Institute for Christian Studies

FACULTY BULLETIN

Number 9

Fall, 1988

by

The Institute for Christian Studies
1909 University Avenue
Austin, Texas 78705

The Faculty Bulletin is an annual publication of the Institute for Christian Studies. The Institute is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to offer the degrees of Bachelor of Biblical Studies and Bachelor of Science in Biblical Studies.

Institute for Christian Studies
CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 9 Fall, 1988 ©

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Institute for Christian Studies
CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 9 Fall, 1988 ©

CHRISTIAN EDUCATION: CONVENTION OR COMMITMENT?*

BY Michael R. Weed

> God had been shifted gently over the decades . . . increasingly into the background at the school, so that now he was little more than a very distant, remote, patriarchal beneficence, dimly sensed and perhaps somewhere up there among the bells, a sort of abstract force for good, like nutrition.
>
> John Knowles

Western schools and institutions of higher learning were traditionally called "universities" not only because they provided a view of the whole world, but also because they provided a view of the world as a whole. That is, universities offered education in the variety of different subjects and disciplines making up the whole; and they did so within a framework, or universe, which underlay and integrated the various separate subjects taught.

Not surprisingly, as Western schools developed from medieval cathedral schools and monasteries, it was Christian thought infused with large quantities of Greek thought (particularly

*An earlier version of this paper was presented to the faculty of Brentwood Christian School in Austin, Texas, in the fall of 1986 and to the Advisory and Development Board of the Institute for Christian Studies in the spring of 1987.

Platonism and Aristotelianism) that provided the basic framework of the university's "universe."[1] Christian theology provided a comprehensive and coherent view of Truth, of past and future, visible and invisible reality--of the Universe--which served to integrate the separate truths of various disciplines and subjects taught in the university curriculum. Because of this critical integrative role, and not just because it dealt with matters of salvation, theology was highly regarded as "Queen of the Sciences."

From University to Multiversity

The modern university, by contrast, is far removed from its traditional namesake. Through a lengthy and complex series of developments, beginning as early as the development of late medieval nominalism, the university has long since left its Greco-Christian framework and has abandoned Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment successors to the Christian universe which once shaped and integrated Western education. This fact, combined with increasing specialization in an ever-expanding number of fields of study, has meant that the modern university tends to become a fragmenting and only loosely arranged conglomerate of separate departments and disciplines with no underlying vision of the whole. The many truths learned and skills mastered serve no larger Truth and guiding purpose.[2] In short, the modern university becomes a "multiversity."[3]

By and large, the contemporary university, having lost or

broken contact with its founding traditions (Greco-Roman, Judeo-Christian, and Enlightenment), has dealt with its loss of an integrating framework by shifting attention away from the foundational issues traditionally addressed by Western education. In this process the university has become a bureaucratic labyrinth, an intellectual morass, and a moral vacuum.

With its loss of an integrative framework, the modern university has lost any clear sense of purpose or direction, abandoning former aims of education as entailing the stimulation of the intellect and imagination, and above all, imparting a vision of the whole which illuminates the meaning and purpose of human life.

The modern university, no longer capable of substantial reflection on the ends or goals of life, inevitably creates a mental environment in which wisdom is sacrificed for mere information. Life concerns lying outside of areas where skills are mastered and data are accumulated are implicitly and explicitly diminished in importance. In turn, this fosters an attitude of tolerant relativism where every person has a right to his or her own private and subjective values and all value judgments become "merely value judgments." Ironically, this normless tolerance of diverse--even contradictory--values carries the seeds of its own destruction, for without norms its tolerance is only a matter of whim or caprice; it is not a matter of deliberation or conviction. Not surprisingly, such tolerance all too frequently degenerates into an all-pervading skepticism and cynicism.

In this fashion modern education tends to offer vocational

training where energies are increasingly devoted to dexterity in various skills and technologies. It disseminates large amounts of data without providing an underlying and integrating vision of the human; at its best it produces a narrow technical competence with only limited and superficial knowledge of anything else.

