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ABSTRACT

The views of Hans Deiter Betz regarding the role of theology in higher education are discussed. The suggestion that the church challenge the concept of knowledge that is presently advocated in the technology oriented university is considered. Views of various other theologians are also described, and the need for Protestant churches to invest their resources in the training of interdisciplinary scholars is emphasized. It is hoped that the church will see the need for interdisciplinary theological research and communication and will identify the valuable resources in personnel which already exist in these fields. Then, through the development of centers for interdisciplinary scientific/theological research, or through the creation of an academically oriented campus ministry which is qualified to speak to specialized issues in the intellectual community, the church will again have a voice within those institutions who determine through their research and teaching the character of the individuals and the society of the next century. (LBH)

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AN ACADEMIC MINISTRY TO TECHNOLOGY

William Fred Lamar

In July of 1975, the United Methodist Board of Higher Education and Ministry published an Occasional Paper entitled, "The Christian Church and the University--Some Reflections," by Hans Deiter Betz. In his paper, Professor Betz decried the limitation of the church's role in higher education to that of sponsoring secular universities, providing spiritual and social services for students, and maintaining theological seminaries for the "training of ministers." Dr. Betz saw little significant involvement in the basic intellectual life of the of the academic community on the part of any of the church's representatives--either the professors of the theological seminaries or the chaplains and the campus ministers.

Dr. Betz concluded his paper by calling for the church to "challenge the concept of 'knowledge' which is presently advocated in the 'technology-oriented' university." The mechanism Dr. Betz recommends for achieving this goal is the creation of "theological departments. . . in universities at all levels." These theological departments and the seminaries should be brought up to the same standards of basic research demanded of the rest of the "technology-oriented university," and they should be "continuously preoccupied with the examination, exploration, and ever new discovery of the theological foundation of the church."

In describing a more desirable state for theological education, Dr. Betz turns to the "German graduate model" of state university theological schools where "these faculties are under the constant pressure of having to prove that they are worthy of this participation in the university."

Apparently, one proves one's worthiness by engaging in basic research in the realms of the nature of truth, the knowledge of God, and the ethics of nuclear physics and human biology, thus providing the university and the world with an "idealistic and humanistic consensus" which will "protect the university from the enemies within its walls." The new enemies of the university (after its victory over the church) are "fragmentation, specialization, impersonalization," and the "powerful political and economic interests which determine what is done and not done in research and education."

Dr. Betz might be faulted in offering an analysis that is a bit broad for the significant problem he describes. Obviously, some basic research is going on at American seminaries: Drew University houses the Center for Bioethical Research; St. Louis University provides

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a home for the Institute for the Theological Encounter with Science and Technology; and the United Ministries in Higher Education is proposing to add a special task force in the theological encounter with legal education to Ron McNeur's excellent group working in the area of medical education.

Further, Dr. Betz's suggestion of providing theological faculties "in universities at all levels" might not withstand some interpretations of the constitutional clause demanding the separation of church and state. Since this clause appears in many state constitutions, as well as the federal document, it has already led to differing interpretations by state and federal courts--permitting the inclusion of theological faculties in some state institutions and prohibiting them elsewhere.

However, these quibbles should not cause us to overlook the fact that Betz is striking at the heart of a significant issue in the life of the American church. Most of the so-called "mainstream" American Protestant denominations are children of the rationalist period in philosophy and theology. Since all theologies are based upon the a prioris accepted by their creators, the denominations born in this age seem to accept as fact the existence of a "Cartesian wall" between the realms of fact and value and the superiority of the sciences to describe and to act in the "real world."

These post-enlightenment churches made two common responses to the problems of existing with the world of expanding scientific achievement and the increasing adoration of science.

One response was that of pietism. Some early pietist churches reacted to the separation of the natural and the supernatural by rejecting the newly emerging world of scientific advancement and enshrining a simpler age as the proper place for Christian conduct (e.g. the Anabaptists, Amish, Hutterites). Other pietists made a pragmatic compromise with their new understanding of the world. These groups entered freely into the world of scientific and technological achievement and became the merchants and manufacturers of the British industrial revolution. Through their nonconformist religious customs, they also retained a tenuous hold on the res cognita (things received) on the other side of the Cartesian wall.

However, even when dwelling on spiritual concepts, the pietists adopted the mechanistic model of Newton's new science. God's will was understood in the rigid standards of the Rules for Wesleyan Societies; God's providence was measured in the return granted to the business enterprises of his elect; and God's mission was to transmit the glories of Christ and western culture to "all the heathen races in all the dark places."

