

Fac. Rev

CONVOCATION OF CHRISTIAN COLLEGES 1962

Advance Preprints

- THE CHURCH AND ITS COLLEGES
a study paper edited by *Edgar Carlson*
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The complete volume of Convocation addresses
and study papers will be available October 15, 1962
from:

THE COUNCIL OF PROTESTANT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES
1818 R STREET, NW
WASHINGTON 9, D.C.

Campus Culture 1962

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I

For some time now I have been engaged in the search for an appropriate patron saint of college teachers and administrators. At last I think I have found one. His name is Koheleth, and you will recognize him as the ancient Preacher whose words are recorded in the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes.

There are at least two reasons why Koheleth seems to me unusually fit for invocation by college presidents and professors — especially presidents and professors of church-related colleges. For one thing, the name itself — Koheleth — has all the required characteristics of a good, sonorous expletive and may therefore serve a useful therapeutic function for men and women to whom the conventional language of irritation is presumably not available.

But even more to the point, the Preacher of Ecclesiastes has given classic expression to that weariness which is the peculiar affliction of the college teacher and administrator. Just recall his familiar words:

Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, Vanity of vanities, all is vanity. . . . One generation goeth, and another generation cometh; but the campus abideth forever. . . . All things are full of weariness; man cannot utter it: the eye is not satisfied with seeing nor the ear with hearing. That which hath been is that which shall be; and that which hath been done is that which shall be done; and there is nothing new under the sun.

Indeed, I propose the adoption of that litany among us for use on those annually recurrent occasions when the president is waited upon by the local A. A. U. P. chapter asking for a reduction in teaching loads, or when the faculty is waited upon by a delegation from student government asking for membership on the curriculum committee, or when another alarm clock has gone off during chapel.

Not, of course, that this brief catalog begins to touch all of the occasions which president and professor approach with the feeling that they have heard it all before, *seriatim*, *ad infinitum*, and *ad nauseum*. Probably high on any complete list would be meetings for which the announced topic of discussion is "the nature and mission of the church-related college." With increasing frequency for the last fifteen years we have been prodded by theologians, and pressed by denominational executives, and occasionally provoked by churches to clarify our understanding of Christian higher education. Not that we schoolmen are opposed to such clarifica-

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tion. Indeed, many of us have actively sponsored it, have devotedly worked at it, have agonized over the difficulty of arriving at some really workable consensus about it.

The question, then, is not whether all that has been said in fifteen years of meetings and discussions has been worth saying, but rather whether there is anything left to be said. In this third Quadrennial Convocation of Christian Colleges are we likely to hear anything new? I think the answer is that none of us knows — not the organizations that are sponsoring it, nor the committee that has planned it, nor the men and women who have prepared its study documents. Nor are we particularly disturbed at our inability to give advance promise of a breakthrough. I doubt that fresh and creative solutions of standing problems are ever pre-fabricated. As often as not they are the product of that spontaneity which is generated when men and women of concern and insight are willing to declare themselves openly and honestly, and — no less important — are willing to expose themselves to the declarations of others; which is to say that creativity is finally the product of free association, in the full psychological and sociological meaning of that term. Then if we are concerned to clarify the peculiar nature and mission of our institutions, we can scarcely do better than periodically to confront each other in free association, prepared to speak our conviction as well as our confusion.

That, then, is the first thing to be said: we ought to resist in our discussions and in our preparation of a final report to the whole convocation any pressure, internal or external, which would make us compulsive about saying something new, since it is precisely that kind of compulsiveness which is the best guarantee that nothing new will happen in us or among us.

But before we settle too comfortably into the expectation that we are to go a familiar route along a terrain whose cartography will contain no surprises — before, that is, we assume too readily with Koheleth that “that which hath been is that which shall be, and that which hath been done is that which shall be done” — we need to ask a question. Is it possible that we face a campus situation which has changed in important ways since last we met in quadrennial convocation? Has there been any shift in the tenor of campus life over the past four years? Is there, in the things which now preoccupy teachers and students, anything which provides our Christian concern with new challenge or opportunity, which requires that answers once given must be reconsidered in the light of new questions? I am myself convinced that there is, and I should like to attempt at least a tentative statement of what I see and sense, to be confuted or confirmed by your own sight and sensitiveness.