Education in such an environment, with no clear unifying vision of the human good, can offer no real guidance for the appreciation and pursuit of the good. Further, to ignore or neglect basic moral, philosophical, and religious questions under the illusion of neutrality can only convey that such matters are negligible and insignificant. In Sir Walter Moberly's words:

> It is a fallacy to suppose that by omitting a subject you teach nothing about it. On the contrary you teach that it is to be omitted, and that it is therefore a matter of secondary importance. And you teach this not openly and explicitly, which would invite criticism; you simply take it for granted and thereby insinuate it silently, insidiously, and all but irresistibly.4

Such an education (if it is such) tends to produce either narrow technical competence or superficial breadth. On the one hand, training in highly technical fields of specialization tends to produce skilled technicians, knowledgeable of their fields but of little else. On the other hand, the proliferation of humanities honors programs tends to substitute breadth for depth and produces the sophisticated dilettantes who constitute sociologist Philip Rieff's "expanding market of educated fools."[5]

Either way, however, modern education is increasingly unable to introduce students to the essentials--human essentials such as honesty, justice, compassion, and loyalty. While such an

education can produce good linguists and perhaps witty talk show hosts, it cannot make good persons.

Against this background it is not surprising to find a growing number of knowledgeable and concerned voices raised in criticism of the present state of education. Philip Rieff, for example, has indicted the academic community for abandoning transmission of the fundamental constraints and interdictions without which we are helpless against ourselves, doomed to an insatiable quest for self-fulfillment in a world where there is no clear or authoritative vision of the human good.[6] Modern education has not only lost an integrating vision of the human and a sense of purpose; it has also abandoned the very quest for such a vision and purpose. The modern multiversity not only fails to dispel the contemporary moral confusion, it actually hastens the cultural suicide of modern society.

Christian School or Private School?

The present plight of Western education must be closely attended by any concerned to found Christian schools, much less Christian universities. While Christianity has played a crucial role in the history of Western education, Christians must abandon any hope of reconstructing the hegemony enjoyed in earlier eras. In the modern public square Christianity may ask for no more--and perhaps expect less--than those privileges enjoyed by any of the confessional communities making up the American pluralism.

On the other hand, as sociologist Peter Berger has capably argued, contemporary American Christians may insist that their pluralistic society recognize the legitimacy of its various communities and abandon the quest for some kind of undergirding Shinto, or state ideology. Quite simply, this means that the secular community must abandon its illusion of "neutrality."[7] That is, it means a frank recognition by the secular community of its own secular commitments as making its status that of one more "denomination" (or a "fourth faith") among the many "denominations" or belief systems constituting American's pluralism.[8]

For Berger, the secular community must

> . . . allow all communities of meaning, including the religious ones, to create their own institutions without interference from an ideologically monopolistic state. This freedom must extend to the creation and maintenance of educational institutions, a practical consequence of the right to pass on a meaningful world to their children, a basic human right if there is any.[9]

For the Christian community, the present situation offers the challenge for Christianity to commend itself by virtue of its ability to provide an integrative vision of the human which both comports with human experience and provides a framework for educating character and intellect.

More specifically, truly Christian education will entail an explicit articulation of the Christian confession and an attempt to draw upon it in constructing and deploying a conceptual framework through which a coherent and comprehensive view of reality is offered. It will require commitment to a

perspective--a set of values, beliefs, and interdictions--which guides and illumines the whole educational enterprise. That is, Christian convictions must not only survive rigorous intellectual scrutiny within institutions of Christian education; Christian convictions must also vindicate themselves by fundamentally informing and guiding the curriculum and various programs of the institution. Only in this fashion may Christian education provide a "universe" on the basis of which the student may live an integrated, fruitful, and responsible Christian life.

It must be explicitly stated, however, that Christian education cannot be merely a sentimental exercise in nostalgia, seeking to reestablish the medieval synthesis. Nor can it be an imperious ideology imposed upon and curtailing intellectual life. Rather, the Christian confession must be related to the contemporary world in a manner that is relevant to but not dictated by the agenda of modern society. The Christian framework must commend itself not because it is ancient--much less because it is orthodox. While it may draw upon numerous sources, the Christian framework must commend itself because of its intellectual fruitfulness for the whole educational process. Christian faith must prove itself capable of illuminating reality, inspiring research, encouraging creativity, and promoting human flourishing.

