Michalson has said, "A church college is more likely to do what any college ought to do--but often doesn't." Should these factors become even more a part of Wesleyan's distinctive contribution to education in mid-West America? I think so, but I'm outnumbered around here by 100 x 1. This presentation too is a tentative statement. What do all of you think about these things? I'll be interested in hearing as time goes on....

Another recurrent theme in religion is the theme of beginning again. We are often encouraged to bury the past and start over. The theme of new beginnings is especially relevant today, isn't it? A considerable number of colleagues are joining our ranks today; we look forward to getting acquainted with them. Several hundred students who have never yet sat through a college lecture will arrive in a couple of days; it's good to welcome them. We are delighted with a brand-new library at the heart of the campus--a visible symbol of what college is all about. And most of all, there is an air of excitement as we welcome our new president, and anticipate the new ideas he will bring in coming days. It is indeed a time for beginning again, and for pledging our united effort toward making Illinois Wesleyan University an institution of unusual quality and distinction.