A New Look at Campus Religion

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I

ADMINISTRATORS and teachers, especially in private and church related colleges, are always in the process of re-appraising their major educational objectives and academic programs. This is as it should be, for despite claims in college catalogues, there are institutions which, in practice, are satisfied with recruiting able students and pressuring them into the rigorous grind of mastering larger and larger amounts of subject matter, understanding the methods of inquiry into academic disciplines, and giving adequate training for the professions. There are colleges with a heritage within the Protestant Christian tradition which maintain required religion courses, compulsory chapel, and a chaplain in the assumption that an indoctrination of traditional Christian values and a presentation of theism in chapel sermons will surely preserve morality and send graduates back to their home towns as loyal church leaders.

Yet presidents, deans, faculties, and most of all, students, are uncomfortably aware that "good" education and "regular" religious activities are not worth the escalating expense to parents, donors, or philanthropic foundations—all of whom are essential to finance private institutions of higher education. More specifically, liberal arts education must do more than liberate young minds from parochial prejudices and more than transmit the heritage of mankind, essential as these are. Then too the training in a skill with the knowledge and the techniques adequate to perform in a profession—whether artistic, teaching, medical, business or any others—easily leaves the humanness out of education with only the residual information and precision.

Whereas no panaceas for all of the problems of higher education are available, and although agencies like the Ford Foundation have rendered great service through encouraging colleges to decide major objectives and means to achieve these purposes (if a major grant is to be forthcoming), each college has to continuously appraise every aspect of its program. One such focus, often neglected, is the campus program of religion. Timidity or a lack of concern in giving new life to religion has resulted in maintaining chapels, religious councils, Bible courses, religious emphasis weeks, and Student Christian Associations which make no impact upon the college community in any perceptible manner. Unimaginative religious affairs are often irrelevant to the college and to students, lacking in intellectual rigor, and are carried on with little awareness of the revolutions which have shaken society and its youth since the early 1950's.

II

Two radical changes in student values are so profound that other emerging patterns of thought and behaviour must be understood in relation to them. These revolutions dictate a context within a campus program of religion and academic instruction in religion must be developed. First, the self-identification of the mass of college students is no longer Christian (or Jewish or Roman Catholic). Will Herberg's well-known thesis in his book **Protestant, Catholic and Jew,** may have been accurately descriptive of adult persons in the mid-1950's, but it was equally prophetic of the collegiate world ten years later. Yet there is one change in mood from Herberg's theory that "religion in general"

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is embraced by most Americans. General religion, as well as specific expression of historic faiths, are considered by contemporary students to be at best embarrassing, or at worst thoroughly unnecessary for human existence.

With the absence of a traditional religious orientation, a secular one is widespread. It takes the form of privatism about a philosophy of life and moral values. "There is no truth beyond my truth." "I create my morality in the immediacy of my decisions." "I owe nothing to anyone but myself unless I so choose." This is a subjectivism which would make the existentialist Jean Paul Sartre or Albert Camus shudder. Such privatism may be a reaction to eighteen years of observing hypocrisy in the larger society where, for example, the church has preached brotherhood and sanctioned segregation, or where national leaders have espoused "the welfare of all" and practiced political self-interest. Privatism may have emerged on the campus where those of us who say we stand for wisdom have used only a semester grade as a means of pressure or punishment. In so far as the secular (and pluralistic) mood dominates the bulk of students, religious affairs must be planned to speak to this condition, attempting on the one hand to use secular language while at the same time providing penetrating insights and personal demonstrations in behalf of particular religious faiths. The aim would be to point to those elements in the secular society which may witness to the truth which in previous times has been spoken of in theological language.

Second, and related to the first, student values are directed toward the desire for personal authenticity rather than an adherence to traditional ideals. College youth seek informality rather than middle-class and upper-class formality; they desperately want relevance of ideas and activities to their own search for meaning rather than mere convention. If it could be argued that these values are not different from those held at other times, (and such an argument has doubtful validity) these contemporary values are articulated more clearly by a larger number of students, and their plea cannot be ignored by educators who seek to understand youth and to involve them in education at the deepest possible level.

There is behaviorial evidence for both these two upheavals. Sexual permissiveness which is clearly rampant, is surely a way of saying: "Whatever I think is right is right (especially if we love each other)" and "I've got to find meaning for my life now—tonight." The pressures for more permissive visiting privileges by men in women's residence halls, revolts against compulsory chapel and required physical education, petitions for more liberal "grants of power" for student government, are all attempts to say more than the student is immediately aware—about privatism and the hunger for personal authenticity. Although the solutions thus proposed may lead to anarchy rather than individual liberty, to meaninglessness rather than authenticity, some manner of education must be developed which will communicate with the students who hold such value loyalties.

III

If this brief analysis has any validity, a college which takes its heritage seriously but which is seeking to communicate with students, will not expect results from college programs which were successful twenty or even ten years ago. Mass meetings for most purposes, especially for traditional religious ceremonies will be dropped in spite of the warm nostalgia the faculty and administration may feel for them. Preaching from the chapel or from the classroom about absolute and universal moral values might be expected to go uncomprehended or if understood, repudiated. A freshman convocation on "The Virtue of Chastity" might well receive polite attention because sex is always a popu-

lar subject, but a required lecture on church history could well elicit "the noisy gong and clanging cymbal" of an alarm clock being set off by the more rebellious students.

