

(Address given by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, C.S.C., President, University of Notre Dame, at the first joint meeting of the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada and the American Council on Education, Toronto, October 13, 1983)

THE MORAL DIMENSIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

It is a great personal pleasure for me to be here with so many friends and colleagues, not only from my own country, but from this great country of Canada where we are meeting together. We have so much in common. We are all Americans, part of that great romantic adventure called the New World. We share the same political ideals, the same religions and Western culture as well, the same economy to a great extent, some here may say to too great an extent. We sneeze and you catch pneumonia. We have fought side by side in two great world wars and we share a common defense today.

Occasionally, we squabble, as only good friends can, about fishing rights and acid rain, investment flows and energy sharing. But in matters most important, we are and have been good brothers and sisters, ready to share our problems and our opportunities, closer to each other than any other two countries on the face of the earth. Even our disillusioned students who felt they were not understood by us during the Vietnam war a decade ago readily came here where you just as readily granted them refuge and understanding, for which we must be ever grateful. If you have a flap with your students some day, I hope we can return the favor.

All the above being true makes my discussion of a problem and an opportunity in higher education all the easier, since the existential situation is quite similar in both our countries. One might question at the outset why, as we consider the possibility of our academic institutions to shape the future, I would presume to speak of the moral dimensions of higher education and some of the impending ethical questions that attend such a consideration. We have all been schooled in the proposition that the life of the university is the life of the mind, the free search for truth and its dissemination to the upcoming generation. This is at first glance an intellectual, not a moral task.

I think it is fair to say that education, lower or higher, involves more than the mind. We are educating human persons, that most marvelous of all visible realities. Jacques Maritain, the late French philosopher, said of the person:

"What do we mean precisely when we speak of the human person? When we say that a man is a person, we do not mean merely that he is an individual, in the sense that an atom, a blade of grass, a fly or an elephant is an individual. Man is an individual who holds himself in hand by intelligence and will. He does not exist only in a physical manner. He has a spiritual superexistence through knowledge and love; he is, in a way, a universe in himself, a microcosm, in which the great universe in its entirety can be

encompassed through knowledge; and through love, he can give himself completely to beings who are to him, as it were, other selves, a relation for which no equivalent can be found in the physical world. The human person possesses these characteristics because in the last analysis man, this flesh and these perishable bones which are animated and activated by a divine fire, exists 'from the womb to the grave' by virtue of the very existence of his soul, which dominates time and death. Spirit is the root of personality. The notion of personality thus involves that of totality and independence; no matter how poor and crushed he may be, a person, as such, is a whole and subsists in an independent manner. To say that man is a person is to say that in the depths of his being he is more a whole than a part, and more independent than servile. It is to say that he is a minute fragment of matter that is at the same time a universe, a beggar who communicates with absolute being, mortal flesh whose value is eternal, a bit of straw into which heaven enters. It is this metaphysical mystery that religious thought points to when it says that the person is the image of God. The value of the person, his dignity and his rights belong to the order of things naturally sacred

which bear the imprint of the Father of being, and which have in Him the end of their movement."

(Principes d'une politique humaniste, Paris: Paul Hartmann, 1945) pp. 15-16)

In educating those persons who will form the leadership of all the other great institutions in our present and future, the family, church and state, the great business organizations and labor unions, the military, the many voluntary organizations that so enrich our lives and our professions, we must face the reality that our universities and colleges are perhaps the most important element in shaping the future. How we educate these student-persons will have an all important influence on what our future will be.

How we educate, this is perhaps the greatest moral dilemma of all, because there is all too little agreement among us as to what is right or wrong in what we are purporting to do. We have many hints from the past.

Plato speaks of knowledge as a completion and a concomitant to virtue. Concomitant perhaps, but I think all of us would agree that while knowledge is power, it is power for good or evil, not necessarily virtue. Knowledge acquired at our best universities was the entree for the young leaders in President Nixon's White House, but after the Watergate debacle, they admitted that they learned how to use methods that were effective, but not to ask whether what they were doing was right or wrong. Augustine, a

well-educated man who sowed his share of wild oats before becoming Bishop of Hippo and a saint, described education as working towards ordo amoris, putting order into what we love. I suspect that this insight, like others in his Confessions, came somewhat later than during his formal education as a Rhetorician. Thomas Aquinas is in the same line, saying that the truly educated person is the one who knows the right things to have faith in, to hope for, and to love.

