

Chapter 1 Introduction

Peter Wilkes

The American university is an enormously influential institution. To the top fifty or so academic establishments, government and industry have come cap in hand, a-wooing. As a result, American academia is deeply committed to an institutional marriage, with a dowry measured in millions if not billions of dollars. For major universities, that liaison has meant commitment on an unparalleled scale to research. Since the funding controls the direction the research must take, both knowledge itself (at least as measured by volume) and the university are influenced by society in general and by government in particular. In return the research-oriented university gains not only money for students and equipment but influence for its faculty. These major institutions provide an intellectual resource for all branches of government and industry. Planes leaving such places as Boston, Chicago, Oakland (near Berkeley) and Madison for Washington, D.C., are crowded with professors seeking not only funding but also influence. Professors

witness to congressional committees, deliberate with administration officials and serve on committees in national administrative departments.

A second, less dramatic opportunity for influence is available to all universities simply because they are teaching institutions. Into their halls crowd young people destined by society to be its leaders in a multitude of areas. Because students will become leaders, equality of opportunity for racial and ethnic minorities as well as for women has become an educational issue. Minorities and women know very well that the path to the boardroom and to the president's office usually begins in the university classroom. It is part of the genius of America that its universities have been opened to a far wider range of its citizens than the older, elite-oriented institutions in Europe. Today's equal opportunity programs are the logical successors of our forebears' commitment to educate all who could benefit to as high a level as possible.

With that commitment, power and influence over an entire culture were handed to those who would teach these millions. During the years when many crucial decisions of their lives are being made, young potential leaders open their minds to their teachers. Students are influenced not only by what is said but also by unstated assumptions. Professors' attitudes to life, in their public activities as well as inside the lecture room, affect young people.

Universities have been conscious of that influence from the start. In medieval Europe the Roman Catholic Church struggled to control the scholars of the great universities—and failed. It was no accident that Martin Luther was a professor, or that the English Reformation began with John Wycliffe at Oxford. When Henry VIII and his supporters financed the universities heavily, they were seeking influence and control. But the heartening feature is that such attempts invariably fail. The people who hold the purse strings of universities have rarely managed to stifle criti-

cism of themselves or their status. The religious suppression of yesterday failed. The political suppression attempted in so many parts of the world is also failing. Students are always in the vanguard of social change. The lecturers in this series are convinced that the more subtle efforts of secular suppression will also fail.

Attempts to mold university opinion fail because the academic community holds certain cultural values. Indeed, it is its essential function to safeguard the intellectual heritage against all comers. In medieval and Reformation times academics could see themselves maintaining the religious basis of truth using intellectual weapons. In the universities the "new knowledge" was seen as a means to recovering the truth from its political and superstitious accretions.

Since the eighteenth century, a profound shift in the whole idea of the role of the university has taken place. The idea of safeguarding a heritage has waned in influence and has been replaced by an intellectual defense of secular culture.

All cultures have their gods, and the god of secular culture is Man. In the secular culture of today's university every value becomes subordinated to that god. Culture itself is defended as worthwhile because it belongs to Man. The only knowledge that matters is knowledge that directly benefits or glorifies Man. The basis for morals is Man.

In spite of that, the idolatrous view of Man is rarely discussed in the university. It is imposed by implication. It is the intellectual bedrock on which much of science and the humanities rests. Students absorb it without discussion, appreciation or criticism because it is not mentioned. It is simply assumed.

The idolatry is therefore difficult to oppose. It is so pervasive that even when radicals seek to throw it down, they erect in its place a further image of the same lord.

A Christian professor in the modern secular university must oppose that secularized culture. The issue is basic to

the Christian faith. Pride of Man is the essence of sin. It represents the unattainable desire for Man to be something over against God. A Christian intellectual is therefore necessarily committed to total war with secularism. There can be no comfortable compromise.

As we have noted, the stakes in this struggle are enormous. It is not merely a battle for the soul of the university; the prize is influence over the entire culture which is the heritage of the modern university. The Christian case is so fundamental a challenge to secular assumptions that it touches every sphere of human activity. The whole secular perspective for science and its use, for human values and ethics, for what people *are* and ought to be, is different from a Christian point of view. As the old optimistic view of Man manifests its bankruptcy, Christian professors have an opportunity for leverage on the whole society. In the name of the Lord Jesus they can use their expertise to remold their specialties to conformity with a Christian world view.

The task is of course enormous. As we have seen, one must stand against the trend of educated opinion since the eighteenth century. It is therefore not surprising that most Christian professors maintain their beliefs privately or perhaps in personal witness but keep quiet in their institutions. To do that, however, is to misunderstand the situation. Simply to continue to operate silently in the secular world is to support its contention that Man is God and that God is irrelevant. Each silent Christian professor confirms for the student multitude that the beliefs of secularism are unchallenged and unchallengeable.

Yet there has never been a better time to speak than the present. As many students of the twentieth century have noted, the secular humanist view of Man has led to disaster. Human beings turn out to have feet of clay. Human beings not only contemplate the heavens but also pollute the earth. Where once wars were fought for religion and trade, now they are fought for secular ideology: Marxist proletarian

Man versus capitalist Man.

In such a context Christians have a ready audience on campus. The old liberal humanism is tinged with disillusion and many are ready to listen to the Christian alternative, an alternative far more radical than the radicals can conceive.

One group of professors on the Madison, Wisconsin, campus who had been meeting regularly for prayer felt themselves called to make some sort of public statement. The possibility was approached somewhat nervously. After all, to get a name for religious enthusiasm is not likely to enhance one's academic career. But the imperatives of our situation were clear, and in the end we could do no other.

We selected a title for the series, assigned the subjects, booked the union Great Hall (in faith asking for 200 chairs) and sought the help of Christian students in distributing posters. Each week for five successive Monday lunchtimes we were overwhelmed with student response. The seating was totally inadequate and we had to more than double the number of chairs. The floor, windowsills and stairs held the overflow.

When it was all over we came to the conviction that what we had done could be done at any university. When a group of professors, including distinguished scholars, takes the opportunity to speak out in the university, others will listen. We acknowledge that the step was a small one, but it is our hope that by many such small steps the journey to the kingdom may be made.