II

It is significant, for one thing, that more American undergraduates have lived and travelled abroad in the last four years than at any time since 1941-45. This has had a variety of effects on the undergraduates themselves and upon the

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campuses to which they have returned. For one thing, it has served to make contemporary history genuinely their own history. To the graduate in the Class of '62 who has not travelled in Europe, the second World War might as well have been fought in the nineteenth century; but his classmate who has walked Omaha Beach and has stood amid the crosses in the American cemetery near Caen and has seen the ovens and the pits at Dachau has a different sense of time. Once the precarious political fortunes of France were as unreal to the American student as the other side of the moon; but news dispatches about French student riots on the Left Bank in protest against Algerian policy take on a new dimension for the American students who themselves have sat with their French counterparts in the *Café des Deux Magots* and walked the *Boulevard St. Germain* and climbed the *Montparnasse*. The tragic complexities of international morality are to some of us more or less interesting as an academic problem met in political science and philosophy classrooms, but they are more than that to the Kalamazoo College coed who was living last summer with the family of Chancellor Adenauer's administrative assistant on the day when that German official was named in testimony by Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem.

It would not be fair to the students to suggest that there are here the makings of a political revival on the campus. I do not yet see evidence for that. But if what we conclude from this is modest, it is none the less significant as a part of the new situation we face. A member of the Class of '63, after spending last summer in Germany, put the matter this way:

Although human beings have made their world into what can be termed inordinately complex, the life of an individual in the world can usually be described in a few short words. I am no exception, and "I sit, unmoved," was sufficient to picture my life as I led it some months ago. It is difficult to believe that even a series of strong impressions could change a conclusive statement such as that into a new, more apt description, but one summer's experience has somehow enabled me to say, "I watch, aware."¹

If there is among many undergraduates a new sense of time, there is also a new experience of identification. Many American students who go abroad avoid the pattern of conventional tourism and seek to lose themselves temporarily in a new and different culture. They study and play and travel with European students, and they live with European families whom they come to think of as their own with astonishing rapidity. They learn to speak the language and they deliberately try to think like a German or a Frenchman or a Swede. And when they come home again they are understandably impatient with the glib characterizations with which Americans typically dismiss the European. It is not that they are uncritical

¹Carol Bergtorf, "I Watch, Aware," *Kalamazoo College Alumnus*, Winter, 1962, p. 4.

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of Europe; it is, rather, that this new experience of identification has made them aware of the continuities of contemporary life. Another member of the Class of '63 has written recently about her feelings as, at the end of a tour of Dachau, she found herself facing the guest book in which were to be recorded the comments of visitors to that place:

I wanted to write something. What I had seen at Dachau would be food for thought for a long time, but I felt embarrassed. When I did write, I did it quickly and unobtrusively so my companions would not see and inquire what I had written. It was only one sentence: "Was ich hier gesehen habe, werde ich nicht vergessen." (I will not forget what I have seen here.) I wrote it in German to express my attempt to come to terms with this experience both as an American and as someone who had come to know and love Germany and the German people. My answer had given me a deeper understanding of the feelings involved on both sides, and the Dachau experience was a moment of insight when I was able to synthesize the two in my mind. Out of my righteous feelings of horror and disgust, came a sense of the responsibility which I and my fellows have today to see that this cannot happen again. I have not forgotten what I saw at Dachau, and the sentence I wrote in the book.²

If the students who return from abroad bring with them a new sense of time and a new experience of identification, they also bring a new perspective for criticism. There is nothing like a year abroad — or even a summer, for that matter — to expose the fatuities of American foreign policy and the almost hopeless provincialism of the American church-related college campus, if the reports of many returning undergraduates are to be trusted. Those of us who are the senior members of the college, and who find criticism of any kind inconvenient if not embarrassing, would do well to listen to the criticism of the travelled junior members of the college before we dismiss it. Pronouncements from Washington do sound different when heard in Paris or Bonn rather than in Kalamazoo, and it is a difference we had better take account of. And if the freedom of the European university from constraint by dormitory hours and other social regulations does not provide a pattern which the American college can adopt *in toto*, it may nevertheless provide us with good reason to ask again what we are trying to accomplish by our regulations and to retire those which are purely formal or downright anachronistic.