Matthew Arnold speaks of studies that will quicken, elevate, and fortify the mind and the sensibility. I like that and I would hope that our future leaders would lead better if their minds and sensibilities are quickened, elevated, and fortified. However, as I look at universities today, my own included, I would say as an honest moral judgment, "Easier said than done." Martin Buber and Ghandi, too, to cite two more modern observers of the educational scene, speak of the education of character as the only worthy outcome. Another modern, Robert Hutchins, described education: "the prime object of education is to know ... the goods in their order." Again, I must repeat, easier said than done. What agreement is there, in most faculties, on the "order of goods."

William Bennett, Chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities, cites some of these in a recent paper and adds one more, Robertson Davies, who outdoes them all. He says: "The purpose of learning is to save the soul and enlarge the mind." (Address delivered at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, Washington, D.C., Feb. 1, 1983). If I might speak for the Church, I would frankly admit that it has its

hands full in the effort to save souls and probably envies the universities in their easier task of enlarging the mind.

What do we do when students are not particularly excited about enlarging their minds, but would prefer to learn how to operate effectively as chemical engineers in a worldwide oil company, lawyers with a lucrative practice, say tax law, accountants in one of the big eight firms, or physicists in a national weapons laboratory? It may be our moral dilemma, but it is theirs, too. The rub is, we are the educators, we establish the curriculum, we teach the courses, we demonstrate what we think is all important in a total education, giving wholeness of knowledge, not bits and pieces.

Again, I trust that I am not overstating the ultimate moral dilemma that faces us, how we educate, but there it is, notwithstanding Plato, Augustine, Aquinas, Arnold, Buber, Ghandi, or even Robertson Davies. Their vision is, I fear, far from our reality.

In the horrible jargon of modern youth, they would say we ought to "get our act together," but I doubt we will do whatever that means unless we can at least agree on something not too popular in modern universities and colleges: defining what we are really trying to do, what we most fundamentally believe higher education to be, what we deeply believe these future leaders should learn from us.

Doing this will require something even more unpopular in modern universities and colleges, spending a few moments to consider

transcendentals like the true, the good, the beautiful, and the moral imperatives that flow from them, if indeed they are very relevant to what we are educating young persons to be, what will really qualify them to lead us out of the present wilderness into a better future. This will require more than simply useful knowledge, in the most pragmatic sense of "useful." I need not insist here that if we, the faculty, do not see the road ahead fairly clearly, it is unlikely that we will surmount this moral dilemma in time to help our present students become effective leaders in a world of considerable moral confusion.

Let me begin with something that we will all agree with, I hope, whatever we think about Plato and Aristotle or whatever we print in our catalogues. In simplest terms, I assume that we all agree that we are mainly, but not exclusively, concerned with the first of those transcendentals, truth. We all want to grow in knowing the truth, which is a road to wisdom, as well as knowledge, and which indeed does make us free. We cannot be like Pilate who asked the Lord, "What is truth?" and then walked away before getting a response.

Whatever else we do, we spend most of our lives seeking truth, about our world, about ourselves, about God, about how we go about knowing truth on a wide variety of levels, scientific and technological, really the easiest because mathematics is a precise language, then learning humanistic truth through literature and history, the social sciences like anthropology, sociology, political science, and economics, again with mathematics a helpful aid in these latter approaches to truth. Then we learn, too, through art and music and, perhaps most

of all, through poetic intuition. At the core of all, we know there is, of course, philosophy which puts it all together, hopefully, in some meaningful synthesis. If we want to go still further in seeking truth, and here I speak of my own profession, we study theology which I did for six years after college. We call it all truth, and indeed it is, although we come to it by many paths of learning, the more, the better, if we are looking for wholeness of knowledge, not just tidbits of this or that truth, quarks at the heart of matter or black holes amid the galaxies. I am fascinated by both of these searches, but not exclusively so.

The pursuit of truth is what makes our profession most exciting and what gives most coherence to our institutions. James Billington, Director of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, recently said at Catholic University in Washington:

"The pursuit of truth is the highest form of the pursuit of happiness -- and the surest way to keep us from the pursuit of one another. Truth is non-competitive; the discovery of one can benefit all. Truth is bigger than all of us, and can be pursued by each of us wherever we are with whatever we have at hand.

"The open, unlimited search for truth is a major source of hope for a free society -- not because it offers easy answers, but because it offers a shared enthusiasm that threatens no one and can

involve everyone. Only in the life of the mind and spirit can the horizons of freedom still be infinite in an era of growing physical limitations."

