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**THOUGHTS ON  
THE RELATIONSHIP OF  
POLITICS AND THE ACADEMY**

“In the sphere of ultimate loyalties, universities share the confusion and unsettlement of the world at large. They have no agreed criteria by which to assess their policies, organization, teaching methods and the forms of communal life; they have not even fruitful disagreement. They tacitly refuse to take cognizance of really contentious and difficult issues. They label them ‘Dangerous, do not touch’, and thrust them out of sight. But that is a lazy and pusillanimous evasion of responsibility. They can give no light or guidance to a directionless world, so long as they are themselves directionless and are content to remain so.”

(*Sir Walter Moberly*. 1949. *The crisis in the university*. Second impression.)

The turbulent decade of the sixties drew the attention of the world and specifically of the universities to the political involvement of the university. In different academic centres all over the world, in Paris, Amsterdam and California, academics were made acutely aware of the fact that the academy is not an ivory tower and cannot be one either. This had profound implications for the traditional stance of the academy concerning the so-called neutrality of the university. In all scientific disciplines this red-hot issue had its inevitable impact. Neutrality had become suspect and involvement seemed to be the only alternative.

In Christian circles it seems generally accepted that neutrality in general and more specifically neutrality towards science, scholarship and knowledge does not exist. Three important arguments are advanced for this state of affairs:

- \* In the first place all teaching and research is value-laden.
- \* In the second place the university is bound up with society in all areas by the fact that it is involved in non-academic affairs.
- \* In the third place a university is always a part of a larger so-

ciety within which it functions and therefore it embodies at least certain fundamental values of the historical and cultural setting within which it developed.

Very little argument is needed to accept the fact that there is no such thing as a politically neutral university.

An important argument vis a vis the political neutrality of the university is the mere fact that the existence of a university within a specific political setting already implies a certain acceptance and acknowledgement of the political status quo, so that a university is obliged overtly to academically sanction, or criticize, the political order within which it exists, or to admit the fact that by its acquiescence and silence it covertly and implicitly is bound to the existing status quo. It seems as though there are only two alternatives: either a sanctioning of the political order or a critical attitude in which the fundamental premises of the political order or certain political policies are radically questioned.

Van Riessen formulated this dilemma in his lecture at the First International Conference on Christian Scholarship held in Potchefstroom in 1975 when he contrasted what he calls the "adjustment university" with the "critical university". He very aptly describes the vain and futile dialectical struggle between these two types of universities in their efforts to deliver society from its evils. In this they cannot succeed because they have both lost the guidance of the law of God for human existence.

Accepting the premise that a university cannot be neutral concerning politics, one has to find a way of defining how this inevitable political involvement should take shape. Apart from the formal questions of who should voice the viewpoint of the university, the faculty and students, or the individual academic, or some representative body of the university as a whole, the crucial questions concern the dilemma already mentioned, that of choosing between two alternative models of involvement. For the Christian university the only option should be clear from the outset: the existing political order cannot be taken for granted or accepted unconditionally and uncritically, but on the other hand

criticism of the political policies and orders which form the frame of reference of a specific society has to be conditioned by norms and criteria at least derived from a deep and fundamental insight into God's Word and His law for human societal life. For the Christian university it is therefore possible to break through the dialectic of the two alternatives: adjustment versus criticism. What certainly needs more reflection in Christian academic circles is the manner in which this breakthrough is to be established. Central to such a discussion would be the problem of academic freedom within a Christian academic context.

One avenue of approach to the problem of academic freedom is the acceptance of the fact that the university has a limited task within society which primarily concerns teaching, research and the scholarly pursuit of science and truth. Against this background there exists, therefore, a certain codified field of behaviour which rules the action and behaviour of the university. When the university acts according to these constitutive rules or allows its behaviour to be codified by a certain set of codes, many would be willing to state that this is complying with the requisites of "neutrality". In fact this is of course not neutrality, just as it is impossible for the referee to be neutral when he has the responsibility of applying the rules in a game. The university's task is thus limited to a specific codified manner of involvement in societal and political affairs: according to the built-in limitations of the scholarly and educational task of the university.

One of the more pronounced modern viewpoints concerning the relationship of the university and society is one in which the task of the university is primarily formulated as being that of social criticism. Down the ages one can trace proponents of this view but the sixties have heralded a new spate of variations on this theme. Central to this viewpoint is the conception that the university has the rôle of social conscience as its primary task.

