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THE VALUE OF A SECULAR EDUCATION

C. G. Martin

'And Moses was instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians; and he was mighty in his words and works'.

ACTS 7:22 (R.V.)

What is the purpose of studies—apart of course from the acquisition of the necessary technical knowledge to equip the student for his life-work? The real purpose is above all to train his mind, so that he may be capable of forming an intelligent and responsible judgment, and of making honest criticisms, both in those matters with which he will have to deal professionally and in his life as a citizen. He must know what words mean, and be able to use them correctly: he must see that words are vehicles of ideas, see that human notions and ideas, including his own, are imperfect and incomplete (he knows by experience how much he has learnt from others): and he must see that there is a truth of things, beyond and above his own ideas and the ideas of others. This is to be an educated man; and our society can be in a healthy state only when it has a sufficiency of such men to lead it. The vice of the spirit of 'the party' is that it deliberately rejects this training up of a sound and responsible judgment, and seeks instead a conformity with the party aims and propaganda. (*see G. Hebert, Fundamentalism and the Church of God.*)

'Secular' is an unhappy word, conjuring up as it does the antithesis between the common round, and the 'religious' exercises of the weekend. For the Christian, of course, as George Herbert reminds us, 'all may of Thee partake', and there is no part of life common or unclean. To make this paper clear, however, we need a word to describe that education whose content does not demand Christian conviction for its appreciation, and whose form does not demand Christian vocabulary or world view. It is, in this country, to a great extent directed and administered by people whose convictions are not necessarily Christian and whose aims therefore do not include the will and purpose of God. Such an education will be labelled 'secular'. Presumably, on this definition, even Christian schools would find a lot of their time devoted to 'secular' education, and would have many pupils who profit from this without being brought to Christian conviction.

What, then, are the merits of a secular education? How much of one's life should be devoted to it? Ought we to stop as soon as we have mastered the 'three R's', so that all our time can be devoted to 'honest trades' and the witness of the gospel? or must we press on to the Ph.D. before we have more than a little spare-time-preaching to offer? To some extent these questions will be answered by our attitude to or assessment of the basic

aims of life. Are we, in Carey's phrase, to 'preach the gospel, and cobble shoes to pay expenses', or are we to spend our time like Kepler 'thinking God's thoughts after Him' in research? May we bear our witness in the world by entering its work and worry, meeting its need and nonsense, and showing the love and power of Christ in all these mundane situations? For the Christian, the basic aim is to please his Lord, Whose will he must find by use of the means of Scripture, prayer, meditation and counsel of others.

The merit of secular education to the individual

Consider first the merits of secular education to the individual. These may again be considered under the heads of the 'getting', and the 'having'. The 'getting' involves a number of years training, endured with varying degrees of patience, boredom, enjoyment and profit according to the attitude he takes. Much education is unfortunately so highly geared to school-leaving examinations that some pupils (often with parental approval) become human tape-recorders able to reproduce correct answers at examination time. Lessons which do not contribute to this aim are regarded as a waste of time. A happy number manage to resist this pressure and find much of their learning of real interest and enjoyment for its own sake. To them it yields the manly joy of achievement, and the thrill of discovery of mental and manual faculties and of new areas upon which to employ them. The acquisition of factual knowledge goes hand in hand with the development of critical capacities. The student becomes aware of his own growing ability to make judgments of value, to stand by his judgments, and thus learn personal responsibility. All this takes place in community, so he learns to realise his individuality, and the many other types of personality with which he is surrounded, and to take his place in the community with good grace, making his own contribution and accepting the contribution of others. In the wider community he learns his own limitations and his own potentialities. He meets those who are better (and worse) equipped in various directions. He learns to communicate with others, to respect divergent views sincerely held while at the same time diverging from them, and to express his own views with clarity and charity. Such an education can be a valuable learning of the virtues of humility, a respect for authority and honest learning, self-discipline and the subordination of present goods to future goods. He may also find wide scope for the practice of personal honesty and integrity, and love and concern towards others. It may be not all readers will recognise their own schooldays in this lyrical description—it could, for all that, be like Turner's sunsets, "what you would like to see".