(Commencement Address, the Catholic University of America, Washington, D. C., May 21, 1983)

It would seem to me that the pursuit of truth is a good shared goal with which to begin to reorient and revivify our institutions as we attempt to shape the future through our students. At least, it has been the inspiration of all of our lives, and we should be able to inspire our students to see it as the best and continuing result of their higher education. The pursuit of truth and the full transmission of truth is at heart what makes educators and education interesting, even exciting, and at its best, fulfilling and inspirational. Universitas, which gave the name to our institutions, means pursuing truth in its fullness.

If you are still with me thus far, let me add another thought or two to the general theme, with the help of two good friends. We may think that our moral concern for shaping the future through our students is a modern concept. Hanna Gray of the University of Chicago puts the same idea in historical perspective:

"People tend to think of the Renaissance as a period of self-conscious new beginnings. The humanists thought it possible that they might produce great reform in the world Their educational thinking was the vehicle by which they criticized the society of their own time: its ethical values, its culture.

The humanists believed that the kinds of knowledge and of scholarship and of advanced education, which characterized the university system of their own day, were too academic, too narrow, too pedantic, too specialized From their critique of what was wrong with contemporary thought and scholarship in the university, the humanists concluded that by contrast an education in the liberal arts was that form of learning most relevant to the development of people who would become masters of their own world and leaders toward an improved future. They thought it was not enough to know what ethics was; they believed it important to know how to apply ethics, how to become more moral, how to shape the will -- and not only the intellect -- of morally aware and active human beings." (The Liberal Arts Revisited, Henry Lecture, University of Illinois, pp. 14-15)

I read the Henry Lecture after practically completing this address and all I could think was: Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose. The Renaissance educational problem is our own today, only the stakes are higher in our modern world, as I will demonstrate later on.

Hanna Gray's thought is put into modern context by Ambassador Charles Malik when he delivered the Pascal Lectures at the University of Waterloo, Ontario, here in Canada in March of 1981.

"The fundamental spirit of the whole university is determined by the humanities. Philosophically and spiritually, where the humanities stand, the entire university stands, administrators, professors, and students, (individually and, what is more dominant, in their meetings, in groups,) their view of the nature and destiny of man, the general outlook on life and being, the interpretation of history, the fundamental orientation of the mind, the formation of personal character and the fixing of basic attitudes and habits, the nature of good and bad and right and wrong, the meaning and purpose of human existence, the whole spirit which stamps the individual human person -- all of these radiate in the first instance, not from the sciences, but from what is taught and presupposed in the humanities The scientist himself, both when he takes courses in general education as an undergraduate student, and from the general climate of opinion of the university, is stamped in his mind and character by the pervasive spirit of the university."

(A Christian Critique of the University, Inter-Varsity Press, Downers Grove, Illinois, p. 70)

Hanna Gray writes as a historian. Charles Malik as a philosopher, a student of Whitehead at Harvard and Heidegger at Freiburg. They are saying the same thing, I believe. All truth is important, but some truths are all important. Education is the key to the future, but it had better include education in what is most important in life.

I found Gray and Malik, not just in these few words, but in their total lectures, quite helpful in the quest with which I began: trying to find some intellectually and morally coherent philosophy of education that can help us shape the future through the students we educate in our institutions. Our best goal is not just to educate in a thousand different ways -- although we will do that too -- but to give a vision of truth, a zest for the pursuit of truth, along all the avenues to truth, that might well lead these young persons to nobility of spirit and a commitment to do what each can^{do} to create a world of greater justice and beauty as well, in a word, to educate persons really capable of shaping the future, not dull and drab practitioners of what is and has been and^{still} needs changing.

Perhaps I am being too idealistic, but I do believe, after living all of my life since age seventeen in a university, that students do react positively to a great vision of what they and their world might become. If we really want to shape the future, the operative question is: Do we want to shape it in truth, justice, beauty, the good and, yes, in love, too? If we are unclear or less than enthusiastic about this, who will follow the uncertain trumpet?

Certainly not our students. We all know we are decent people, totally engaged in a noble quest. But let it not be forgotten that how we think, what we do is so much more important than what we say. Every act of ours is teaching. Our words are only buttressed by our deeds, and our deeds are inspired by our convictions. If we are not deeply concerned about truth, justice, beauty, the good as we know it, how will they be?

