

### THE PLIGHT OF THE HUMANITIES

It is because of the vital role that our universities play in the life of a nation that I am concerned with the problem, "the plight of the humanities in our universities." It is becoming a known fact that subjects commonly associated in the public mind with cultivation and learning have been crowded out of the curricula or have lost their traditional meaning. This sad situation affects not only the nature of the university's function but the quality of its product. "The plight of the humanities" has involved the sciences as well, and the whole question has of late been the subject of much discussion.

However, not everyone is convinced of the existence of such a problem. Some regard the disappearance of the humanities as inevitable in a practical age and the practical man may say: "Why rescue them?" Yet at the same moment he may well be asking: "Why can't my staff draft a lucid memorandum or an intelligible letter?" It is easy to miss the close relation between these two questions. It is easy to forget that the liberal arts provide not the decoration but the fabric itself. The purpose of such great subjects as history, philosophy and literature is to teach the student how to think, to train his mind, cultivate his judgment and taste and to give him the capacity to express himself with clarity and precision. Nothing can be more practical than that.

Humanistic studies do not belong only to the faculty of liberal arts but should pervade the professional schools as well. They should be the nucleus of the entire university. One of the functions of a university is to train persons for the liberal professions, but a liberal profession is "liberal" only because it includes education in the liberal arts. A professional school without the humanities is little more than a technical institute. Here, our practical man may again ask: "Why burden a doctor, lawyer or engineer with training in the academic luxuries? Why ask him to make useless digressions into the humanities?" The answer is that the liberal arts, properly taught, make an able doctor, engineer or lawyer still more able in the practice of his profession. It gives the professional man the breadth of view which enables him to see his professional task in a more Christian way.

A similar neglect of the humanities is observable in



many courses in pure science. Although rigid training in the methods of research has been intensified, the disciplines of the humanities have been steadily reduced. The serious results that follow when such is the case are demonstrated by complaints that too many scientists are merely glorified technicians, lacking any broad understanding of the field in which they labor and unable to bring a sound critical judgment on the results of their efforts. The same evil is observable in the field of social sciences as well.

Moreover where the humanities are still taught, they seem to be losing their traditional character. It is pointed out that the classics have been taken over by the philologists, that history is becoming a branch of sociology, that philosophy is under the shadow of psychology and that the study of English literature is losing its power to encourage good writing and wise reading. This is the true plight of the humanities. It is not so much that they have been deserted as that they have lost their way. Their neglect, serious as it is, is less serious than their misuse.

It is encouraging to note that there is some evidence of late that some serious minded people are looking for a remedy of the problem of the humanities. His Excellency the Governor General, Rt. Hon. Vincent Massey, in his address at the University of Toronto centenary celebrations last summer stated: "The neglect of the humanities is doubtless not a cause but a symptom of an age yielding to the delights of materialism. But any symptom which aggravates the sickness as this one does must be treated as a malady in its own right. The treatment is obvious. It is for the universities now so to use their traditional freedom that they may resume their universal function. They should not necessarily cut off or curtail any useful activity. They should rather strive to redress the balance, to restore a true perspective, to define with clarity and firmness what are the essential values in education as distinct from training."

In conclusion although there is no easy remedy, at least something can be done to restore to those impractical subjects, so called, the respect too long refused them in a practical age.

—EUGENE KENNY, 54.

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