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Norman Lamm, President  
Yeshiva University  
500 West 185th St.  
New York, NY 10033

October 30, 1986

Dear President Lamm:

I read your October 14 New York Times piece, "A Moral Mission for Colleges, with great interest. It was an exceptionally well-written piece, and one with which I disagree deeply.

I have written a responding essay, "A Moral Mission for Colleges, 2nd Edition," which I am enclosing for your interest.

I have submitted my thoughts to the Times (as well as to our local university paper.) However, regardless of whether it reaches that readership, I wanted to share them with you as well.

Should you have any comments, I would be most happy to hear from you.

Sincerely,



Brian G. Zack, M.D.  
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BGZ:ms

## A Moral Mission for Colleges, 2nd Edition

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Norman Lamm's essay, "A Moral Mission for Colleges" (The New York Times Op-Ed Page, Oct. 14) stands desperately in need of rebuttal. The eloquence of his pen and the depth of his feeling effectively disguise an argument which means nothing at best and which, at worst, is a call for moral indoctrination.

Mr. Lamm asserts that today's universities are delinquent in not offering their students "moral guidance" and deplores their "permitting a generation of students to grow up as ethical illiterates and moral idiots." He maintains that universities should, and by implication currently don't, "encourage a moral climate that elicits respect for the human spirit," and solemnly declares that "knowledge ought to ripen into wisdom" and that "human beings... are certainly the purpose of education."

In what sense is all this to be understood? The non-sectarian colleges and universities of today do not advocate a suspension of morality or teach disrespect for the human spirit. It would be exceedingly difficult to find an educator of any persuasion who felt that knowledge ought not to ripen into wisdom or that the purpose of education was anything but the elevation and enlightenment of human beings. At this level, Mr. Lamm's polemic reduces itself to a thoughtfully written statement of the general principles of education with which every responsible individual can agree -

and which is so abstract as to be meaningless in terms of providing direction for actual and specific educational reforms.

It is in the necessary act of grounding Mr. Lamm's airy phrases in the reality of the classroom that a dreadful danger lies.

Most modern universities, run by thoughtful men and women who would have no trouble at all agreeing in principle with most of Mr. Lamm's desiderata, have taken the approach that the individual human spirit is best aided on the road to morality and wisdom by the development of its own faculties for critical analysis and reflection. The aim of a liberal education is to facilitate this process by providing the raw materials and the environment with and in which the student can apply these capacities to the development of a personal world-view which is truly meaningful - meaningful precisely because it is created from within, not imposed from without.

Of course, in this paradigm, the ultimate nature of the outcome cannot be dictated by those in authority and so, it would seem, a chance is being taken. Yet it is my sense that it is working, that it enables those who are capable and motivated to develop themselves into human beings who can be respected, if not agreed with, by all - and the practical question is, what is the alternative?

Mr. Lamm provides scant guidance here, but the hints he does drop are disturbing. He mentions, and apparently endorses, the opinion that schools should "teach moral and ethical subjects that represent a consensus of the community." He believes universities ought to be providing the kind of moral instruction that one is accustomed to finding in houses of worship. And he

asserts that "there are verities that are eternal, though they may be ignored for generations."

Mr. Lamm, whose verities are they? Is it not conceivable that the generations that have been ignoring yours have found their own? Or that the mere fact that a community has reached a consensus on an issue does not necessarily make its position wise, or moral, or even advisable? .

Externally imposed morality, indoctrination into a predetermined set of moral beliefs and values, suppression of the individual's capacity for reflection and self-determination - all of these are characteristic of the societies which Mr. Lamm and I would agree have perpetrated the most horrific abuses<sup>of</sup> morality, of wisdom, of the human race. This is the dangerous path into which Mr. Lamm's call for "moral guidance" might lead us. When a society grants itself the power to determine the moral precepts of its members, there is no guarantee that those precepts will be chosen wisely. This is the alternative to the chance being taken by liberal education. It is an alternative with little to recommend it and of potentially devastating outcome.

Mr. Lamm, you write that "not all religion is Khomeinism;" presumably you would choose something better. May I point out to you, by way of putting all this in perspective, that, translated into Iranian and with scarcely a sentence or two altered, yours is a vision of education of which the Ayattolah himself would be proud.

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