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# Optimism and Academic Responsibility

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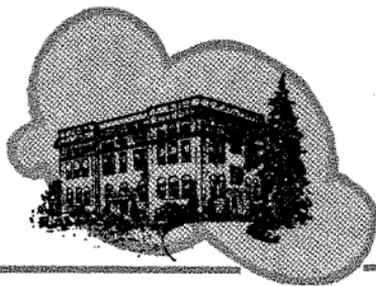
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*"Christ it was who had enlightened me, that gave me his light to believe in, and gave me hope, which is himself, revealed himself in me, and gave me his spirit and gave me his grace, which I found sufficient in the deeps and in weakness."*

Journal, George Fox, 1647

## Optimism and Academic Respectability

BY DONALD MCNICHOLS, DEAN

Tomorrow's leadership is training now in the liberal arts centers of the nation. It is responsibility of these centers to help these young men and women develop those attitudes which will eventuate in their greatest possible contribution to the world. The liberal arts need to reveal the *optimistic elements*, in its interpretation of the world. Young people need to know that optimism is academically respectable in the best of the arts and sciences, that this attitude is tenable in the light of the finest in contemporary learning.

There is a new interest today in certainty. In part it springs from reestablishment of old bases of faith and in part from new discoveries. A brief glance backward reveals partially why this is true; it shows that certitude was not destroyed from facts, but from methods of investigation.

Various terms have been employed to describe the mind of the twentieth century, all of them simply expressing varying degrees of pessimism: skeptical, cynical, disillusionment.

It is logical that a negative factor must exist in the inquiry stage of investigation, for in the words of Northrop, ". . . inquiry does not start without a problem, and the presence of a problem means that the traditional beliefs are in question." He does not infer that the traditional beliefs will necessarily be found in error. The negative factor is in its truest use an open mind and not a skepticism. A skeptical attitude sells out traditional beliefs too cheaply.

The liberal arts attempt to convey a history of man's ideas, and it should teach a student that his greatest danger in the quest for truth lies in improperly interpreting fact. The nearest that man can approach truth is an interpretation of what he has observed and experienced. Truth remains constant, dependable, consistent; man's apprehension is partial, fluctuating. We say, "This was true yesterday, but false today." But accurately observed it would be corrected to state, "Yesterday's interpretation disagrees with today's discoveries."

This concept and attitude as presented is fragmentary and thus open to objection, yet certainty can rest upon the knowledge that truth is constant, Man's knowledge is pieced together from his accumulated experiences. Scholarship owes a great debt to modern science, for it seeks to train observation and interpretation to greater accuracy and this is resulting in the breakdown of those discrepancies which in part gave rise to an era of doubt.

On the other hand the student should be cautioned against the, "Whatever is, is right", type of optimism. This attitude actually is not an optimism at all, but a shouting in the dark. Its adherents are fearful of exploration lest they be shown in error; consequently, they prefer to remain blindly fearful.

The liberal arts should remember, first, in scholarship the only fruitful and satisfying method lies within the willingness to inquire. Second, the only fruitful attitude toward this activity and life is with basic affirmations of God, the universe, and man. Third, these appear now to be compatible in the finest sense, therefore, academically admissable.

The period following the first World War and stretching through the twenties came to be identified as "The Waste Land" as named from T. S. Eliot's monumental treatment of the Holy Grail theme applied to his own day. Eliot despaired of reaching the ideal, life for him reached out as a kind of hallucination in which, "There is no water but only rock." In this decade men doubted and denied the moral and artistic standards of the preceding generation. They had been swept into an attitude of futility, for in their desolation men could only see blind forces spelling out their destiny.

The economic crisis of the thirties with its various voices shouting frankly proletarian points of view attempted to inaugurate a new view of man. He was capable of controlling the forces about him, yet this view which was more strongly propaganda than comprehension ebbed away into a negativism during the forties. The voices of this period have aptly been identified by the title of Horace Gregory's book of poems *Chorus for Survival*.

Since World War II, writers have demonstrated a willingness to turn from blind action to a quest for certitude. It is true that many of them, such as Robert Lowell and Roy Campbell directed their attention toward religious contemplation; however, the stream of faith was swollen largely from the confluence of many sources as each found reason to be optimistic. Ironically, the same sources, namely the sciences, which a hundred years earlier doubted the friendliness of the universe toward man, now supplied a basis for faith.