Perhaps I can cap this discussion of our greatest moral challenge as educators by making it concrete in seeing how we might face the greatest moral problem confronting humanity today or ever. Weak tea will not do here. I speak of the nuclear threat to humanity.

I could speak of a whole series of other ethical challenges that face us: How to preserve excellence in a time of retrenchment (the Carnegie Commission has the ultimate word on this one); how we preserve our freedom while seeking new and massive funding from business enterprises; how we respond to the legitimate desires of women and minorities when there are so few openings on our faculties; how we effectively reach out to potential poor and minority students when student aid is shrinking; how we balance vocationalism and the humanistic concerns in higher education; how we relate to Third World yearnings for development and human rights; how we sustain support for the fine arts in our institutions when all the emphasis is on computers which are basically uncreative -- I know that computers have composed symphonies, but spare me from listening to them; how we concern our business and engineering students in not just being consultants, but creative managers of greater productivity without which we will not make it in the world

markets; how we inspire our lawyers to work for justice, whatever the cost, not just for profit whatever the manipulation of the law involved; how we graduate physicians who care about people, whose deep personal concerns transcend cat-scans and electro-magnetic machines; how ultimately we reproduce ourselves, not practicing celibacy as regards the most important cohort to come and the one with the least attraction today, great teachers. All of these are fundamental moral concerns for our educational endeavors. I could say something about all of them, but just let me address the most important, the nuclear dilemma. If we do not learn and teach our students how to cope with this primordial nuclear problem, we need not worry about all the others. After total nuclear conflagration, all human problems are moot.

I am often asked, "Why the sudden concern? The nuclear threat has been with us for 38 years since the obliteration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Somehow we have survived."

I believe the sudden concern stems from the current accelerating trend to utter disaster which has, during the past 38 years and increasingly in the past two or three years, been escalating upwards. We now have available a million times the destructive power of those primitive yet devastating bombs that ushered in the Atomic Age in Japan. There are now four tons of TNT equivalent available for every man, woman, and child on earth. It is not just theoretically there, it is targeted, poised on a delivery system, hair-triggered to a very fallible computer, and there is a decision time of ten or

fifteen minutes, much less on the field of battle, and there will be practically no time for decision once these systems are placed in space.

To give some small sense of the rate of escalation, we have been told in recent years that the Russians are escalating wildly, which they have been doing, one new SS-20 a week aimed at Europe, while we have presumably been sitting on our hands. Well, while we have been sitting on our hands, we have developed the MX with ten warheads, the Triton submarine with new super accurate missiles, the Pershing II, the cruise missile, the B-1 bomber, and the upcoming Stealth bomber. What would we have done if we were not sitting on our hands?

All the movement, on both sides, has been massively upward and destabilizing an already touchy situation, and all of this is happening in a very troubled political climate, where arms control talks go nowhere, and the leaders of the super powers have not met since President Carter signed the SALT II Treaty -- still unratified, in Vienna. As the little girl, Samantha, who visited Russia at Andropov's invitation last Summer, asked: "If both sides say they will not start a nuclear war, why do they both continue to build more weapons?"

Never before has humankind -- mostly mankind -- had in their hands the power to destroy the total work of creation, fourteen times over, in a few moments, even accidentally. The newer weapons are greatly destabilizing, because they are either non-verifiable, like mobile SS-20's or cruise missiles that evade radar and defense

systems, or they are offensive, first strike, like MX, rather than defensive and deterrent. The military on both sides are jittery and for good reason. Once the nuclear barrier is breached, for whatever reason, even no reason, or mistake, it is bound to escalate. As a Russian scientist recently put it: "These are not weapons because weapons are to defend yourself and if you defend yourself with this weapon, you are dead." Neither," he added, "is nuclear war, war in any rational Clausewitzian sense. Wars are won, but in nuclear war, there is nothing left to win, all is death, destruction, and devastation, your country and ours and probably most others."

It has to be the worst sin, the worst blasphemy, to utterly destroy God's beautiful creation, Planet Earth, the gem of our solar system, and all we have created here, so painstakingly, in a few thousand years; all our institutions that we have labored to perfect, all learning, all science and technology, all art, all books, all music, all architecture, every human treasure, everything, but especially millions of men, women, and children, all their future and all futures, utter obliteration at worst, a return to the Stone Age at best.

It has to be utter insanity for rational creatures to have painted themselves into such a corner, to have created such a monster. But in freedom, what we have created, we can uncreate, dismantle, and we must.

