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VALUES AND THE UNIVERSITY

The role of the university in teaching human values is of major importance and enormously complicated. We have a shared concern about the widely apparent erosion of the commitment to fundamental human values within our American society. Probably we also would all agree that there should and must be ways in which our colleges and universities can constructively respond to that concern and help to restore a commitment to values. Beyond such general common ground, however, I foresee more disagreement than consensus, more complex ambiguity than clarity. The task I have set for myself is to address the problem, without hope that I can provide a simple solution, and to focus my efforts on the most basic issues as I perceive them. I will strive for the utmost in candor and objectivity, while knowing that doing so may bring at least as much discomfort as satisfaction—and perhaps more irritation than pleasure.

The value system on which the American society is founded derives absolutely from the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, and that tradition has been losing force throughout the twentieth century. A chasm the size of the Grand Canyon separates the religious orthodoxy of our founding fathers—that white male minority of landowners and professionals which provided the leadership that created the United States—from the widespread agnosticism or religious indifference among our current population. The Judeo-Christian religious tradition is not dead, nor necessarily dying; it may still encompass most of our citizens, but it is ceasing to be the prevailing norm to which all Americans can appeal or repair with certainty. That is fact—like it or not—and it will remain fact unless and until a religious revival sweeps over all of us. I can make no prophesy as to whether, when, or how such a religious revival might occur, but I do not anticipate it in short order.

Volumes are required to analyze the decline of religion in the United States, so only a few brief thoughts are in order here. The power of religious commitment within a society depends in part on the effectiveness of organized religion. In twentieth-century America, church and temple have been progressively undermined by material affluence: a population suffused with possessions and creature comforts idolizes both—idolizes literally in the Biblical sense—and is concerned less with the spirit

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than with the flesh. Religious commitment also depends in part on the family for vital reinforcement. In twentieth-century America, the family structure is disintegrating. Obvious symptoms include sexual permissiveness; divorce; the impact of geographic mobility on the dispersion of the extended family, a mobility that reduces communal existence only to the so-called nuclear family; and the tendency for parents to assign secondary priority to child-rearing in favor of the pursuit of material gain and social pleasure outside the home. It is less well understood how profoundly the family structure is assaulted by the drastic impact of the explosion of technological developments. For example, communications technology is aimed at individual rather than communal consumption (telephone, television, computers, radio, and printed materials all target individual use within the home); communal housekeeping chores have been replaced by automation; and the resulting abundance of leisure time tends to be available more for individual than for communal activity. The revolution in food preparation and consumption is eroding not only the formality, length, and symbolic importance of the family meal, but is in part replacing dining altogether with snacking and grazing.

Religious commitment is further eroded by widespread cynicism and skepticism among the American people. Cynicism derives on the one hand largely from the perceived gap between the absolute value standards that religion ordains, and on the other hand from the visible departure from these standards in the behavior, not only of most people, but even of persons in authority—not only public but also religious authority. In a society whose discipline has given way to self-indulgence, there is bound to be cynicism concerning absolute ideals of behavior that are visibly and almost universally inapplicable to everyday behavior. As for skepticism, this would appear to be the inevitable by-product of a society whose overwhelming material success derives from the application of human reason to the solution of prac-

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tical problems. The scientific method, proceeding as it does from observation, to hypothesis, to proof or disproof, encourages curiosity rather than faith. This is not to say that science and faith are incompatible—they are not. But we are not at a point, at least not yet, where science engenders faith. Instead, a spirit of inquiry questions established truth, including religious truth.

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If these observations are descriptively accurate—and they are not intended either as blame or praise—they lead to the conclusion that the erosion of a religious commitment creates a crisis of values in a society whose fundamental values stem from religious commitment. There appears to be little argument but that our American society confronts such a crisis of values. A society bereft of common values is in trouble. The lack of a universally accepted value system is a disease that tends to beget social disintegration. A society that perceives itself as sick with a crisis of values therefore discovers itself as threatened and seeks to cure itself with the restoration of a value system. Most naturally, however, the need to restore a common system of social values literally involves a restoration, i.e., not so much an attempt to forge a consensus around a new system, but rather an attempt to reimpose the traditional value system of the past. If that value system derived originally from religious faith and belief—as ours did, if it has decayed because of a decline in faith and belief—as ours has, if a recovery of faith and belief proves elusive—as is also true so far in our case, then the attempt to restore it without faith and belief requires acts of authority—it is imposed rather than revived—and the system of values becomes political ideology to be obeyed, rather than a creed to which faith and belief voluntarily subscribe. Marxism-Leninism offers a striking example of a value system based on an imposed political ideology, as did Hitler's National Socialism. A special problem for American society, however, is that the traditional democratic value system rooted in faith and belief and available for restoration is incompatible with imposition as political ideology by public authority. In so many words, any effort to make traditional American values mandatory would destroy traditional American values.