The fresh flow of articles and books on faith and certainty attest to a renewed optimism. Although this movement includes religionists, its freshest insights stem from other fields of learning. It must not be inferred that each group rests its attitude upon the same foundations, or that all are in agreement, but the significance of the new point of view is greater because its sources represent diverse fields of investigation.

Ralph W. Sockman's new book *How to Believe* and Dwight Stevenson's publication *Faith Takes a Name* are

wishes a reading list of respected scholars who are affirming trust in the order of things.

The liberal arts program must, among its areas of preparing youth, supply them with a faith to live by. There is no reason for it to rest wholly upon authoritarian principles, rather it should emerge also from an understanding of truth and its interpretation. There has been fear in some circles of following Tennyson's advice:

To follow knowledge like a sinking star,  
Beyond the utmost bonds of human thought,

but from knowledge has come the new impetus and will to believe. Science with its insistence upon accurate observation declined to draw conclusions until its experiments permitted a high degree of probability. This probability now seems to find the universe friendly toward man.

The specific contribution of the liberal arts should be that of supplying youth with a proper attitude in following knowledge. Its function is that of a guide, hence is true teaching. In some instances students are taught to fear thorough scrutiny—as if truth were to be feared. Later when these same students discovered certain dogmas taught them in this atmosphere to be untenable, the entire structure of their confidence collapsed. It is much wiser to school youth in properly initiating inquiry.

What should be one's attitude in investigation? Bacon insisted that all preconceived ideas must be put away before one initiates inquiry; however, today he is regarded as having fallen into the same limitation of pure induction as did Aristotle who lacked predicative power. Decartes too feared the traditional beliefs and sought to remove them by an intellectual doubt. Later, such men as Morris Cohen and Ernest Nagel advocated the hypothesis within the inquiry; this was a step in the direction of entering an inquiry with certain assumptions as guides, even though these might require continuous revisions in the light of newly discovered evidence.

among the most current religious voices to present a faith in God.

The practitioners of mental health resolve doubt psychologically, as something within. Such popular books as *The Mature Mind* by Harry Overstreet and Bonero Overstreet's *Understanding Fear* are being followed by a joint effort soon to appear, *The Mind Alive*. *The Saturday Review* indicates that it too is a treatment for maladjustment through advocating a "give and take" in life with the inference that one can surely win.

Science and philosophy are adding to this growing insistence upon faith by providing provocative and intelligible interpretations of the universe whose implications are optimistic on behalf of men. Scientist George R. Harrison of MIT gave the Sterne Lecture last year at Phillips Academy, Andover, and he spoke on "Faith and the Scientist." *The Atlantic* published the text of his address in its issue for December, 1953, thereby giving it wider circulation. Mr. Harrison's argument for faith rests upon a belief in the fundamental stability of man in nature. Said Mr. Harrison, "The universe is based on ordered progress, not on chaotic change." Science, through its continuous observation of our world, calls attention to the stable elements, thereby revealing a reasoned basis for faith.

*The Atlantic* is currently publishing three excerpts from Lucian Price's book *Dialogues of Whitehead*, under the caption, "To Live Without Certitude." Alfred North Whitehead is quoted in this work as saying, "Here we are with our finite beings and physical senses in the presence of a universe whose possibilities are infinite, and even though we may not apprehend them, those infinite possibilities are actualities."

This scant reference to current writing is inconclusive as evidence that optimism is becoming academically respectable for the first time in nearly a century. But the skeptical can check the new publication list and the periodical index if he

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## CALENDAR

- March 14—Choir Concerts, 3:00 p. m., Hillsboro, Oregon; 7:45 p. m., Camas, Washington.
- 21—Choir Concerts, 3:00 p. m., Marion, Oregon; 8:00 p. m., Willamette United Presbyterian Church, Shedd, Oregon.
- 25—7:00 p. m. to 10:00 p. m., Alumni Fun Night and Mid-Year Business Meeting. (Basketball game, buffet supper, business meeting, and talk "Inner and Outer Sanctums" by Dr. Arthur O. Roberts).
- 26-April 5—Choir tour through Washington, Oregon, and Idaho.
- 26—4:00 p. m. through April 6, 8:00 a. m., Spring Vacation.
- April 16-17—8:00 p. m., Wood-Mar Hall Auditorium, Drama, "The Vigil" by Ladislav Fodor.
- 18—3:00 p. m., Home Concert, Choir, Newberg Friends Church.
- May 1—May Day.
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