Much of the church still dwells in this anti-rational world. In its more intellectual moments, it speaks of revelation without reason. In its more proletarian manifestation, it is content to stand uncritically on an Acrilan carpet before an electric organ to sing "Give me that old time religion; it was good enough for father and it's good enough for me!"

The other response which the church made to the new world of empiricism and scientific discovery proved equally inadequate. Beginning with deism (with God as senior, but absent, mechanic), a portion of western Christendom moved progressively through the rationalistic reduction of all doctrine and scripture to something acceptable to contemporary scientism to the ultimate death of a transcendent God.

Both deism and pietism in their earlier and more contemporary expressions had some aspects in common. First, they were not able to critically evaluate the faith commitments of the enlightenment because they were a part of the same philosophic age. And secondly, they both adopted a mechanistic understanding of God and of his relationship with humankind. Consequently, these religious offspring of the Cartesian dualism proved unable to question the similar presuppositions of the modern sciences.

But science discovered what religion could not uncover--that the closed world model of Newtonian science was open to all the vagaries of probability, indeterminacy, and the intrusion of the experimenter into the experiment. Later, in the world of social actuality, science was to discover that it was a moral force in the universe and that it would be held accountable for the social and moral damage to society begun in the "value free" experimentation of the laboratory.

The experiments of Planck, Einstein, Böhr, Heisenberg and others led the scientists to see the inadequacy of the Newtonian system which affirmed the ultimacy of matter, the observability of reality, causality, predictability, and determinism.

Ronald W. McNeur, meteorologist and theologian, records the change in science as follows:

> Einstein's historic equation introduced the primacy of energy and discarded the basic concept of reality being observable. Planck's experiments with black body radiation introduced the photon of light and the quantum of energy and disrupted both the wave theory of light and the traditionally held concept of continuity in nature. Böhr's work in atomic physics had to acknowledge the involvement of man in his study. The scientist in the process of measuring can only measure what occurs to the atom when it is responding to his measuring. Heisburg's principle demonstrates the inability of man to measure accurately and record all aspects of a situation which he is investigating.[1]

Thus, science moved to recognize the possibility of a world that it could not see and that could not be empirically validated. All that could be said was that this world seemed to be

greater than human understanding, and that there appeared to be in every system of thought, values which were both non-empirical and essential to the system.

At the same time that the Newtonian system was falling from the inside, the world outside of science began to question the role of science in society. We ended a great war by dropping an atomic bomb. Then we began to ask if persons should have such godlike power. One of the generals of that war was quoted as saying:

> With the monstrous weapons man already has, humanity is in danger of being trapped in this world by its moral adolescents. Our knowledge of science has outstripped our capacity to control it. . . Man is stumbling blindly through spiritual darkness while toying with the precarious secrets of life and death. The world has achieved brilliance without wisdom, power without conscience. Ours is a world of nuclear giants and ethical infants.[2]

After dropping the bomb, the world entered a phase of unprecendented scientific research--a time when technological applications came faster than moral questions. We placed a man on the moon; we created the largest peacetime military industrial complex in the history of humankind; our factories spewed forth ever-increasing quantities of products of dubious social or utilitarian value until we came to that point in American history when great numbers of people were willing to agree with Archibald MacLeish:

> Prior to Hiroshima it had still been possible--increasingly difficult but still possible--to believe that science was by nature a human tool obedient to human wishes and that the world science and its technology could create would therefore be a human world reflecting our human needs, our human purposes. After Hiroshima, it was obvious that the loyalty of science was not to humanity but to truth--its own truth--and that the law of science was not the law of the good--what humanity thinks of as good, meaning moral, decent, humane--but the law of the possible. What it is possible for science to know science must know. What it is possible for technology to do technology will have done. If it is possible to split the atom, then the atom must be split. Regardless. Regardless of. . . anything.[3]

Thus, science discovered the inadequacy of its own ultimate principles. The goal of medicine--the preservation of life--was called into question in the case of Karen Quinlan and thousands like her. Medicine was forced to ask if life were not more than living. The goal of ever-increasing production has been attacked by such eminent scientists as Barry Commoner[4] and the members of the Club of Rome,[5] who asked, "Is not life more than having?" Similarly, the new educators are questioning the concepts of "value free" education; psychologists wonder if persons should go "beyond freedom and dignity;" and

geneticists are calling for moral accountability for members of their profession.[6]

Surely, now the time is ripe for that type of basic research into "the nature of truth and knowledge of God which will provide the university and the world with an idealistic and humanistic consensus," which Betz called for in his paper. But, in order to provide this type of academic insight into the plight of and the remedy for humanity, the church must provide a philosophy which will affirm the unity of knowledge, an interdisciplinary theological specialist to develop and interpret the apologia to the sciences, and a means of support for the system.