It will require, most of all, hope that it can be done, the beginnings of serious, high level conversations, with creative options on the part of the super power leaders. All movement must be reversed --

downward for a change -- done mutually and done in a totally verifiable manner. This is not a Russian or American problem. It is a threat that profoundly affects every human being on earth.

Fred Kaplan, in a recent book, The Wizards of Armageddon, portrays the efforts of the intellectuals who have elaborated American nuclear policy while rotating between the Departments of Defense and State and the national think tanks. After almost 400 pages of record, he concludes:

"They performed their calculations and spoke their strange and esoteric tongues because to do otherwise would be to recognize all too clearly and constantly, the ghastliness of their contemplations. They contrived their options because without them, the bomb would appear too starkly as the thing that they had tried to prevent it from being, but that ultimately it would become if it ever were used -- a device of sheer mayhem, a weapon whose catyclismic powers no one had the faintest idea of how to control.

The nuclear strategists had come to impose order -- but in the end only chaos still prevailed." (The Wizards of Armageddon, Simon and Shuster, 1983, pp. 390-1)

Is it conceivable that universities and colleges who traditionally have been rational and objective critics of our society, local and global, can be silent in the face of the nuclear threat? Is it possible that our students can prepare to be future leaders and still not learn from us the dimensions of this threat, the moral problems, and possible solutions? It is mainly of their futures that we speak. Our lives are on the downside.

I have spoken of the pursuit of truth as our greatest moral imperative. There is no truth about the world and humankind today that does not become darkened in the shadow of the thermonuclear mushroom.

What to do? Many things. While the problem is fundamentally geo-political, politicians are mostly concerned with what their constituents are saying, especially if it is loud and clear and universal. I fully realize that our opportunities for political action far transcend that of those in controlled societies, especially behind the Iron Curtain. But even there, one finds great and, I think, sincere concern. One would have to be crazy not to be concerned. Again, as a top Russian scientist told me: "I'm really worried about your computers, and ours are worse."

Each of us and each of our institutions must do what we can do best, and there are some things we can do together. The nuclear problem involves the expertise of all our faculties and departments.

The physicians are best organized at the moment. After their international meeting last year in Cambridge University, the three American leaders, two of them Notre Dame graduates, joined three Russian medical colleagues to discuss the medical effects of nuclear war on Soviet national television.

At their Amsterdam third international meeting this year, Dr. Bernard Lown, the Harvard co-founder of IPPNW said in his message:

"We can and must instill a sense of moral revulsion to nuclear weaponry and to the Orwellian term, 'deterrence'

which is but a sanitized word for indiscriminate and colossal mass murder. Our goal should be the widest conditioning of an anti-nuclear instinct as potent as hunger. Moral arousal, I believe, will help tilt the perilously balanced scale in world affairs towards survival.

"President Eisenhower predicted that there will come a day when the people will generate such a mighty popular groundswell for peace that governments will be forced to get out of their way. Such a day is no longer remote for it is beckoned by the unleashing of the deepest forces imbedded in humankind when threatened with extinction."

(IPPNW Report, Vol. I, No. 2, p. 15)

I am presently attempting to bring worldwide scientific and religious leaders together -- making common cause for the first time since Galileo -- against the nuclear threat.

The scientific statement, signed by 36 National Academies of Sciences at the Vatican in September, 1982, is very explicit, calling for moral judgment from religious leaders and indicating some possible first steps towards the ultimate elimination of all nuclear weapons. The statement was reproduced in full in the most popular technological review in the USSR, with a circulation of 3,000,000. Something can be done, even there, if one tries.

Our students especially must learn that they are not powerless. The groundswell is there in the Freeze Movement, but this is just a first step and the whole movement needs more creative direction and focus. We have launched a new course at my University this semester involving at least ten different departments. We are also founding a new Academy of Peace at our Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Research in Jerusalem, under the Presidency of Landrum Bolling. Many other universities are similarly involved.

I must close now. I would not want the urgency of what I have just said to exemplify one moral dimension of our educational endeavor today, to overshadow -- even though it almost must -- the long range moral concerns about which I spoke earlier in this talk. As one said in another connection, "It's difficult to discuss wetlands ecology when up to one's hips in alligators," but, unfortunately, we must do all at the same time, the urgent and the long range. Indeed, if we are to shape the future, we must educate as best we can, part of which endeavor will be to concern ourselves and our students that if we act as we should, there will still be a future, despite the current run-away nuclear threat.