III

This gradual widening of the campus perimeter is by no means the only thing which creates a changed situation among us. The Berlin wall has cast its malign shadow upon us, and the tremors which move out from Christmas Island and the

²Sue Helgeson, "I Will Not Forget . . ." *Kalamazoo College Alumnus*, Winter, 1962, p. 8.

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Siberian wastes leave us shaken. The effect of an increased tempo in the Cold War during recent months is beginning to be felt in tangible behavior on the campus. One observes at least two different responses to this quickening pace of events. Among some the result is a new seriousness. Student government has traditionally been preoccupied with "improving communications with faculty and administration" (which, being translated, too often means "winning acceptance of student ideas and endorsement of student projects"), and with what seems to be the plague of every respectable campus, an inadequate social program. If student governments this year still plug faithfully away at "improving communications," some of them seem less and less interested in increasing the number of dances per quarter. Indeed, on my own campus this year an attempt was made to divorce the student senate entirely from concern for campus social life, in order to permit senate time to be spent in debate of issues affecting local educational policy and national and international political policy. The impetus to this new seriousness seems to me to come from the critical events of recent months.

But if some students respond with a new seriousness, others respond in a quite opposite fashion. To refer again to my own campus, if there has been this year more serious debate of serious issues among students, there has also been more horse-play than we have seen in some time; and I predict that this particular pattern will continue while national and international tension remains high. I am inclined to see an increase in the campus "prank-rate" as a phenomenon not unlike the ridiculous high-jinks engaged in by the extreme political and religious right-wing in this country. Both result from frustration in the presence of events which are desperately threatening but apparently irreversible. Why should we be surprised when religious or political fundamentalists, who have seen their programs defeated year after year, finally strike out in a furious rage against a system which keeps them in a perpetual state of impotence? Well, many a college student could describe his own existence in the words William Faulkner used to describe Miss Rosa Coldfield, who existed in

that dream state in which you run without moving, from a terror in which you cannot believe, toward a safety in which you have no faith. . . .³

Then why should we be surprised when students, who are reminded by the hourly newscasts of the threatening danger to their own destiny and of their impotence in the presence of issues too immense and causal factors too distant to be touched, give vent to their own frustration with increasing frequency? If the campus prank seems to us an inappropriate response to apocalyptic threat, the students themselves might reply that there is no such thing as an "appropriate" response in the presence of a threat so unprecedented.

³*Absalom, Absalom* (Random House: New York, 1936), p. 142.

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IV

If the crisis beyond the campus has had its effect upon us, so has the crisis on the campus had its effect. There is, I think, a new mood of educational concern among the students in our schools. Indeed, I would venture to guess — though with no objective data to support the guess — that it is precisely among students in colleges like ours that a concern for the character of education is keenest. Another way to say the same thing is that we are finding an increased desire on the part of students to participate in the processes of policy-making in the college, and we are being closely questioned, not simply on social policy but on curricular policy.

For a time I was uncertain why this mood of criticism seems to have intensified among us, but I now think the answer is fairly simple. In the last few years as never before, the smaller private college has been faced with at least three challenges: one has come from the rapid growth of state-supported education both in enrollments and in instructional quality; a second has come from the general public demand for increased excellence in higher education to meet the international threat; and a third has come from competition among private schools for the limited financial resources of individuals, corporations, and foundations, a competition upon whose success our survival depends. In response to all three challenges, the private college has attempted to create for itself an acceptable public image. In order to win public notice and support, a private college has to show how it is distinctive as over against public education, on the one hand, and over against other private colleges competing for similar public notice and support, on the other hand. So we have sought to call attention to our strengths and to minimize, and hopefully even to eliminate, our weaknesses. We have issued statements of purpose cast in appropriately lofty terms, and we have made curricular innovations announced with appropriately hopeful predictions. Understand that I am not describing here a process with which I have no sympathy. On the contrary, it has been a necessary work, and in my own institution I have willingly participated in it.

