

# THOUGHTS ON THE UNIVERSITY

a sermon

Preached in Duke University Chapel

by

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Scripture lesson: Isaiah 6:1-8; I John 1:5-10

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"Brethren, whatsoever things are true....think on these things.... these things do, and the peace of God will be with you." Phil.4:8-9.

## I

The nation is deeply troubled. Some universities are in partial disarray; many seethe with unrest. Academic life is disturbed, studies are in jeopardy. Students are aroused and profoundly stirred teachers are disquieted; administrators alternate between hope and despair. Cambodia touched off the smoldering pile of young adult resentment toward a protracted war that had already amassed an appalling record for debauchery, atrocity, and futility. The pattern of turbulence and closed universities of southern Europe may lie ahead for us. Mass education adds to the problem by geometric progression; not only does it provide arenas for massive ferment, but mass education is itself potentially a massive reservoir of political power, for good or ill.

In the face of these realities, it is, perhaps, already too late in the day to hope for a constructive answer to the question, what is the role of the university in today's society? In some ways, the events of the past three years make the answer all too apparent. For the "new left", the decision has already been made: it holds that the university is a chief instrument of social revolution. It is just this that astute conservative reactionaries perceive, and it is this which many teachers and scholars, pursuing their researches with time-honored non-judgmental objectivity have been slow to take in.

All decent people, inside and outside the universities, are aghast over the desperate events at Kent State and, now, at Jackson State. They are also bewildered and shocked by recent calculated student indecencies at Princeton in March. These plainly violated standards of academic process and scholarly restraint. Ordinary people do not comprehend disruption of the university when disruption is planned and then justified as an instrument of social protest. They have not, up till now, understood the university as the chief instrument of societal change.

They are, perhaps, still thinking of the university in the manner of John Henry Newman's idea of it; namely, as the place of liberal learning where "knowledge", as he said, "is capable of being its own end". In his Idea of a University, Newman spoke of university education as "a comprehensive view of truth in all its branches." This "liberal education," he taught, engenders the "philosophic temper". It instills a "habit of mind", serene and composed, which fosters "throughout life the personal attributes of freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom."

For such conceptions of university education, the platform of the "new left" is, on the face of it, unintelligible. From the Newman 19th century perspective, the eloquent defense of Princeton graduate student, Michael Teitelman, on behalf of his fellows charged with disruption and insubordination must seem incredible and outrageous:

"This is a political trial", Teitelman declared, "and that's what we want everyone to understand. We're not on trial here. What's on trial is the ruling class and its racism and imperialism. We have said that the real explanation of all that we do in this trial is to be found in the unhuman, unfree, repressive social reality all about us. We do not deny we organized a demonstration against Mr. Hickel. We explained why we did so and why we thought it right to do so." (Princeton Alumni Weekly, April 28, 1970, pp. 11, 14).

It is not necessary to enlarge upon the bill of particulars with which Mr. Teitelman indicts the established orders of society, including those of the university. It suffices to observe two or three things:

The first is that, by asserting the "political" character of the hearing for students charged with violating the university code, Mr. Teitelman means to exempt the defendants from the standards pertaining to their membership in a university community. He does so on grounds of the rightness of their political views!

Secondly, and behind this is the premise that the really sufficient reason for continuing university membership is political "enlightenment" issuing in liberating social action.

Thirdly, that disruption of university practice and academic protocol is non-censurable if it is politically justifiable. The end justifies the means! Our ends are right, therefore our behavior, however obnoxious, is justified!

But, beyond this, is the underlying premise about the nature of the university that justifies this logic of expediency with immunity. It is that the university is, at the least, a staging for, perhaps, even an instrument of social revolution. Certainly, the "new left" is not above using the university as such under the guidance of ends taken to be, as Teitelman says, "right". So "right", indeed, so valid he believes, is the end in view that even means which denature the university are not deterrents to the apostles of social reform, urged on as they are by revulsion against oppressive established orders--both inside and outside the university.

