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The Philosophy of the Modern University

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The philosophy of the modern university, as a title, by reason of its ambiguity suggests for discussion two matters differing in scope. In the first place the title may refer to a basic policy or philosophy of education that guides all the academic work of the universities and colleges of our country. In the second place it may refer to the much narrower question of the characteristics of the departments of philosophy in these institutions. The latter sense of the title is but the former in miniature, or better, in germ, for while a given university may not follow the leading of its own department of philosophy, the character of education as a whole grows out of the philosophy it initially adopts. The narrower question, however, will be postponed awaiting specific treatment.

When attention is directed to the educational policy of the American universities, a difficulty appears at once. Is there an educational policy? Or is it not true that every institution has its own philosophy and that there are few agreements? In one college, all the teaching in psychology is directed to convince the student of the truth of one particular theory, be it behaviorism or interactionism, while in another, laboratory experimentation is stressed and theory, or interpretation, is eschewed; no doubt each experiment is significant, but no one answers the question, significant of what? One college emphasizes (no doubt this is not true in war-time) golf and the social graces, another is known throughout the country for nothing but its football, while a third in one of the north-central states has a large proportion of Phi Beta Kappa members on its faculty. Some colleges offer typing and home economics, others say that training the fingers does not constitute a liberal education. Some colleges make swimming a requirement for graduation, others are more impressed

with a student's ability to read German. It is therefore more than doubtful that one can legitimately speak of *the* philosophy of *the* modern university.

Someone may, however, attempt to reply to the effect that these are differences of detail only. It is impossible for two universities to be exactly alike, and the various curricula are just the means which different administrators think are most efficient to what is essentially the same end. Are they not all trying to give the students an "education"?

Thus to cover all the various procedures of a hundred different institutions under the name *education* is not exactly conducive to clarity. A training of the fingers does not seem to be the equivalent of a training of the mind. The excellent typist cannot ordinarily solve problems of physics or understand the course of history, and ordinarily the scholar cannot type. In fact, the situation is worse than this. The schools of education have long discussed the aims of education, and while most of their work concerns elementary education it is instructive to note that they generally speak of aims in the plural rather than of *the aim* of education. This is a tacit admission of failure to find any one comprehensive aim. It is a failure to provide any criterion by which one subject should be included and another excluded. More recently the educationists have begun to speak of citizenship as the one comprehensive aim of education. By its various programs the school is to produce good citizens. But again arises the question of clarity; is *good citizenship* any clearer a term than *education*? In Japan, in Russia, in Germany, or in any totalitarian state good citizenship means one thing; we hope that it means and will continue to mean something very different in the United States. But even in the United States there is not entire agreement on the meaning of good citizenship. When in 1933 the N.R.A. came into existence, some people argued that although you and I would not have initiated that particular plan, you and I ought to obey its provisions and help it to succeed, for otherwise there would be no cure for the depression. But one gentleman argued that it was unconstitutional, that it violated fundamental American liberties, and that its success would be worse than any depression. He was in the minority, but he happened to be right. Or again, in those early thirties many people spoke of the

Supreme Court as thwarting the will of the majority of the people. Especially the labor unions called for majority rule, and anyone who opposed majority rule would be in their eyes a poor citizen. American tradition, however, has never favored plain majority rule. Among all the governments of the world the United States has been foremost in protecting the rights of the minorities, and these rights are not regarded as gratuities from the government in power, but as inalienable. It is clear, then, that good citizenship is an ambiguous term, and to use it as the comprehensive aim of education is merely an attempt to hide a deep confusion. The confusion is deep because the substituting of unrelated aims for a single comprehensive aim in education is just the result of the absence of any ultimate aim for human life as a whole. If the educators had any view of the chief end of man, they would find it easier to locate the proper place of liberal education. Whether it be the views of an individual professor or the policy of a faculty, all will be confusion unless founded on an unambiguous world-view. But this is what modern education does not have.

If a Christian university should commit itself to the proposition that the triune, sovereign God, the creator and preserver of the universe, is the source of all truth, that as revealed in the Scriptures he directs the course of history to its determined end, and that the chief end of man is to glorify him, together with further implications, and if such a university could apply these fundamental principles to education, then confusion would be replaced by *the* philosophy of that institution. Many colleges originally founded on Christian principles have proved untrue to their trust. Others in varying degrees still preserve the aroma of Christian ideals. The cause of these declensions may have been omissions or lack of clarity in the statement of these principles; more often the betrayal of trust came from the failure to apply the principles to the details of the curriculum. And thus one may see in the so-called Christian colleges today the same confusion that permeates secular institutions. A Sunday religion that is ignored on week-days is justly repellent; so too, a Christian philosophy that is taught in the Bible course but is ignored in physics and sociology does not make an education Christian. Only a unified world-view applied in detail can

remove confusion from a faculty; only so can the student be provided with a mind that is not divided against itself; only so can there be an *aim* of education.

And yet there may be something that can be called the philosophy of the modern university. In spite of the fact that one is Hegelian, another realistic, and another pragmatic, there is a certain unity observable. It is, however, a negative unity. It is the unity of opposition to supernatural Christianity. The Hegelian may be and often is very religious; he speaks with evident piety of the Absolute God; and collectively he writes a large number of volumes on religion. The pragmatists are more frequently irreligious, though William James held to some sort of a God. But whether they speak of God or not, they do not believe in a transcendent, personal creator; they do not believe in a sovereign God; and they most emphatically do not believe in sovereign grace. Now, this rejection of the very basis of Christianity pervades all their teaching. They may be teaching history: in this case they may give certain economic causes of a war, but they would never think of considering a war as a punishment sent by God on account of national sin. They may be teaching sociology: the cure for crime, then, may appear to them to be the removal of slums and other external changes; murder may be something to be discouraged and even punished; but that there is an inherited evil character and that capital punishment for murder is divinely ordained are matters only for more or less polite rebuttal. Despite the fact that here and there a professorial chair is held by a true Christian, these illustrations are sufficient to justify the statement that modern education is unified, though negatively, by an anti-supernaturalistic philosophy.

The pervasiveness of the antichristian polemic has, or can have, however, a certain merit. Of course in the majority of cases it increases the inborn antagonism of the student to God and to his plan of salvation. It deprives the Christian student of a Christian education and leaves him stunted. But the polemic found in sociology, literature, philosophy, geology, zoology, shows by way of contrast that Christianity indeed has a view that affects all departments of learning. The professors of the universities are by no means stupid, and in many cases they see more clearly than the professors in Christian colleges that Christianity has world-view. What is

needed is that this world-view be developed in much greater detail so that there may be a recognized Christian sociology, Christian history, and so on throughout the whole curriculum. Unless such a world-view can be placed before students who want an education, they will study and accept what is placed before them now. The various schools of thought may differ among themselves, but they are all vigorous, they are all learned, and they have negligible supernatural competition. Perhaps in a later article a modest item of competition may be provided.