The point is simply this: our students have taken us seriously! We have talked of excellence, and they have asked us to define it. We have talked of education which gives important place to values, and they have begun to scrutinize the values we practice in the presence of those we profess. We have talked of a community of learning, and they have asked us how genuine community can exist in which there is not some substantial sharing of responsibility for decisions which affect the common life. We have talked about the primacy of the college's intellectual task, and they have asked us why we assign so much of our budget to non-instructional purposes. We have talked of the liberating character of our peculiar kind of education, and they have asked for more freedom now.

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And there is one other element which our particular colleges face. In our attempt to establish our distinctiveness in the educational world, we have quite rightly given fresh attention to our heritage as institutions which stand within the Christian tradition; but most of us have not yet given enough attention to what concretely this ought to mean, or even to what in fact it can mean given the peculiar settings of our individual schools. But Christian colleges are not created by administrative fiat, any more than a Christian nation was created in the fourth century by imperial fiat. It does not take students long to discover that there is no common mind on this issue among the college's several constituencies — faculty, administration, trustees, alumni. Nor does it take long to discover whether or not it has been carefully thought out even by its advocates in the college. One test is to see where those responsible for policy go for their precedents when a major decision is at stake. Perhaps the best test is to see how persons are treated at all levels of the college life.

V

My fourth observation brings us into the realm of the inner life. Campus culture today is marked by an existential concern. I mean this in the technical sense that many students are preoccupied with the problem of establishing their own self-identity, with the search for the "authentic" life. For some this takes the form of a passionate moral inquiry which indicts conventional values and conventional behavior and seeks instead the courage to live without conventional sanctions. Strangely, there is among many such students a keen interest in discussing the conventional issues of personal morality, and not, I think, simply for the purpose of refuting them. One sometimes gets the impression that they would like desperately to be convinced of the conventional position if it were not for the bankruptcy of the arguments ordinarily advanced in its behalf. Strangely also, many of these students are themselves strongly, even dogmatically, moral, but they refuse to identify their concerns and commitments as moral because they do not trust supposedly moral men.

For other students this existential concern means, not passionate inquiry, but paralysis. There is, it seems to me, an extraordinary amount of immobility among us, of able young men and women who simply cannot get themselves into purposeful motion. It is not for them a matter of rejecting conventional values; it is simply that they do not know what they want, and sometimes, as Rollo May has observed, that they do not even know what they feel. Undoubtedly the causes of this condition are many, but I am convinced that one of them, at least, is this: we live in a society which is so oriented toward the future that we are all but incapable of appreciating the significance of the moment. John Deschner has written of the contemporary student, "He seems to spend his life searching for the answer to the question, 'When does life begin?'" In Will Oursler's novel,

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New York, New York, one character speaks for many a college student: "‘Some-day I may do something terribly important,’ Jackie told him solemnly. ‘That’s what I’m working for now. Thinking I’ve got to think it all out, so I won’t make a mistake.’"“ Are there, then, no terribly important things to be done now? Many of us, I think, are convinced the answer to that is no, and the result is that students move through four years of college in almost total ignorance of the depth and range of life — real life — which is opened all about them on the campus.

Perhaps this is not so surprising. When you find yourself needing to make conversation with a small child, what is the very first question you are likely to ask him? "What are you going to be when you grow up?" That has become the test question of our culture. We have been systematically schooled from earliest age to believe that life is something that begins some time in the future. We do not ask a young man, "What kind of person are you now?" but "What are you going to be?" Too seldom are young people in our society encouraged or allowed to take responsibility for life now, within the full reach of their capacity. Even in college there is too much perpetuation of the conditions of childhood. And the result is that, when we are grown, we are not "grown up." College students who ask, "When does life begin?" very soon become professional men and housewives asking, "When does life begin?"

There is somewhere a character in one of Sartre’s novels, a professor who is not really a man because he has never chosen in a concrete moment to be a man. When he comes to the full realization of his nothingness he says, "I have led a toothless life. I have never bitten into anything. I was waiting. I was saving myself for later on, and I have just noticed that my teeth are gone."

