

Religious Bulletin

March 7, 1929.

Hail, Columbia!

The New York Herald-Tribune, under date of February 26, published this editorial:

"There is an interesting symptom in the appointment by Columbia University of three religious advisers -- Protestant, Catholic and Jewish -- to look after the specifically religious interests of these three faiths. Half a century ago a college felt itself obliged to look after the whole of the moral and religious life of its students. Many colleges regarded themselves, indeed, as molders of character almost more than as teachers of subjects. But of late it had come to be considered none of the business of the official college to meddle with the conduct of the souls of its students. Boys came to learn and it was the business of the college to teach. The boy's mind, not his heart or his doings, was the teacher's business.

"The pendulum is beginning to swing in the other direction. Psychiatric advisers are being appointed to deal with those conflicts and perturbations which the human creature suffers at adolescence. And now a great university recognizes the fact that, for better or for worse, students come from a certain religious group or tradition and that it is not the just function of the college to overlook that fact. These advisers, officially sponsored by the institution but paid by the religious community in each instance, are to be the center, the focus and the guide of the religious interests with which students come to college.

"It is a matter for speculation as to just how much good these advisers will do. Too often in the past religious "secretaries" have tried to pump up religious activity as the football coach pumps up football enthusiasm. They have not been guides of a religious activity already present, but propagandists of an interest that was absent.

"It will be interesting to watch how busy these religious advisers at Columbia are. Meanwhile it is important to notice that a secular university is not blinding itself to the genuineness of sectarian interests. Catholic, Protestant and Jewish students will no longer feel that the university is a place where, as in some clubs, religion is taboo. The extent to which students respond to the ministrations of these collegiate spiritual guides will be, moreover, an important indication of what part religion, especially organized and sectarian religion, is going to play among the educated classes in the future of American life. College graduates are among the key molders of opinion. They become teachers, lawyers, editors and scholars. It is well that Columbia, in addition to studying religion as one might study biology, recognizes and deals with the more intimate and personal religious life of its students. A new type of university pastorate may be growing up. One can only watch on the side lines and see how large and how genuine a student following it will have."

Tardy reparation this! And hollow as it is tardy! Columbia makes a gesture of coming back to us mediaevalists who have stuck to the "character-molding" idea, and offers no apology for the generations of atheists she has sent out in the past, the worst of whom came to our colleges and universities of the hinterland to enunciate the philosophies of Red Russia. And what kind of character training can come of ~~the philosophies of Red Russia~~ religion which is studied "as one might study biology," as one speculates on a museum piece? Michigan promulgated the same twaddle a few years ago when it announced its "School of Religion." It declared that there can be no real education when religion is left out (thereby condemning in toto its course for the preceding hundred years), and then promised instruction in "the fundamental principles underlying all religions" (which is what the little boy shot at so far as results in character are concerned.)

"When you depart from the truth, the pendulum swings first in one direction and then in the other; meanwhile, the souls of men are the subject matter of "noble experiments."