If the 'getting' is anything like this, what of the 'having'? The 'having' gives both confidence and humility. He knows both the possibilities and the limitations of his own endeavour. With a trained mind he can approach a given situation, analyse it, collect relevant facts and data, and make some judgment upon the contribution of others. With humble respect for truth he will often feel that any attempt at solution is incomplete, but he will at least provide a ground for responsible action in the given situation. His

training in expression will enable him to communicate his ideas with clarity and conviction. He will also be able and accustomed to relate each situation and branch of experience to life as a whole.

To some the last paragraph will sound horribly like Aristotle's 'man of practical wisdom', calculating, aloof, correct. To others it may sound hopelessly academic and removed from the factory floor. It is intended however, to be readable in the context of any walk of life. 'Mental training', 'respect for truth', 'communication' may vary in the cases of plumber talking to his mate, salesman to customer, don to undergraduate, but in every field 'responsible action' is urgently necessary and these three components (no doubt among others) may be discerned. For Christian audience it may hardly be necessary to add that God's full purpose in man will be seen when 'mental training' is matched by 'every thought subject to Christ', the 'truth' to include a world-view in which Christ is pre-eminent, and 'responsibility' to be towards Christ and not only one's neighbour. It may well be necessary to state clearly that the additional factors mentioned are not divinely guaranteed to operate miraculously, alone, where the other factors have been neglected or abused. The indwelling Spirit makes the secular education holy, not obsolete, or unnecessary.

The merit of secular education to society

Action from reason and conviction rather than from hunch and mood is likely to promote stability. Respect for truth and humble openness of mind will promote better conditions for the solution of social problems than superstitious or arrogant tradition. So charms give way to prophylactic medicine in the control of epidemics; ECT treatment supersedes Bedlam for some mental disorders. Where the solution to a given problem is in doubt, progress is most likely to be made where there is mutual respect for sound learning, and free, clear communication of ideas humbly put forward in the common interest. Also by the careful, disciplined, recording of the experiments, hopes, successes, failures of each generation, those who follow may learn, and 'standing on the shoulders of giants' see further. It may well be said that unregenerate man is so vitiated by sin that this picture can be true only with the indwelling Spirit shedding the love of God abroad. It is true that those in whom the Spirit works will have the greater contribution to make, but it is not divinely guaranteed that they will make this contribution without the development of potential that comes through secular education.

The merit of secular education to the Church

The Church's job is to offer spiritual sacrifices to God, and to show forth His praises to the world (1 Pet. 2), to know the abiding presence of Christ while making 'disciples of all nations'. The individual's personal committal to Christ as Saviour and Lord is something he does alone, each in his time for himself. But the knowledge of the Christ to Whom he is committed may be broadened and enriched by the heritage of the past. Writings and liturgy may enshrine the spiritual insights and experiences of generations of worshipping believers, and we in our turn are responsible

to deliver to those who follow that which we also received. A trained mind is no barrier to the humble understanding of divine truth. An ability to convey ideas by accurate words is no bar to the proclamation of the gospel, or the instruction of the faithful. A respect for truth, and the ability to relate the part to the whole, will promote humility and worship in the face of Christ Who is the truth, and the One by Whom and for Whom all things exist. Many would say that the Church to-day could do with more 'responsibility', greater 'respect for truth', a wider relation of the various parts of experience, and certainly a clearer manner of communication. These are tools of the trade that can be gained by secular education. How the tools are used depends on the dedication of the holder to his Master. If the charge "we have filled the pulpits with degrees and emptied the pews by degrees" is true, the fault is not with the degrees but the men that held them. Wesley's Oxford training did not give him what he got at the Aldersgate Street Meeting House, but was very useful to him in employing that experience. Moses' training did not teach him what he learned at the Bush, but was certainly a factor in his becoming the founder under God of the Jewish religion and nation, from whom, as according to the flesh, is the Christ.

THE ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

THE 1965 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING OF THE CHRISTIAN BRETHERN RESEARCH FELLOWSHIP WILL BE HELD ON SATURDAY, 30th OCTOBER, 1965, IN LONDON. AS IN 1964, THERE WILL BE A PERIOD OF OPEN DISCUSSION FOR MEMBERS, AND A SESSION OPEN TO THE PUBLIC, AT WHICH EMINENT SPEAKERS ARE EXPECTED TO BE PRESENT.