A MORE IDEAL SYSTEM?

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I began to write this essay just an hour after Barack Obama took the oath of office as the forty-fourth president of the United States. His inauguration brought tears to my eyes, and no doubt to the eyes of millions around the world; it brought renewed hope to our hearts, and new inspiration to our minds. It can scarcely be denied that the American higher education system has played a significant part in the development of the admirable values, maturity, and moral development so evident in the President's words, actions, and whole personality. So I would hesitate to claim that American higher education programs have "paid relatively little attention to the student's inner development."

In fact, my somewhat limited experience of higher education in the United States of America has led me to admire one feature of the system. This is the insistence in many colleges and universities that their undergraduates take some general values-oriented courses of a philosophical or broadly spiritual nature as they embark on their various specialized courses. This suggests that there is a widespread recognition of the importance of "the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding." I am also impressed by the high degree of volunteerism evident in U.S. society; this could suggest that the courses achieve their purpose.

However, I venture to suggest that there is much more that needs to be done if the higher education system is to respond adequately to the situation of the world, in the present and the near future. So, in dealing with the statement I have been invited to comment on, I shall not attempt to assess its truth by comparing the system of higher education in America with the systems of other countries. Instead I shall compare the present reality in American higher education with what, in my opinion, would be a more ideal system: one that would have a better chance of preparing students to live respectfully and morally in the world.

In considering what American higher education could do to promote the student's inner development in the spheres of maturity, values, and spirituality, I look at the issue first in terms of the *content* that should be communicated and then in terms of the *process* through which this revised content can best be communicated and internalized.

The *Content* of Educational Courses

It is important that there be a significant shift of emphasis in higher education, particularly in three areas: in the economic sphere, in the political sphere, and in the cultural and ideological sphere.

ECONOMICS

First of all, students should be helped to realize that good economics is not merely compatible with ethics; in fact, the ethical component is an essential aspect of economics. We have come a long way from the time when it was widely assumed that efficiency was the most important business value. Nowadays, it is widely recognized that there are a whole variety of soft values that are vitally important for a business to be successful—for instance, good relationships and good spirit in the workplace, good teamwork, and promotion of creativity, as well as development of good, long-term, friendly relationships with customers, suppliers, and the local community.

Many companies go further, adopting an environmental audit of the materials they use and of the ecological effects of their product. A smaller, but increasing,

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number of companies have willingly or reluctantly introduced a *justice audit*, which ensures that production of the materials used does not involve exploitation of workers, especially in poorer countries. It is essential that the importance of these two audits and of a variety of soft values be fully integrated into the teaching of economics in colleges and universities. The effect will be to shift economic theory from having a mainly individualistic bias to adopting a holistic viewpoint, one that takes full account of communitarian and ecological values.

POLITICS

Alongside this change of emphasis in economics, there is an equal need for more positive appreciation of strict political controls on economic activity. This is a particularly good time to make this point; as I write, people all over the world are experiencing the disastrous consequences of the regimes of light regulation that were widely introduced over the past 20 years. The realization that there is need for regulation is by no means new. Ever since the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890, legal curbs have been imposed to limit the emergence of monopolies, and some major companies were forced to split up. Long before that, legislation was enacted to ensure that corporations (limited companies) published accurate accounts. And with the coming of the New Deal in the 1930s, quite severe restrictions were imposed on economic and financial activities, with the aim of ensuring that another crash would be avoided.

However, with the ever-increasing influence of the Chicago School many of the more influential economists and politicians all over the world came to believe in a minimalist approach. The result was a failure to ensure that legislation kept up with new practices in the financial and economic spheres. Financial transactions became increasingly opaque. There was also a lamentable failure to put curbs on ecologically damaging activity both at the national level and internationally. A different approach to political theory and practice has now become essential. It is important that university professors recognize and teach the need for, and value of, tight regulation of the financial world and of the whole sphere of economic activity. Two obvious examples: students should be made aware of the harmful effects of tax havens and other tax avoidance strategies; and teachers and students should look again at the arguments in favor of some form of tax on speculative currency transactions, along the lines proposed by the economist James Tobin.

During the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, politicians came to accept the need for a legislative regime that favored development and support of trade union activity. However, in more recent times many politicians, especially in the United States, came to accept the argument of neoconservative economists and of many leaders in business that strong trade unions are an obstacle to economic development. At the present time, there is need for a turnaround on this issue.

In a globalized world, it is vitally important that universities help their students and the wider public recognize the value of trade unions—and, furthermore, to see that it is no longer sufficient that trade union activity be organized purely nationally. It has become essential that political leaders of the major developed countries press strongly, through the United Nations and other international bodies, for development of international federations of trade unions and for fostering and support of trade union activity in poor and newly developing countries where workers are often grossly exploited.

