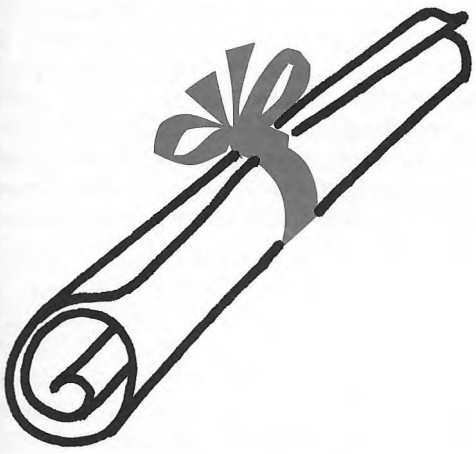
VIEWS & COUNTERVIEWS



THE RELEVANCE OF IRRELEVANCE FOR EDUCATION

According to the writer of the Book of Acts, the ancient Athenians and the foreigners who lived there "spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new." I suppose if the writer were describing today's academic institutions he would use different terms, but the thought would be much the same: we spend our time in nothing except telling or hearing what is *relevant*. Or so it seems. Relevance is perhaps *the* criterion for those who are most concerned to reshape our colleges and seminaries today.

Fine. Nobody should be against relevance. Indeed, without it any academic institution will gradually, if not quickly, be sapped of its vitality. But in the rush to be tooled for involvement in contemporary society, we ought not to lose sight of a simple truth: relevance isn't everything.

Our society, I think most will agree, has strong one-dimensional tendencies, if it has not yet become that one-dimensional world described by Herbert Marcuse. "Mass production and mass distribution," according to Marcuse, "claim the entire individual. . . ." The computerized military-industrial complex buys us off and lulls us to sleep by its routines, its luxury, and its promises for greater and greater comfort. "In this process," Marcuse explains, "the 'inner' dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down." The critical and the creative power of human reason is more and more undercut. We come to accept the order of things as it is, without question, without dreaming visions of what might be.

It was not always so. In the classical tradition of Western thought, there was always the soaring vision of reason, whether in science, philosophy, religion, or art, a vision which transcended the immediate problems of the societal system. As Marcuse says, "Prior to the advent of this cultural reconciliation, literature and art were essentially alienating, sustaining and protecting the contradiction—the unhappy consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, the promises betrayed. They were a rational cognitive force, revealing a dimension of man and nature which was repressed and repelled in reality." But now that transcendent intellectual dimension is gone, or at least it seems to be on its way out. A harmonizing technological pluralism more and more embraces everything within one coordinate system. The well of the inner life, the

source of individuality, creativity, spontaneity, and rationality, is being covered over. Reason reigns supreme, to be sure. But this is for the most part what Paul Tillich called "technical reason," not the classical "ontological reason." We are concerned with what Gordon Allport referred to as the "itsy-bitsy empiricisms." We amass and store information on a vast scale. But we seem to be forgetting how to cultivate wisdom.

Enter the multiversity. This behemoth is now coming to dominate our society. It dominates it in the sense that it provides the lubricant for the societal wheels. Education is lubrication. "What Oxford and Cambridge were to England in the time of its greatness," Henry Aiken has pointed out, "so Harvard, California, Columbia, and other national universities are now to the world-powerful United States." But, Aiken remarks, "the all-important difference is that the forms of education in which the English universities excelled—the individual tutorial, classical studies, humanistically oriented history and politics, and philosophy—are precisely the areas which seem least useful and relevant to the ongoing concerns of our present national society." Our educational system, as Aiken suggests, does not tend to produce the "cultivated nonspecialist," the man with the critical, humanistic common sense and historical perspective. Its hyper-specialized, essentially unrelated departments generally produce only skilled technicians. These men and women may sometimes brilliantly solve problems posed for them by the national society, but they do not seem to have the discipline also to stand over against society with a considered criticism and a creative vision. "Where the Englishman received, so to say, a common law education," Aiken comments, "which led him from case to case and from precedent to precedent, developing along the way his sense of analogy and relevance, Americans, within the range of their specialties, are trained to be methodical, exact, and systematic. Outside their professional range, they remain rather clumsy and impressionable, likely to be opinionated in a speculative way, but where something is to be done, curiously indecisive, ready to place the burden of obligation on someone else who can supply a more 'informed' judgment." This phenomenon has prompted Robert Hutchins to observe — "the multiversity, which will do for the society anything the society will pay for, exists to flatter the spirit of the age."