What then can we do? If nothing is done, our society is likely to decay further into the chaos of undisciplined self-indulgence. We can await—and many of us can work for—a religious revival. But even those of us who

believe that such a revival is the best and only answer will probably have to realize that matters are likely to get much worse for much longer before it occurs. We can try to restore order by imposing a value system politically, but such action would destroy the very value system that created our society and that most of us would rather preserve. Can we create a new system of values that is compatible with our tradition and sufficiently attractive so that we can subscribe, rather than be required to submit, to it? If we wish to consider this alternative, then a powerful potential reposes in our educational system. And so we turn—at last!—to education, and to higher education in particular.

It is of course time that education in the United States be generally separated altogether from religion, except for schools and colleges operated directly by religious organizations. This American situation, due to the separation of church and state provided by the Constitution, represents a sharp break with earlier practice and with the continuing norm in many other nations. Until the American situation was established, most other societies tended toward patterns of governance in which church and state formed a united establishment, and in which schools and universities served that establishment in terms of both its secular and religious dimensions. American colleges originally were private institutions formed under religious auspices, although publicly chartered. The evolution of public colleges and universities—largely in the nineteenth century—led to the same separation from religion that obtained in the public schools and, over time, played a role in the gradual separation of much of independent American higher education from its church-related origins. The modern American

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university, characterized above all by post-baccalaureate programs leading to doctoral and professional degrees and by an explicit commitment to scientific research, came into being only toward the end of the nineteenth century and is largely a product of the twentieth century. As an institution, the contemporary American university exhibits the productive application of scientific method in both research and teaching, and that scientific method itself is rooted in academic freedom, defined primarily as the unfettered ability to pursue inquiry even when such inquiry and its results challenge established dogma. Initially, in fact, academic freedom principally meant freedom from religious orthodoxy. We have already noted that the scientific method and religious faith are not incompatible per se, but it is true that science can succeed only on the basis of free inquiry and that free inquiry is wholly incompatible with any notion that its findings must conform to preconceived absolutes

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including religious dogma. The insistent need of science for freedom of inquiry therefore inevitably produces conflict with dogmatism, religious and otherwise.

It does not follow, however, that separation from religion and rejection of religious dogma as a constraint on academic freedom result in an American university institution that is value free. Quite to the contrary, the contemporary American university is profoundly committed to a value system rooted in reverence for human reason. Admittedly, this value system has seldom been articulated and, as a result, is more real than apparent.

There appear to be at least three interrelated reasons for this lack of articulation, of which the third may be the most interesting and relevant to our present concerns. First, the rationalist value system of the contemporary university has been taken for granted as self-evident; second, its results have been so astonishingly productive that energy has been channeled into its application rather than explication; and third, it appears to overlap so substantially with traditional American values that it has largely escaped both serious challenge as well as explicit separate recognition. Insofar as the university value system rooted in reason is committed to the ability of each person to pursue the exercise of reason to his or her limits; to freedom of action within rational bounds; to the application of reason to the solution of problems and settlement of differences and against the arbitrary or unreasonable exercise of power and authority; and to distinctions among persons based exclusively on rational merit—to that extent, ingredients of that value system

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY SEAL

One hundred and one years ago, in 1885, the seal of The Johns Hopkins University was adopted by the University's trustees. In its symbolic content, it looks backward to Lord Baltimore, the founder of the State of Maryland, and forward, via the globe and the two open books, to the goals of the University. Its motto, *Veritas Vos Liberabit*, expresses a hope, propounded often and transgressed almost as often, for millennia.

The following is excerpted from *A History of the University Founded by Johns Hopkins* by J. C. French and published by The Johns Hopkins Press, Baltimore, in 1946:

“The adoption of a corporate seal for the University was long delayed. On April 21, 1876, the Board asked Edward Stabler, of Sandy Spring, Maryland, to design a seal for them; and they sent along tentative suggestions of their own. For some reason nothing came of this, or of the plan considered in 1879 of using a simple circle bearing in its center the date 1876 and around the periphery the name and place of the institution. The design finally accepted was the result of proposals sent by Clayton C. Hall to the Somerset Herald, Stephen Tucker, Esq., of London. By combining the arms of Maryland, which embody those of the family of Lord Baltimore, with symbols of learning this English expert created ‘an heraldic picture of a university situated in the State founded by Lord Baltimore.’ The emblems which represent the University are open books and a terrestrial globe—‘indicative of literary and scientific studies.’ These objects are placed on an azure background on the upper part of a shield bearing the Baltimore arms. This shield is hung upon a bough of oak and is surrounded by a border bearing the corporate name of the institution, which, as its members have sometimes to be reminded, includes the article and is not merely ‘Johns Hopkins University.’ All too often it becomes in popular speech ‘John Hopkins University.’