CULTURE, ETHICS, IDEOLOGY, AND SPIRITUALITY

It is clear from what I have been saying that the new emphasis in the teaching of economics and politics will be possible only if it has a strong cultural underpinning. Teachers and students need to breathe in a set of fundamental beliefs, values, and commonly held assumptions that support the shift from an individualistic approach to one that takes seriously the reality that each individual is part of a community, that the many human communities and ethnic groups are all part of a common humanity, and that humanity itself is an integral part of the fragile ecosystem of Spaceship Earth. It is only in a world where such a culture is widely and increasingly accepted that people will be willing to accept the need for tight regulation of economic activity, and that politicians can be expected to propose and enact such a regulatory regime.

Where are such beliefs, values, and assumptions to come from? In the past, in the Western world and

particularly in North America, they came largely from the Christian religion. A significant contribution came also from Enlightenment philosophy, much of which had a rather skeptical attitude toward established forms of religion. In the United States today, in contrast to Europe, Christian churches still play a leading role in shaping the values and fundamental beliefs of the population. Alongside this, there has developed a more secular body of civic virtues. These more secular virtues are based on, and foster, a set of beliefs that sometimes fit comfortably with overtly religious beliefs and values but are occasionally in tension or even in sharp conflict with them.

These religious and civil beliefs and values constitute the backbone and underpinning for moral behavior in society. Indeed, many of them are indispensible for the continued existence of a functioning society. One thinks, for instance, of the notions of duty, responsibility, respect, concern for the poor, for human rights, for freedom of conscience, and for a maximum degree of freedom of action so long as one's actions do not interfere unduly with others. However, the present financial, economic, and ecological crises have shown up a certain weakness in the current set of values, beliefs, and assumptions, both in American society in general and in its higher education. The balance has swung too much toward emphasis on personal freedom and away from emphasis on the common welfare and ecological sensitivity.

One might argue that until recently an ideal that was explicitly or implicitly put before many young people was that of becoming an extremely successful entrepreneur and then, in later life, becoming a philanthropist, like John D. Rockefeller or Bill Gates. If higher education is to meet the challenges of today's world, there must be a decisive shift of emphasis in the ideals and virtues that it explicitly and implicitly inculcates. The need for this change of emphasis is most obvious in the areas of religion or theology and philosophy. The individualistic bias in American religion and in secular culture needs to be corrected. At this point, I must acknowledge that such a shift is already beginning to take place in some American institutes of higher learning.

However, a change toward a more communitarian and ecological approach in the teaching of philosophy and religious studies will have little practical effect—at least in the short run—unless a similar change of emphasis takes place in the teaching of economic and political science. For instance, it is no longer sufficient to treat the topic of business ethics as a fairly marginal addition to the mainline courses. It is essential that these courses, from the beginning, pay full attention to the impact all economic and political activities have on the environment, on the community, and on the wider human society. In the teaching of economics, it is particularly important that teachers and textbooks be careful to avoid a simplistic understanding of Adam Smith's views, and to challenge the notion that ideally there should be little or no regulation of the market.

The *Process* of Education

Having begun this essay with a reference to President Obama, I now return to him. It is obvious that a significant part of his education came not from his university studies but from his practical experience on the ground as a community organizer, as well as from his earlier experiences of living outside mainstream American culture. This suggests that there is need for a much greater degree of integration between formal third-level education and various forms of experiential learning. An internship in areas of social deprivation at home or abroad, or in an ecologically fragile environment, should be made an integral part of the course for students of economics, politics, ecology, engineering, IT, and other disciplines. This would help to ensure that their book learning is related to conditions on the ground and to the everyday experiences of some of the people most affected by developments in the disciplines the students are studying. The exposure experience would play a vital role in helping students internalize the fundamental values of social and ecological responsibility.

Even within the classroom situation, there is need for a shift toward a type of teaching that is more experiential than formal lecturing. Simulations of various kinds could be integrated into the course. For instance, students could, in the space of an hour or two, go through simulated experiences of living in a different culture, or of trying to survive in, and find a way out of, an environment of extreme poverty or oppression. Similarly, students could be invited to take part in a simulation where difficult choices have to be made between the need for economic development and protection of

the environment or of important cultural values.[1] Reflection on these simulated experiences would, of course, be a key part of such learning events. Use of such exercises is a helpful way of inviting students—and their teachers—to take on an effective concern for the common good of society and for the protection of the environment. It can contribute notably to enabling higher education to pay more "attention to the student's inner development—the sphere of values and beliefs, emotional maturity, moral development, spirituality, and self-understanding."

Note

1. I designed one such simulation, called Development in Mulu, which can be found in my book *Integral Spirituality: Resources for Community, Justice, Peace, and the Earth*, Maryknoll, New York (Orbis Books, 1900), pp. 175–183.

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