

The Function of a University



Speech before the John Dewey Society of Yale University, October 21,
1957

Let me begin by sketching in a few assumptions—all of them, I like to think, about matters on which there should be no disagreement between Professor Weiss and myself:

(1) I assume we are talking primarily about the university as both of *us* know it best—that is, of the American university in its typical present form (Columbia and California and Harvard and Illinois, not Notre Dame, or Southern Baptist University, or the University of Utah with its special relationship to the Latter Day Saints).

And I assume, second, without in any way prejudging the relevance or importance of the statement for our purposes here (but merely by way of definition), that the crucial change that has come over that typical American university in the past century—crucial in the sense that we can no longer regard as typical those universities in which no such change has occurred—has to do with the relation of the university to the Christian religion. I think it probable that the typical American university of a century ago *did*—to quote a recent letter to the *News*—take it for granted that universities and churches “both witness to the one final authority of truth,” that is, one and the same final authority of truth, and that the typical American university today does not—so that, in a sense in which its predecessor was not, it is an “open forum in which any honestly-held opinion is entertained.” (I stress the words “in a sense in which its predecessor was not,” because I by no means agree that it is that kind of forum really.) To put it otherwise, and in the language of another’s recent letter in the same correspondence, I assume that the typical American university today does not “slant” its teaching or research in the direction of Christian belief—and that, again in the language of that letter, any move to restore the typical university of 100 years ago would be

widely regarded, and on by no means unreasonable grounds, as "a step backward into bigotry."

(3) I assume that we could engage in no less profitable activity here this evening than to discuss the *merits* of that change—as contrasted with, say, the *precise* character of it, or the question whether, if it be so far-reaching as some people suppose, the change poses some problems that are receiving insufficient attention. My own view is that the battle that might have prevented the change, assuming, *arguendo*, it should have been prevented, would have had to be fought not in the university but out in American society itself, where, like it or not, the teaching function of the Churches has gone through some bad innings. Those who deplore the change, and feel a vocation to undo it, and think they can *undo* it by rearguard actions fought within the typical university itself, are for my money wasting their time; I for one hold no brief for them. In an age when Theodore Green can write, as he does in his recently-published book, "America has become a country half-Christian, half-secular," the Christians *cannot* expect to call the turns at the universities in the way their great-grandparents did.

(4) I assume, in that background, that our prime task this evening is to identify those issues concerning the future of the typical American university that are worth talking about; *and* that an issue is *not* worth talking about unless (a) there is enough genuine disagreement about it to provide fuel for discussion, and (b)—here I repeat myself a little—unless it is the kind of issue that involves water still this side of the dam. I do *not* profess to know with any certainty what these issues are; and I shall be pleased with our discussion this evening if we do no more than identify them.

(5) I assume, finally, that there are two promising places to look for such issues, namely: (a) the general range of questions relating to the function of the university that men have actually fallen out over in recent years; and (b) what I am going to call the official literature of our topic—the books, the articles, the lectures, and commencement addresses in which accredited spokesmen for the typical American university undertake to communicate to others that university's picture of itself. Under (a) we can, as it seems to me, fix upon at least the following: the continuing controversy in recent years over the loyalty oaths imposed by certain state legislatures; the question whether there are *any* circumstances in which a congressional investigating

committee might properly look into what is going on at our universities; the whole question of the propriety of eliminating Communists and Communist-sympathizers from the faculties of our universities, and the kindred question as to the grounds on which, once the decision to eliminate them had been made, the executioner's axe was to be wielded; and, finally, the question—let me state it as carefully as possible—as to the status of the restrictions imposed by the Government of the United States upon normal channels of communication among scholars in different countries. These *are* questions on which I can imagine Professor Weiss and myself as having held rather different views in recent years; but most if not all of them I would favor excluding from tonight's discussion because they are water on the wrong side of the dam: we are not, in our time, going to see Communists back on the faculties of our universities; we are not going to see Communists excluded from our faculties any the more hesitantly because some say they are being eliminated as conspirators not heretics; and we are not going to see any successful challenge to the Government's power to interfere with scholarly communications in the interests of national security; at most we might expect an occasional new flare-up of the loyalty-oath controversy, and of the issue concerning congressional committees; but even those are not lively issues at the present time, and I earnestly hope—as I am sure Professor Weiss does—that we have heard the last of them. But I feel quite otherwise about the grounds upon which the more vocal academic spokesmen in these controversies adopted their positions—about, if you like, the state of mind they revealed concerning the relation between the university and the broader society of which it is a part. So, too, though there is considerable overlap, with what I have called the official pronouncements about the kind of "freedom" (I can sidestep the word no longer), freedom of inquiry and freedom of teaching, that the typical university can or does or ought to extend to the members of its faculty. The relevant and potentially controversial issues, in a word, have to do with the claims being put forward in the name of academic freedom—the freedom of the university, *vis-a-vis* the broader society within which it functions, to pursue its way without regard to the present and future state of public confidence in what it is doing, and the freedom of the faculty-member of the typical university to initiate and execute just any old type of inquiry he may take it into his head to initiate and execute, to arrive at just

any old type of conclusions that just any old method of inquiry may lead him to, and, having arrived at those conclusions, disseminate them "freely" in the academic journals and in the classroom. I believe that the typical American university, however it may square off to specifically theological questions, is from the standpoint of tradition-ists a far more sense-making enterprise than it describes itself as being and, what is worse, thinks of itself as being; that a great deal of foolishness is being talked—and in high places—about both types of academic freedom; that the most casual glance at the realities of its operations will reveal that the things being said about it *are* foolishness; and that the time has come for the foolishness to stop being talked, and for three reasons:

First, a university—Thomas Hobbes to the contrary notwithstanding—is above all a place where the talking of foolishness should be discouraged as a matter of course; *second*, in misrepresenting its function the university cuts itself off increasingly from the possibility of understanding it, and so becomes less capable of performing it; and *third*, in misrepresenting its function it endangers the position of privilege—not freedom but yes, independence—it enjoys in the broader society that wills and maintains that independence—and, by endangering it, does the university a great and undeserved disservice.