“A last detail of the seal is the motto, *Veritas Vos Liberabit*, lettered on a scroll below the shield. Of this motto President Gilman remarked that it had been in use since the organization of the University, though by what official act it was chosen is not now clear. It is, of course, a part of the Latin text of the Gospel of St. John VIII, 32, which the Authorized Version translates, Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free. Among President Gilman's personal papers there is a sheet on which are listed the various forms in which the Latin phrase occurs in New Testament translations; and this suggests that the selection of an appropriate motto may have been left in his hands.

“The seal was officially adopted by the Trustees on December 7, 1885. A resolution approved April 5, 1886 authorized its use on publications of the University, on journals receiving financial aid from the Board, and on published papers which had ‘the approbation of the Academic Council.’ Its employment without the consent of the Trustees was forbidden.”

seem to correspond effectively to the religiously derived human values encapsulated both in the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. There are two particularly interesting aspects of this overlap between the traditional American value system and the rational values that constitute the foundation upon which the contemporary American research university has been built and operates. The first is obvious: The spirit of freedom, individualism, tolerance, and diversity that infuses the religiously derived traditional American value system has provided a splendidly supportive environment for the evolution and spectacular flowering of the rational research-driven American university as we see it today. The second is not so obvious: The supportive existence of traditional American values made it largely unnecessary for the American university to articulate its own rational value system, which in effect has thrived primarily as a set of unchallenged assumptions within the larger context of the American tradition.

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It follows, however, that decay in the traditional American value system presents special problems for the American university. This is not merely theory. The challenge to inherited values that erupted in the 1960s—prompted by the trauma of Vietnam—inevitably manifested itself particularly in the American university, where so many of the young who spearheaded that challenge were gathered. And—confronted by rebellious discontent and anger based in part on rejection of established values—the American university proved to be visibly vulnerable: It found appeals to the American tradition ineffectual, and it was unprepared to articulate and assert its own rational value system in response. As a citadel of rational inquiry, the university found itself for a protracted period unable to cope with unreason among students and, worse, with matching unreason among some members of the faculty as well. As it turned out, the university's omission of articulation of its own value system produced a lack of internalization of rational values even within the faculty.

Where then does this rather bleak analysis lead us? As part of the recovery from recent trauma, the American university—and the colleges that model themselves on the university institution and, perhaps ultimately, the schools whose teachers prepare in colleges and universities—has begun to articulate and promote the rational value system it requires for its own self-preservation. This rational system of values may be a wholly inadequate

substitute for the religiously based system of traditional American values; but at least it corresponds to that system to a significant degree, is not in opposition to it, and is preferable to no value system at all. It is not reasonable—and therefore not practicable—to expect the American university to promote a religiously derived value system spontaneously because an institution so committed to rationalism will not be attracted to religious orthodoxy. As for the teaching of American values as a mandatory obligation, that demand would transmute the American tradition into political ideology and therefore would be self-defeating, as previously noted.

There is, however, a more hopeful possibility. It may arise from that very triumph of reason that characterizes the enormous success of the American research university in mastering new science and technology and in pushing toward the limits of human reason. More is happening in the contemporary American university than the beginnings of the articulation of a rational system of values. For one thing, the fragmentation of knowledge into ever more complex specialized disciplines that has marked the university for the past several decades is beginning to be transformed by a new effort to restore coherence, to achieve some reintegration. At this time, almost all the new initiatives in the university are multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary, and they strive to recombine earlier fragmentation. Even more significant is the awakening realization that the limits of human reason are real. To cite just one example, we have learned more about the functioning of the brain in the last score of years than all of humankind knew in the past, and we know more as well about the human mind, whose logic can be programmed into computers and labeled artificial intelligence. But we still know very little about the ways in which brain and mind interact, and we have already learned that logic cannot program human judgment, emotion, intuition, and perception. Thus it may be that the triumph of reason in the university brings us back to confront anew the mystery and grace of the human spirit. And it may even be that this emerging confrontation will lead the best and brightest of the most

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reasoned minds to seek old values in new forms, to rediscover with new force that reason and spirit are as indissolubly linked in the human mind as teaching and research in the university, and to strive anew for spiritual values that transcend the limits of reason. If this be so, then our society may be closer to the full recovery of a value system than is now apparent, and then our universities may foster and enhance the human spirit as much as they already endow human reason.