Opposite to this conception of the role of the university within society is the classical liberal view of the university as a neutral, objective clearing house of knowledge and information, a view which has not been ousted by the modern conception of

the university with its strong accentuation on social and political involvement. In this traditional view, the relationship of the university to the society is often described as that of mirroring or reflecting the main contours of the society in which it fulfills its task. Over and against social criticism thus stands a view of the university as a social mirror. In the latter position the university's task is seen as a faithful reflection of the dominant values of the parent societies. This "mirroring" function is then often conceived in a very passive sense. The university is regarded as a microcosm of society. All the various factions, viewpoints and aspects of societal life, are then seen to be present in or represented by the university. It does not fulfill a specific role, but functions as a microcosmos in which a myriad societal functions are brought together in order to create an academic setting in which members of the greater community of the macrocosmos are prepared for their respective roles.

This view of the passive reflection of and adjustment to the status quo gives very little direction to the solution of the problem of the relationship of the university and society and the academy and politics. What it does accentuate is the fact that a university never exists in a vacuum. It is buffeted by political, social and economic forces over which it has little or no control and which permeate its whole existence. Institutions such as universities are nodal points in the society whose position reflects the structure of the social firmament in which they are encapsulated.

Although the idea of neutrality will certainly be rejected by the proponents of a Christian university, acceptance of the political involvement of the university is still an idea very much in need of attention.

Two distinct alternatives in this respect confront the Christian academic: Against the background of that argument concerning the encapsulation of the university in society it is argued on the one hand that the mere fact that the university exists within a certain society and political order already implies an involvement with the political situation and a sanctioning of the status quo. Such a point of view is represented by Wallerstein when he ar-

gues: "It is a political act for the university to support the government in its normal functions. It is a political act for the university to oppose the government. However it acts in relation to the government, the university is engaged in politics". (Wallerstein. *University in turmoil. The politics of change.* New York, 1969, p. 11).

Over and against this view there is the view of Philip M. Hauser (*Political actionism in the university. Daedalus, vol. 104, no. 1, Winter 1975, p. 265-272*) which states that the university is essentially apolitical and has a unique nonpolitical mission to perform. (Hauser, p. 270). This view is developed in conjunction with the well known Weberian thesis. This does not exclude the possibility that students and faculty members can participate in active politics or in advisory political roles in their capacity as citizens, but within the context of the university itself the student and faculty member is called to be a political "eunuch". The scholar is required to wear two different hats when acting within the limits of the university's task and when participating in political issues outside of the academic scene. In this process he should also be aware of the respective roles that he does play. (Hauser, p. 268).

This latter view is not free of problems either. The so-called apolitical character of the university becomes highly questionable when it proves that the university actually undergirds a specific political policy which makes possible its own existence and functioning. Whereas it might be possible to restrict the active involvement of students and faculty in political matters, or their explicit expression of political value judgements, to the confines of their academic roles, this still does not solve the problem of this tacit political involvement of the university with an established political order. When Hauser stresses that it is a precondition (for the fulfilling of the mission of the university) to provide open and free communications of all points of view, then the question arises as to where the boundaries of this freedom are to be located. Can all points of view be accommodated, except points of view concerning the political?

In the second instance it proves very difficult to define the margin between the areas within which the two different "hats" are worn by the academic. If he participates in politics in any manner outside of the realm of the academy, he is still equipped with his academic suit which most definitely influences his judgment although he has changed his suit to match the political "hat" which he is wearing. Furthermore he is required to act according to the constitutive rules of politics as such when participating in everyday run of the mill political activities.

It is clear that it is necessary to distinguish between an academic interested in political matters in an academic fashion (i.e. acting within the rules of the game of the academy) and the same academic participating in political issues outside of the university in the political realm and acting or being required to act according to the rules of the game called politics. Although it is the same person he is acting in two different settings which each require obedience to different sets of norms. Of course the fact that an academic is expected to be knowledgeable and trained implies that his responsibilities in the sphere of the political issues are far greater than the responsibilities of these who lack this type of training. On the other hand the mere fact of a citizen incidentally also being an academic in his other societal roles gives him no greater authority than other citizens participating in politics without the same academic training.

One fundamental fact should be recognized in this respect and that is that the political realm is one in which the politician, the ordinary citizen (who can be academically trained or otherwise) and the academician each has his own specific task and calling. And these different approaches complement one another, or at least they should complement one another in the realization of the fact that the concrete social life is far more complex than only politics or just the academy, and that these two aspects of societal life represent limited approaches to the concrete problems of society in general. And just because they are limited they not only need one another, but also have to recognize these limitations, which in practice would mean that neither one of the two spheres, according to the traditional sphere sovereignty thesis, is

allowed to claim final and absolute competence to be the sole judge of societal issues.

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