Who populates the many independent departments of the multiversity? Who goes to Harvard or Berkeley or Columbia to attain that finely honed professional training? The graduates of the so-called "university college," of course. Today the multiversity seems to be reaching out like an octopus to shape American four-year colleges to fit its own purposes. The traditional liberal arts college, many people seem to think, has a future only insofar as it can become a prep-school for the giant university. So education at the college level is in danger of becoming mere lubrication, too. To get the right training and to acquire the right skills—that's the de facto motto of the day, not something as old-hat as "truth" or "learning, virtue, piety." In other words, a relevant college education seems to mean fulfilling the requirements for graduate school or, more directly, obtaining the expertise to solve the problems defined by the national society. You get yourself greased-up to slip smoothly into graduate school and thereafter into the societal machine. Or you prepare for a problem-solving career to be begun immediately after graduation.

I wonder whether our theological seminaries are not being squeezed into the same mold, caught as it were between the university college and the multiversity. Without any doubt the exciting cutting edge of theological education today, at least as far as most students are concerned, is with those disciplines which are addressing themselves to the problems of the university, technology, and the city. What theological student today really cares about the intellectual nuances of the inner-penetration of the persons of the Trinity? But offer him a course in urban sociology, even better a chance to become involved in an experimental urban program, and his eyes will light up. Not surprisingly, the seminaries themselves seem to be giving most attention to developing or deepening ties with the multiversity or the city. The thing to do these days, apparently, is to pick up your seminary, figuratively, if not literally, and move it into a multiversity or an urban environment. In the meantime, what becomes of the classical disciplines such as dogmatics, church history, and biblical studies? They take a lot of hard work and seem to have little cash value. Theological students today, accordingly, are asking, Why bother with them? I wonder how many seminary curricula are being shaped, subtly or openly, by the force of that question.

The society-oriented mood among contemporary theological students is reflected and sup-

ported, as most people know, in and by the dominant trends of recent American theology. These trends were already evident two decades ago when Paul Tillich began to captivate younger audiences with his projected apologetic theology. Theology, according to Tillich, is fundamentally an enterprise of answering the ultimate questions of modern man. Tillich always held, to be sure, that "the Christ" is the criterion, finally, of modern culture, that the answer gives the form to the question. Yet he never really allowed a primary place for an intramural ecclesiastical dogmatic theology such as Barth's, although he very much admired the criticism of church and culture he found in Barth's *Epistle to the Romans*. He said that "kerygmatic theology needs apologetic theology for its completion," but he held back from saying that the reverse is also true. Tillich's reading of the Bible and the theological tradition show the same focus on the present situation. Tillich's was a highly selective, albeit creative and stimulating, approach: If modern man needs a sacramental understanding of nature, for example, and you find that in Luther, that's why you read and discuss Luther, not primarily to find out what Luther himself was trying to say and why he wrote what he did.

With Harvey Cox, tutored by Tillich, we have moved to a new stage. Cox sees theology not as supplying answers *to* the cultural situation, but, in effect, finding answers *in* that situation (with the help of biblical spectacles). "The task of prophecy," he explains in his essay on the place and purpose of theology, "is to illuminate history. . . . The task of theology is to guide, criticize, and deepen prophecy." The task of theology, then, is to help the church "get with it," that is, get where the action is, in the world. Theology as a fun thing to do in itself, singing, playing, and dancing with mind and heart in and before the presence of God — that celebrating kind of theological thought is ruled out. In a word, Cox has entered into the Tillichian pathos for the situation, but he seems to have passed by the Barthian joy in doing theology. He doesn't seem to understand why Barth loved Mozart. For Cox, apparently, theology must always be program-music, that is, a means to an end, not also an end in itself. The worst possible thing, it seems, is to "repair to the religious ghetto." Theology for Cox, it seems, is for the prophet only, not also for the priest. Theology is for the sake of society; and, apparently, that is all.

I do not want to belittle Cox's achievement. We are all in his debt, sometimes more than we realize. I just want to underline my simple thesis that relevance isn't everything. Perhaps I can make my point most clearly with reference to the arts.

Once upon a time when I was a young radical, I came to detest and despise the slogan, "art for art's sake." I came to believe that that slogan masked a bourgeois elitism and a firm commitment to the status quo. The artists have painted the world, I thought to myself in Marxist terms, now the time has come for them to change it. At that time I grew deeply fond of Picasso's Guernica, taking that as my paradigm case. Here was an artist who expressed his hatred of the persecution of the poor and the innocent in our world. Here was an artist who was calling us all to the task of ending war and building a just peace.