If on the other hand, we listen carefully, clues to genuine student need are everywhere, suggesting the drive for private truth and a search for aesthetic meaning. Not a week goes by, for example, without one to a dozen students making inquiry about the Peace Corps. A theological lecture may be lightly attended but auditoriums are packed with students who listen with intense feeling to Joan Baez or to Peter, Paul and Mary. The real worship of one-fourth of the student body is at the "Black Den" where folk songs of protest and freedom are sung. The student rush to Mississippi in 1964-65 to aid in voter registration is certainly a symptom of the student mind as much as it is an indication of crucial social need.

The implications of these values upon a college program of religion are astonishing. Trustees might tear their hair in lament; letters from parents might fill the President's desk. But a renewal of faith in students is possible. In fact, prototypes to the "new look in religion on the campus" can be found in liturgical jazz, ecumenical work-camps, and coffee houses sponsored by the chaplain, and a renewed interest in community involvement.

First, there is always a remnant on the campus of students and faculty who find personal identity as Christians and who have e m o t i o n a l roots in the Church. Before they, too, give up corporate worship as irrelevant, radical renewal of the Sunday chapel is possible. Folk music is the honest music of our time. Let the choir, so expert in singing **Bach** Chorales, be at least occasionally shifted to the concert hall. In its place put an ensemble of those who have skill in playing guitars and singing and do so with utmost seriousness. The choir and congregation would not be limited to singing "Blowin' in the Wind", a popular folk song about the Holy Spirit. "The Times are a-changin'" is a folk song of affirmation. "If I had a hammer" speaks eloquently of dedication, and the dozens of freedom songs, folk spirituals, and the songs which speak of birth, work, death, and suffering could give an intensity to the chapel service not known in recent years.

Even though the Prayer of General Confession has beauty of style and expresses universality of the human condition (for those of us who are over 35) the prayer of confession should become a contemporary statement of "facing up to ourselves." The following prayer, written by students at Stephens College will serve as an example:

> Father, in heaven, I am not all that I make out to be. I am full of pretense and confusion. I am often rude, selfish, negligent, and wasteful. My heart is not true and my conscience has been rubbed smooth by compromise. I do not live up to my expectations of myself, yet I judge others by standards I dare not apply to myself. When I face up to myself, despair gets hold of me, and I am at my wits' end. I am deep down at the very bottom and by myself I cannot get up again nor out of it. Help me. Let me know that you are more powerful than all the misery of my rationalizations. Amen.

Second, the pull of the Peace Corps and Civil Rights demonstrations must not go unnoticed in the 1960's. Without detracting from either of the above, students can be given the opportunity to be immersed for a week in significant projects with an inner-city church, a community in Harlem, or in the mountains of Kentucky. Less dramatic involvement in the local town or city with handicapped children, in community centers, mental hospitals, and voter registration can often be creative avenues of community participation. Whatever service is rendered, or whatever added academic motivation results, these are of less significance than the shocking re-appraisal which students are forced to give to their shallow privatism and

to the sense of personal authenticity which begins to emerge.

Third, anyone who has been on a campus for even a brief time is aware that student privatism carries with it a desire to learn, to pursue ideas, and to grapple with the crucial issues of our time. It is also evident on the campus that the most creative thinking goes on within clusters of students, not within the regular classroom, but at night bull sessions. Yet the college curriculum and its schedule regiments everyone into classes from 8 a.m. through the dozing one o'clock hour until 5 in the afternoon. Night classes are usually a reflection of the 50-minute daytime mold. And while no-one would deny the necessity of formal lectures, laboratory periods and reading assignments, that there is a super abundance of pedantic teaching and dullness of interest can hardly be doubted.

While religious studies must demand the same rigorous intellectual effort which is characteristic of any sound learning, courses in religion involve a dimension beyond other studies. The claim made by biblical writers, theologians and philosophers is that they have clues to the ultimate meaning of human existence. Moreover, the content of such studies is centered around questions of depth importance—birth, death, time, truth, freedom, the nature of life, the meaning of history. These are issues which demand more than book learning and note taking. If they are relevant to persons, such an awareness will become known in the midst of inter-personal involvement and honest conversation.

The third proposal, then, is that the teacher of religion break the pattern of instruction so common on the campus and move to fresh models not unlike that of the best campus bull-sessions. Classes the first two weeks of the term might be held in the faculty member's home for two hours each of several evenings. This context would provide for personal sharing, raising of issues to be probed, and mutual struggling with existential questions. A second part of the term could be used for independent study and tutorial sessions. The last third of the semester would then be a profitable time for more formal lecturing, the presentation of historical material, or whatever would give resources to put "flesh" on the "bones" of beginning answers to complex questions.

An alternative method would be to begin the term by taking all of the members of a class (assuming the number would not exceed thirty-five to forty) to a secluded cabin or lodge off campus for a week-end of exploratory discussion, raising issues, and mutually probing the questions related to the study to be pursued. If a Saturday noon until Sunday evening did not develop the rudiments of a community of searchers which would become a group of excited young scholars, then such an objective would probably not be reached in the regular schedule of courses.

IV

Despite the preaching of Billy Graham, Ayn Rand, and Barry Goldwater, privatism is not an adequate primary value. Personal authenticity is a high value. If students are to be shocked into an apparisal of privatism, and if they are to be challenged, guided, and inspired to find personal authenticity, the program outlined above may be at least a first step by the private or church related college.