

# A Moral Mission for Colleges

By Norman Lamm

Until about 50 years ago, it was commonly accepted that the university was responsible for offering its students moral guidance. Professors regarded themselves as not only the teachers of knowledge and skills, but also as educational stewards of a special kind of wisdom: the nature of the good life; truth and goodness and beauty; and the value of thought and reflection.

In time, that received wisdom came under progressive assault. Universities began to disseminate knowledge without reference to this ethos. Intellectual inquiry became an autonomous enterprise. The moral mission of higher education was denigrated as too parochial and amateurish and, in the sixties, as being hypocritical, a cover for imperialism. Not long ago, a noted British philosopher observed that philosophers have been trying all this century to get rid of the dreadful idea that philosophy ought to be edifying. If this is true of philosophy, what can one say of other branches of knowledge taught in our ivied halls?

This despair about the larger questions of life having a claim on our attention has filtered down to our lower schools. Only a few weeks ago, New York's Governor Cuomo created a stir when he suggested that values ought to be taught in New York State

## Students need ethical guidance

public schools. Secretary of Education William J. Bennett has repeatedly urged public school leaders to teach moral and ethical subjects that represent a consensus of the community.

It is fairly obvious that this erosion of the teaching of values in our schools is a reflection of a deliberate turn of events in higher education and in the intellectual climate of this country. No wonder that George Bernard Shaw once said of us:

"I doubt if there has been a country in the world's history where men

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were ashamed of being decent, of being sober, of being well-spoken, of being educated, of being gentle, of being conscientious, as in America." As usual, Shaw was exaggerating. But there is an undeniable kernel of truth in his criticism.

Such value-agnosticism in the academic enterprise is, first of all, self-destructive. To be value-neutral means to abandon the very premise on which the search for and transmission of knowledge is pursued. If the university does not teach the moral superiority of education as opposed to ignorance, of reason over impulse, of discipline over slovenliness, of integrity as against cheating — then its very foundations begin to crumble.

An educational system that is amoral in the name of "scientific objectivity," thus devours its own young. They fall prey to a variety of predators that rob them of their confidence in the life of the mind, the significance of culture, the intrinsic worth of knowledge.

Moreover, permitting a generation of students to grow up as ethical illiterates and moral idiots, unprepared to cope with ordinary life experiences, is a declaration of education bankruptcy. It is no excuse to say that for moral instruction people ought to look to their churches and synagogues. Most of them never show up in churches and synagogues, and too many religious institutions, affected by the prevailing secularism, are afraid to use the words "right" and "wrong."

In addition to allowing academic values and general social-moral principles to come out of the closet and into the lecture hall, we must reassert the existence and value of the spirit. It is my hope that the counsels of sophisticated despair will soon be decanonized in the academy; that our society will learn that there is a larger wisdom that awaits our patient inquiry; that man is a spiritual as well as a biochemical, psychological, political, social, legal and economic animal.

An openness to spiritual dignity

## Universities should not fear the specter of sectarianism

does not imply denominationalism. It does mean that the prevalent dogmas of scientific materialism and philosophical despair are not the only points of view worthy of scholarly attention; that belief in the reality of the mind and the existence of the soul does not condemn one as intellectually inferior and scientifically backward; that faith and hope have equal

claim on the heart and minds of educated people and deserve to be presented without coercion on the one side or derision on the other; that not all authority is authoritarian, not all morality is moralizing, not all religion is Khomeinism, not all spirituality is illusory.

If the marketplace of ideas cannot find place within itself for the idea that maybe man is more than man, that just possibly there is more to the world than the world, then all the other huckstering that goes on in that pathetically depressed economy may lead to the conclusion that humans are less than human and that there is less to the world than meets the eye.

From the inevitable tensions that arise between fidelity to a sacred tradition and the search for universal knowledge, some general principles emerge which, even if disputed by some, are of value to all: that the pursuit of knowledge is deserving of sacrifice; that knowledge ought to ripen into wisdom; that whether or not one believes that human beings are the purpose of creation, they are certainly the purpose of education; that the effort by man to transcend himself is admirable, even if he often fails; that there are verities that are eternal, though they may be ignored for generations; that men and women possess spiritual dignity that makes them worthy of our respect, our reverence and our dedication to their welfare.

A modern university should not be "spooked" by the specter of sectarianism. It should encourage a moral climate that elicits respect for the human spirit, for honor, or law, for the pursuit of knowledge and love of learning, for the human capacity for self-transcendence. □