But then I made a trip to East Germany, and I visited a number of galleries there. I thought to myself, is that socialist realism abominable! All the workers and the factories are executed with the same cloddish germanic hand and the same sausage-and-beer managerial style. Then look at that neo-fascist architecture! Rather like [illegible]age diamond-studded garbage cans. Compare all this to the Bauhaus, and Klee, Bechmann, Nolde, Kirchner, Kollwitz, and Kandinsky. It then becomes clear that those who most aimed for relevance, the exponents of socialist realism, had sold their souls to the system. Perfect relevance to society had become, what it always must become, perfect submission to the status quo. The others, in varying ways, had retained their independence, and so were able to criticize, to prod, and to dream of new possibilities.

I concluded, therefore, that the slogan, "art for *society's* sake," the slogan of relevance, was not enough. Art should be for society's sake, of that I remain convinced, but not necessarily and compulsively in a direct and immediate way. The artist, it seems to me, needs the free breathing space, the perspective, which the slogan, "art for art's sake," can provide him. To use traditional categories, the good and the beautiful (and the true, too) are inseparable. A painting finally, I would venture to say, is not beautiful if it does not serve the good of mankind. But I don't think we should require the artist to justify his work of art, much less tell him exactly how to create it. To be truly relevant to humanity, and not just to reflect the societal

status quo, the artist needs the moment of irrelevance.

Likewise for education, particularly at our liberal arts colleges. Let us do the university college thing, maybe. But in the doing let's not lose our grasp on the liberal arts thing. That is: the ivory tower, the reflective community apart, the exposure to many varieties of human experience, the critical yet passionate discussion of the great issues of today. We ought to be able to cherish the moment of detachment as well as the moment of involvement. We ought to be able to delight in learning for learning's sake, as well as learning for the sake of society. We ought not to be embarrassed about losing ourselves for awhile in the study of Plato or Buddha, Alexander or Mao, DNA or Saturn. Nor should we be bothered by an occasional desire to spend time on blissfully irrelevant undertakings such as random conversation with friends and colleagues, taking a walk by oneself, or keeping a journal.

Likewise, too, for theological education. We need theology for theology's sake no less than theology for society's sake. We need to learn how to play with our minds like the children of God we are, as well as to learn how to participate in and creatively resolve the profound social crises of our time. The doctrine of the inner-penetration of the persons of the Trinity, for example, can be a delight in itself, if we can only bracket for a moment the concern for cash value. Similarly for all the wonderful mythology of the biblical writers and maybe even the proverbial angel-counting pin-headedness of some of the church's doctors. Why not let Thomas or Luther or Edwards turn us on by the sheer intellectual brilliance of what they said and thought and sang and prayed? Why not be carried away with an antiquarian enthusiasm for the myriad of fascinating tidbits in the story of church history?

Who knows how or when our imagination might be enlivened, our vision broadened, our sensitivity deepened, our creativity enhanced, our rationality developed? Education should be more than lubrication: it should be liberation and cultivation. Both in secular and theological education we need the moment of irrelevance—precisely in order to be truly relevant, precisely in order to enter into the fullness of our humanity.

H. Paul Santmire
Wellesley College
Wellesley, Massachusetts

INTERPRETING THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF ECCLESIASTICAL OFFICE

Professor Gerhard Krodel, in his essay on "Forms and Functions of Ministries in the New Testament" (*Dialog,* Summer 1969) has adequately and authoritatively discussed what the New Testament has to say about the nature and function of the ministry. He also demonstrated the development of the concept of ecclesiastical office in the later New Testament writings (i.e., the Pastoral Epistles), championing, however, the commonly held Lutheran view of orders as an "apostolic succession of the tradition" (or *kerygma*) rather than a "succession of an unbroken chain of the ordained ministry." Comments which I made in the "Symposium on Ordination" (same issue) indicate that Professor Krodel and I do not interpret the New Testament data in quite the same way, and he indicated that there were positions divergent from his own. I do not take issue with Professor Krodel's historical-critical analysis (being far from competent to do so), but I do take issue with the kind of hermeneutic he implies and which has been so prominently used by Protestant biblical scholars.

Protestant scholars since the days of Adolf von Harnack have noted the development of early Catholic structures within the New Testament canon and in such postcanonical writings as the letters of Ignatius and I Clement. Harnack detected the rise of early Catholicism by the beginning of the second century A.D. where a church of "law and doctrine" emerged out of the necessity to do battle with gnosticism.[1]

Rudolf Bultmann went even further by investigating the church order of the Pastoral Epistles. He suggested that the development of ecclesiastical office was the result of the loss of eschatological expectation and tension with the indefinite delay of the *parousia.* He agreed with Rudolf Sohm that the early congregations moved by spiritual energy rather than juridical procedure, and that this pneumatic activity made legal regulations unnecessary. But he disagreed with Sohm that a development of legal regulation stands in the way of the Spirit; "it

1. Adolf von Harnack, *What Is Christianity?* (Harper Torchbook, 1957).