Let me be as clear as possible as to the *kind* of point I seek to raise with Professor Weiss, not in the hope or expectation that he will disagree with it and do battle against it—no one who has ever stood in the presence of his wit and dialectical skills would lightly bring upon himself such a misfortune—but in the hope *and* expectation that he will agree with it. We are not going to fall out, as far as I am concerned, over the desirability of free inquiry at the typical university: *Im* for it too—provided we do not understand ourselves to mean by free inquiry, inquiry so free that it ceases to be inquiry. We are not going to fall out either over the desirability of autonomous status for the university vis-a-vis its broader society—provided we do not understand ourselves to mean by autonomy a right on the university's part to defy the broader society *ad libitum*, and without calling down on its head retaliatory measures by that broader society. Freedom of inquiry and university autonomy let us have by all means—provided they do not contemplate the reduction of the university to improvisation and farcicality, and provided they do not contemplate a suicidal

irresponsibility vis-a-vis the tacit understandings, between the university and the general community, on which the former's continued existence, with *any* kind of autonomy, clearly depends. Freedom of scholarship and freedom in the classroom let us have by all means—provided we mean by it merely the kind of freedom of scholarship and teaching that the university not preaches but actually practices; not any other kind of freedom, or more freedom, because more freedom, or any other kind of freedom, would speedily deprive us of the benefits we have learned to expect from free inquiry. *Both* kinds of academic freedom let us have—provided we keep ourselves reminded that with freedom go commitment and responsibility that keep freedom from being nearly so free as it is sometimes made to sound.

Let me, in that background, endeavor to point up the issues that seem to me worth discussing with a series of questions to Professor Weiss—so worded, I hope, as to leave no doubt as to my own position about them.

First, is it or is it not true that the general impression that our universities are the guardians of no orthodoxy—that within them all questions are open questions and no mind really a mind unless it is an open mind—is it or is it not true that this impression results from what is in fact an optical illusion? Whatever may appear to be the case about the university as a whole, what of the several departments of which the university is made up, each of them the carrier of a discipline, each belonging to a national, or even world-wide, academic community dedicated to the dissemination and development of the findings of that discipline? If the university appears to have no orthodoxy that it jealously guards against all challenge, what, I ask, of the sum-total of the orthodoxies of the departments? In a word: whatever the university and its spokesmen may think or say about the *university's* having no orthodoxy that it seeks to impose, does it not remain true that it is the carrier of a congeries of orthodoxies, so organized as to perpetuate themselves in substantially their present form, and to that end placing—each of them—formidable obstacles in the way of any save the most marginal challenge to *its* orthodoxy. Do they really, over in the biology department, grease the wheels for the young man who has decided that no matter what others may think Lysenko was right, and everybody else wrong? Do they really provide him the fellowship support he requires in order to exercise

his freedom of inquiry, encourage him not to bow to authority handed down from the dead past, and urge upon him his duty to follow the bent of his instincts wherever they may lead him? Do they really, over in the English department, lay down a red carpet, as at a Polish wedding, for the graduate student who has got himself convinced that Arthur Miller is a finer playwright than Shakespeare, or that the late Edgar A. Guest was a more accomplished poet than Donne, and make it their business to provide him the facilities he needs in order to do the research necessary for establishing his novel hypothesis? Or do we find, in point of fact, the reverse situation—where the graduate student is likely to thrive, grades- and fellowship-wise, to the extent that he identifies and feels at home with his department's orthodoxy. Is it not the same when, having satisfied a committee of his elders of his mastery of the content and methods of inquiry of his discipline, he turns to seek a teaching or research appointment—when, a little later, he aspires to promotion, and when, all along the line, he turns to his professional journals to ask for publication of his findings? Is it not true that freedom of inquiry is really a privilege reserved for the most part to the Elders of the various disciplines, and that the punishment meted out to the younger who challenges prevailing opinion among those Elders is sure and swift? Does the whole not add up to something more like an apparatus of censorship than to one of freedom of inquiry? And, most important of all, since the presumption in favor of the discipline and against the youthful innovator is necessarily overwhelming, is it not desirable that this should be the case? And if that be true, mightn't we find some more accurate word than freedom with which to describe what actually happens in the bosom of our universities?

Second, have we, in the course of outgrowing God and Holy Scriptures, outgrown *all* absolutes? Are we, in the typical secular-age university, "free" to question not merely the existence of God and the validity of Truth that rests merely upon Revelation, but also everything else? Including, if so, the scholar's obligation to serve and seek and, having sought successfully, to tell—the Truth? Are we free to suppress knowledge, or to advocate the suppression of knowledge because it is uncongenial to, say, our political purposes? Are we free, as individual scholars selecting our topics of inquiry, to ignore the best long-term interests of the respective disciplines to which we are nominally dedicated? Is there, or is there not, such a thing as the

scholarly conscience—and if there be such a thing, are its demands absolute or merely relative? If so again, do we invent it anew with every sunrise, and are those who insist upon the prescriptive character of its demands—like those who still speak of God and Revelation—asking for a return to some outmoded bigotry? In a word: is it desirable that our universities should vouchsafe to their faculty-members a freedom to deny the value of scholarly inquiry itself? And if not, is it not desirable—to go back to my earlier form of words—to stop talking as if it were?