II

The agony of the present-day university is something like this: it is caught in the pincers of a societal revolution surrounding it, while, at the same time, the university is itself disturbed and disrupted from within by morally defensible outrage against maladies without. It is caught in the middle between societal inaction and leftist reaction. Meanwhile, often, as at Princeton, the leftist reactors within claim all the immunities of the academy while exhibiting the behavior of fanatics.

The resulting internal conflict is insupportable. For, of all civilized institutions, the university--committed as it is to rational inquiry, persuasion, and the honor code of the gentleman--is most vulnerable to disorder. The discipline of the university is still mainly self-discipline. When the university, however, becomes the focus of the infectious ills of the environing society, it is the first casualty of the prevailing cultural disorder. Liberal education is incompatible with the illiberal spirit; when the latter waxes, the former wanes. (See page 3a).

Here, the inequality, or the contrariety, between the things that are and the things that ought to be come first to disquieting awareness. And in our time of immense societal distortion--stubbornly resistant, it seems, to humane solutions by way of present modes of political and institutional response--the university tends to become the home of radical solutions to social ills. All this obtains while the ailing society is laggard either frankly to acknowledge its sickness or to resolve it by finding the cure.

So the university spawns social activists--students and faculty with varying degrees of revolutionary commitment. Among these the most zealous, like those at Princeton, are not above turning the academy into an instrument of social change, disrupting the educational process itself in the interest of radical renovation of the political order and its economic base. Unfortunate as it may be, their strength is that they have too good a case! But, at the same time, they denature the function of the academy by using it as a political tool.

So it has come to pass that the currently ascendant idea of the university is that of the "new left". They hold that the university is properly an agent of societal change. At times they act and speak as if the university should become the Church. It cannot be denied that, in some part, they represent a rebirth of conscience of which the Church should always be the promoter. But prompted by great "righteous indignation", these apostles of social reform have their residence in the Academy. Yet the Academy is not the Church. Unlike the Church, the academy has not required that its members be regenerate. But apostles of righteousness, who are not regenerate, may easily become fanatics.

The "new left" does, I think, follow in some part admonition of St. John: It comprehends what the academy has characteristically been slow to acknowledge. This, namely, that the Truth is not something to be known only, or always to be being sought after, but rather some-

But this special vulnerability is not all that imperils the university. In addition, by its very nature, the university tends to invite, however unintentionally, the disorders with which it is presently afflicted. For, the university is, as the medieval schoolmen understood, a microcosm of the world. It is microcosm of the surrounding culture. In so far as there is reasonable working harmony between the ends or goals of a society and its institutional support of them, there is stability. In such a case, there is also stability enough for the peculiar role and function of the university. When the contrary prevails, that is, when there is contrariety between new emerging goals and the institutional vehicles for their realization, then the resulting ferment and strife in the surrounding culture first comes to articulate consciousness in the university-- as the microcosm of the macrocosm.

To be more explicit, it is the nature of the academy, from the time of Plato, that it should proceed on the Socratic premise that "the unexamined life is not worth living" and that, therefore, the purpose of the academy is just exactly to examine life as it is being lived to the end of its progressive betterment. In a sense, the academy has always stood in the role of critic of the established or prevailing culture. That is why "the gown" and "the town" have frequently experienced some measure of estrangement and some need of reconciliation. But in times of intense cultural revision, when the nisus of history moves toward the renovation of cultural forms in the interest of squaring the practices of society with a larger human good, this pressure frequently has its initial acknowledgment in the university.

thing to be done, and now. The "new left" in part seems to hear what churchmen ought always to heed: "If we say that we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth". It is the New Testament and the Church which always say that the truth is for doing. The "new left" is urging that there is, a no more needed pedagogy, and no Christian can deny it. The fact/<sup>is</sup> that the truth for doing, as St. Paul declared, is just exactly faith, hope and love. And the exasperating thing is that the "new left" concurs with St. James that faith without works is dead.