Unfortunately, this ideal of Christian education is seldom fully realized. No doubt this is so for a variety of reasons. Certainly, Christian educational institutions are subject to

their own versions of most of the same problems besetting their secular counterparts, not to mention financial problems facing institutions so heavily dependent upon private funding.

Too many Christian educational institutions, however, also share their secular counterparts' lack of unifying vision and guiding purpose. That is, for many Christian institutions the "Christian" component embodied in the institutional statement of purpose in actual practice amounts to little more than vague commitments to "well-rounded education," a "Christian atmosphere," "the character of the instructors," or quaint sentiments offering comfort to the supporting constituency. Such schools and institutions are frequently Christian more by convention than by conviction.[10]

Too often "Christian education" simply reflects and reproduces the same intellectual fragmentation found in the surrounding educational systems. Few instructors are educated to view the whole and to relate their particular discipline or subject matter to any larger framework of meaning--Christian or otherwise. Obviously, teachers trained in and primarily familiar with the contemporary "multiversity" (both secular and Christian versions) find themselves far more comfortable with its methods and practices (frankly secular) than those which a truly integrative Christian education would entail (e.g., regular faculty colloquia and interdisciplinary seminars).

An implication here is clearly that it is simply insufficient for Christian schools to employ instructors who

"don't mind the religious atmosphere." Nor is it sufficient for Christian schools to employ teachers who are well-trained in their particular discipline and also attend worship services regularly. Rather, the central task of Christian education, and the critical problem facing every Christian instructor, is precisely the integration of the subject or discipline within an explicitly Christian conceptual framework. In fact, it may be even more crucial for the development of an integrative Christian education that a Christian perspective be offered in the so-called "secular" courses than in requisite Bible and religion courses.

It is paradoxical--and ironic--that the religious aspect of education itself may become problematic within the Christian educational institution in at least two ways. First, the very presence of religion or Bible courses in the curriculum may contribute to the fragmentation problem. Faculty who teach other than Bible or religion are tempted to leave religious instruction and confessional statements to the religious experts or biblical specialists. In this fashion, the very presence of Bible or religion courses may serve to insulate other courses and other faculty members from such matters and thereby to legitimate their functional "secularization." Thus one may find a religion department attached to an otherwise secular educational institution.

Second, in various ways Christian educational institutions may render Christian faith and religious symbols trivial and innocuous. In his novel, Peace Breaks Out, John Knowles

describes the religious component in a New England boys' school:

> Not even the most flaming atheist could really have found anything offensive in these services at Devon. God had been shifted gently over the decades and through the centuries increasingly into the background at the school, so that now He was little more that a very distant, remote, patriarchal beneficence, dimly sensed and perhaps somewhere up among the bells, a sort of abstract force for good, like nutrition. . . . There were still hymns--"God of Our Fathers," "A Mighty Fortress," all the ones that young male voices sounded impressive singing; there were Responsive readings, Gospel excerpts, a prayer or two, and that took care of God.11

One might want to quibble that in some Christian schools it could be argued that God is more of a "chummy presence" than Knowles's "abstract force." Either way, over-familiarity tends to breed, if not contempt, at least indifference. In a climate where religion and religious symbols all too easily become routinized and trivialized, it is difficult to imagine how one would ever come to experience awe or mystery, or to have a sense of the sacred. In such a climate, rather than serving as a force energizing and integrating the whole educational process, Christian education serves in the manner of a vaccine which, using a weak strain of a deadly virus, immunizes one against the virus. That is, some forms of Christian education may innoculate students against any serious engagement with Christian faith.

In the final analysis, the reponsibility for maintaining the integrity of Christian education rests primarily on the institution's administration. The administration, in spite of the necessary but distracting tasks of fund-raising and public relations (and the complications of modern bureaucratization),

must ensure that the school is more concerned with true Christian commitment than merely with public orthodoxy. It is the responsibility of the administration regularly to restate and review the vision and purpose of the school. Further, it is the task of the administration to exemplify and to encourage the implementation of the vision and purpose of the school both in administrative procedures and in curricular matters.