It is possible that we have now available in our society the germ of such a philosophy, the specialist to interpret it, and the beginnings of a support system for such an effort.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, William James and Alfred North Whitehead rejected the ancient dualism between thought and object in favor of a doctrine of "pure experience."[7] Whitehead concluded that science and metaphysics were not innately dependent on each other, but that both started from the same ground of immediate experience and then proceeded in opposite directions to accomplish their differing tasks.[8]

In the following generation, Michael Polanyi was to present a similar argument. In his books Personal Knowledge and The Tacit Dimension, Polanyi demonstrated that there existed before every system of thought a tacit dimension. This dimension, which consisted of one's inheritance of language, thought patterns, social expectancies, and cultural allegiance, determined to a great extent what one could think of, the problems one could select as significant and attempt to solve, the approach one would take in solving the problems, and the framework in which the solutions would be reported.[9]

In his work, The Logic of the Sciences and the Humanities, F. S. C. Northrop summarized the appeal of the pragmatists when he described experience as the central element of the work of the ethicist, theologian, scientist and artist. We are all united at the point at which we apprehend reality in this world. We differ only in what our cultural and genetic inheritance permits us to perceive and in our means of explicating a common reality.

If reality is held in common and apprehended in common, then we need persons who can stand across our fragmented disciplines, who can talk above the babel of our departmental jargons to call us again to the vision of a universally held truth. It is possible that such an ideal person exists in the Roman Church in the Jesuit communities where one frequently finds individual priests with doctorates in scripture, canon law, and the sciences or social sciences. The existence of such Rennaissance scholars has been of great benefit to the church, both in terms of its ability to communicate to the world of scholarship and in terms of its ability to study and learn from the world.

Unfortunately, the Protestant churches have never made a similar investment of their resources in the training of interdisciplinary scholars. Nor do they have a large body of scholars free of family ties and obedient to the church who may be commissioned to invest their lives in crossdisciplinary fields where scholarly recognition is rare and promotions and tenure even rarer.

However, if the church is to understand or communicate with a technological age, it must recognize and develop scholars who are able to cross the narrow lines of discipline and who are willing to view themselves as theological apologists to other disciplines. Such persons must be willing to give their lives to working and publishing outside their own disciplines; living in a world not of their own making where their expertise is not primary; constantly working with experts in other fields, raising value questions and testing the "theologies" of these other disciplines; interpreting the gospel to those who need to hear it--and who want to hear it as did the people of Athens--in their own tongue. In other words, we need to develop theological scholars, masters in their craft, who will give their lives and resources as ministers to other disciplines in the university.

The Protestant churches already possess a few such individuals;[10] it also may have the seeds of a support system. As was previously mentioned, our churches are involved in the National Center for Bioethics, in theological centers for the study of change in medical and legal education, and in specialized ministries to science and technology.

Hopefully, the church will soon see the need for interdisciplinary theological research and communication and will identify the valuable resources in personnel which already exist in these fields. Then, through the development of centers for interdisciplinary scientific/theological research, or through the creation of an academically oriented campus ministry which is qualified to speak to specialized issues in the intellectual community, the church will again have a voice within the walls of those institutions who determine through their research and teaching the character of the individuals and the society that will take us into the twenty-first century.

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[1]Ronald W. McNeur, "Education" (Philadelphia: United Campus Christian Fellowship, 1965), p. 4 (mimeographed.)

[2]General Omar Bradley, quoted in Evangelism for Our Age, Nashville (Tidings, 1952).

[3]Archibald MacLeish, "The Great American Frustration," Saturday Review, LI (July 13, 1969), 14.

[4]Barry Commoner, The Closing Circle (New York: Knopf, 1971).

[5]Donella H. Meadows, et al. The Limits to Growth (New York, Signet 1972).

[6]Elof Carlson, "The Pervasiveness of Life Sciences in our Daily Lives," Paper and Comments Presented at the Danforth Foundation Conference on Values, Colorado College, Colorado Springs, Colorado, June, 1975.

[7]William James, The Meaning of Truth (New York, 1909), pp. xii-xiii cited by Lawrence Cremin, The Transformation of the School (New York: Vintage, 1964), p. 108.

[8]Alfred North Whitehead, The Aims of Education (New York: Free Press, 1967), p. 108.

[9]Michael Polanyi, The Tacit Dimension (New York: Anchor, 1967).

[10]For example, Bruce Hilton of the National Center for Bioethics; the previously mentioned and quoted Ron McNeur; and in the field of ministries to science and technology, John Crocker, Episcopal chaplain at MIT; Paul Bodine, Presbyterian campus minister at Iowa State; Myron Teske, Lutheran pastor at Purdue; and Don Shriver, dean of Union Theological Seminary.