Nevertheless the academic apostles of social righteousness are mainly blind, or perhaps uninformed, respecting Isaiah's more authentic apostolic calling. They are unaware that, just because he was a man of "unclean lips" dwelling among "a people of unclean lips", Isaiah could not be trusted with mission until he had acknowledged his complicity in the sin and guilt of his people. He could not be trusted with mission until he had been cleansed for mission. He was not sent until he had received the grace of a diviner forgiveness which preserves "righteous indignation" from supercilious fanaticism. From the Princeton Weekly nothing is plainer respecting the academic apostles of righteousness than is declared by Proverbs:

"There is a generation that curse their father,  
And bless not their mother.  
This is a generation that are pure in their own eyes,  
And yet are not washed from their filthiness."

The Biblical view of man does not indulge such an interpretation of "the generation gap" as would distinguish between one generation and its successor by the sinfulness of the former and the righteousness of the latter. Nevertheless, only invincible ignorance would deny that the young adult generation are warranted in some of the grave indictments they bring against contemporary American society.

### III

What happened at Kent State and, perhaps, at Jackson is a frightening disclosure, I fear, of the moral sickness of our culture. Surely it is a time of peril for any nation when agents of government, charged with maintaining the peace, resort to overwhelming force against an indiscriminate body of unarmed citizenry--especially youthful ones. Such official excess is probable evidence, as was stated by John W. Gardiner this week in the New York Times, that "we are dealing with disintegrative forces that threaten our survival as a society."

As for the universities--and I speak after nearly thirty years' experience in three such institutions--the universities, as micro-cosms, cannot sustain much longer the inner turmoil engendered by the unresolved ills of the larger society. After nearly three years of internal divisiveness the universities are becoming dysfunctional. It is true, as Mr. John Gardiner also is reported to have said, that "today's divisiveness is not confined to one issue. There are multiple points of conflict," he said, "the war, race, the economy, political ideology. There are multiple rifts--between old and young, between regions, between social classes."

This is all true; yet I suspect--so far as the universities are concerned--it is much as I wrote for the Divinity School Alumni a year ago, namely:..."that until the futility of Viet Nam is retired, with its violation of conscience, the scepticism of youth toward the wisdom of their elders and the propriety of established orders will not recede. Viet Nam is the scandalous symbol of the bankruptcy of capitalistic democracy's way of meeting the future or dealing with human destiny by stereotyped and outworn patterns of response. More than anything it epitomizes...the frustration of the young with the sheer inertia of the Establishment." And I would affirm again what I then declared that, "Unless creativity replaces inertia, Viet Nam may turn out to be the fatal nemesis of the American way of life--its dissolution of confidence."

This past week Mr. Gardiner declared that "a crisis of confidence is indeed upon us: "we must move vigorously", he said, "to solve our most crucial problems" and we must seek "a healing of the spirit of the nation." It was in commentary upon these words that the Times noted that "Almost two years ago, the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence warned that the greatest threat to American survival was not from without but from within."

The real enemies are those of our own household: it is this unblinkable fact that simply renders obsolete, I believe, the premises and consequent policies that seemed to justify Viet Nam in the first place. Certainly, they are now discredited for any further extension of the war. And that is the scandal of Cambodia: it not only offends against the decent opinion of mankind, but flies in the face of reason itself. To many, it seems an invitation to societal suicide.,

But if there is to be as Mr. Gardiner has urged a "healing of the spirit of the nation," then, surely, there must be, in addition to acknowledgment of our own moral blame as a people, a recovery of moral integrity and vision. If, as Proverbs has it, "without vision the people throw off restraint and perish," will we as a people give heed to our foundations?

whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honorable, "Brethren, /whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, ... whatsoever things are of good report...think on these things." So counsels St. Paul. But, more emphatically he enjoins: "these things do, and the peace of God shall be with you."

Brethren, our jeopardy as a nation, the threat of our dissolution as a people and as a society, is that we cannot continue to exist in defiance of the moral Universe. At last and inescapably, the truth is for doing! But it is the nation, and the individuals who compose it, that must do the truth. The universities cannot, in this, substitute for society. Neither can they safely assume the apostolate of the Church. Only this week student activism has resorted to the legitimate avenues of democratic legislative process. This may be a turn of the tide. I pray God the legislators hear them.