There is on the campus an existential concern — students asking urgently, sometimes desperately, the question of their own identity — and that is all to the good. But there is also an existential mood which, if not challenged, can turn this situation of potential good into actual tragedy for many. My own thinking is very much in debt to the existentialists, and I honor them for the courage with which they have made us face some of the facts of our human experience which we might prefer to forget. Existentialist philosophers and dramatists have made us see that each of us is an inescapably accountable individual, and we cannot assign responsibility for our actions to anyone else. As no one can finally do my dying for me, so no one can do my living for me; and no one can finally make my decisions for me. Many a contemporary student has come to accept the loneliness which comes with being an individual, indeed has accepted it with a vengeance. Let me offer just a single bit of evidence. There was a time, not so long ago, when college students seemed able to entertain quite calmly the idea of consulting a psychiatrist when serious difficulty arose, but there is some evidence to suggest that a change of attitude is taking place. Such consultation may now be looked upon by many

‘Pocket Books (New York), p. 124.

with suspicion; indeed, some scarcely dare to consult anyone when faced with a difficult decision. And the reason seems to be that to consult another person is a sign of weakness. More than one conversation in my office has been opened by the visitor with words of embarrassed and guilty apology, "I know I ought to be able to handle this myself."

If the existentialists have seen something true about what it means to be a man, I think the time has now come for us to see that in another respect they have sold us a bill of goods, and the product is shoddy. They and their cult have become so preoccupied with the lonely individual that that is all they see, and as a consequence they have falsified the human situation. Martin Buber was once an orthodox existentialist, but Buber was too sensitive an observer of human life to be satisfied permanently with this lonely view of man. While it is true, it is only part of the truth. The other part of the truth is supplied in Buber's trenchant phrase, "Real life is meeting."

Until we can change the campus mood of existential loneliness into one of dialogic expectation, we cannot make good on the college's claim to be a community in any significant sense of the word.

VI

My final observation is this: In the presence of this existential concern for self-identity, the Christian faith is unhappily not a ready resource for many students — perhaps even particularly from those out of conventional church backgrounds. Last year we invited a prominent clergyman to the campus to speak, a man who is respected in his community and in his denomination as an exemplary churchman and an able preacher. At the conclusion of his sermon in the college chapel, one student remarked to another, "I still believe in God, but that's because I don't go to church!" He went on to explain that if he were to go regularly to church and were there subjected to the kind of airy irrelevancies, easy answers, and outrageous claims he had just heard in this sermon, he would very soon lose his faith.

Professor William Mueller, in his book *The Prophetic Voice in Modern Fiction*, has written something about the contemporary emptiness of conventional religious symbol and language which I am now ready to endorse:

. . . relatively few contemporary writings of an explicitly religious nature would qualify as great literature or as profound religious thought. There is much pulp devoted to the mawkish expression of man's love for God, just as there is to man's love for woman. Much "religious" writing is sentimental; it titillates flabby and easily seduced emotions and offends the taste of anyone with either literary or religious sensibilities. The central religious situation, that of man confronted by God, has become so

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vulgarized by the combined efforts of television, cinema, jukebox, popular writer, and popular preacher, that it is becoming increasingly difficult to discuss this situation in serious and mature terms. One reason a Dante or a Milton would be unlikely in this century is that the biblical situations and the biblical vocabulary have been so overworked and sentimentalized by superficial and inept artificers that the serious writer struggling with the same basic problems must resort to different situations and different vocabulary.⁵

Then on the campus we need to prepare our presentation of the Christian message as if those to whom it is addressed have never heard it and will not be likely to welcome it.

It is not only the emptiness of our conventional religious language which makes it unavailable to the contemporary student; it is also the pretentiousness of the claims we have too often made. Most of us have been schooled to believe that there is a Christian answer for everything, that a Christian is the man with the answers. Then one who discovers in these difficult days that he does not have all the answers — indeed, who finds that the conventional religious answers seem to lack the depth and reality of the questions — is likely to conclude that he has no longer any right to call himself a Christian. Then on the campus we need to find courage to insist that there is a legitimate Christian agnosticism and to help students to identify that minimum to which they can hold in faith.

VII

If it is legitimate to hope that this convocation will justify itself by contributing freshly to the discussions of the last decade, perhaps it can best do so if it takes full account of what is freshest among us, namely, a changed apologetic situation. If it is true that we face a new situation on the campus which many of us do not fully grasp, and of which we are not prepared to take full advantage, the convocation could scarcely make a more important contribution than to describe that situation as accurately as possible and suggest ways of speaking in it and to it as relevantly as we can.

⁵Association Press: New York, 1959, p. 23.