The administration must enable and encourage the faculty to implement an integrative vision of education on a day-to-day basis both in the classroom and in the overall climate of the school. Hence, it is vital that an adversary relationship not exist between faculty and administration. This is why it is important that the administration resist authoritarian tendencies and less-than-forthright methods of dealing with personnel in order to maintain a climate of mutual trust and cooperation between faculty and administration.

Unfortunately, students frequently encounter faculty members who, themselves raised in authoritarian, anti-intellectual, and inflexible environments, reflect immaturity, rebelliousness, and embitterment.[12] Students and faculty are often disenchanted by the perception of administrative procedures which run counter both to the intellectual heritage of academia and to the requirements of Christian ethical principles.[13] Unless this problem is courageously and sympathetically addressed, it will continue to frustrate the whole educational enterprise.

Additionally, the administration should resist the temptation

to monitor and evaluate its programs primarily in terms of the values and standards of the surrounding secular society. (Recent examples of private religious schools striving for success in intercollegiate athletics vividly illustrate the risks.) Specifically, the curriculum must not be "market-driven" in an attempt to place graduates in successful jobs. It is not at all certain that it is possible to train people the same way everyone else does and, at the same time, to educate them to maintain Christian identity. In fact, as Alasdair MacIntyre has observed, "the road to success in Philadelphia and the road to heaven may not coincide after all."[14]

Notes

[1] Although Western schools and universities developed from cathedral and monastery schools, the origins of Western education lie in ancient Greece. The unique feature of the Greek mind, philosophy, bequeathed to Greek education a tendency to see reality as a whole. Truth is indivisible: separate truths are not simply unrelated fragments of data but are ultimately reflections of Truth. Consequently, education necessarily is inclusive of intellect and virtue and it benefits the individual and society. Cf. Werner Jaeger, Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture (Oxford: Oxford University, 1945), Vol. 1, xxi, xxii.

[2] Dennis B. Quinn, "Higher Education: The Pluralistic Monopoly," The University Bookman, Vol. 28:1 (1988), 3.

[3] Clark Kerr, The Uses of the University (New York: Harper, 1963), 9-18, 135f.

[4] Sir Walter Moberly, The Crisis in the University (London: SCM, 1949), 56.

[5] Philip Rieff, Fellow Teachers: Of Culture and Its Second Death (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1972), 13 n. 7.

[6] Ibid.

7 Peter Berger, "From the Crisis of Religion to the Crisis of Secularity," Religion and America: Spiritual Life in a Secular Age, Mary Douglas and Steven Tipton, eds. (Boston: Beacon, 1982), 22.

8 Ibid. See James Davison Hunter, "America's Fourth Faith: A Sociological Perspective on Secular Humanism," This World: A Journal of Religion and Public Life, Fall 1987, 101-110.

9 Ibid.

10 Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, "How Christian Universities Contribute to the Corruption of Youth: Church and University in a Confused Age," Katallagete, Summer 1986, 21-28.

11 John Knowles, Peace Breaks Out (New York: Bantam, 1981), 62.

12 Douglas Frank, "Consumerism and the Christian College: A Call to Life in an Age of Death," Making Higher Education Christian: The History and Mission of Evangelical Colleges in America, Joel Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shipps, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 260.

13 Thomas A. Askew, "The Shaping of Evangelical Higher Education Since World War II," Making Higher Education Christian, ibid., 149.

14 Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (South Bend: University of Notre Dame, 1981), 185.

CONTRIBUTORS

The contributors to this issue are all faculty members of the Institute for Christian Studies.

Gragg, Douglas L., B.A., David Lipscomb College; M.A., M.Div., Abilene Christian University; Ph.D candidate, Emory University; Biblical Languages and Exegesis

McNicol, Allan J., Pat E. Harrell Professor, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Yale University; M.A., Ph.D., Vanderbilt University; New Testament, Biblical Theology

Thompson, James W., A.B. Cox Professor, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Union Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Vanderbilt University; President, Institute for Christian Studies; New Testament, Homiletics

Weed, Michael R., Billie Gunn Hocott Professor, B.A., M.A., Abilene Christian University; B.D., Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary; Ph.D., Emory University; Ethics, Theology, Church History

Institute for Christian Studies
CHRISTIAN STUDIES
Number 9 Fall, 1988 ©