

DOES THE UNIVERSITY HAVE VALUES?

Our University was established from the beginning as a determinedly secular institution. When regional Universities were being set up, it was feared that some people might find themselves unjustly excluded on grounds of race or religion, which would greatly have restricted the value of the University as a place of education open to all, and as an intellectual meeting-place. Consequently there is in the Charter of Incorporation (21) the following paragraph:

No religious test shall be imposed upon any person in order to entitle him or her to be admitted as a Member Professor Teacher or Student of the University or to hold office therein or to graduate thereat or to hold any advantage or privilege thereof.

At Oxford and Cambridge, the only English Universities until the eighteenth century, students were required to swear an oath of religious obedience to the Crown before they could graduate, which excluded Catholics, for instance, from University education. It was to prevent this kind of exclusion that our University was from the beginning distanced from “religious tests”.

If you read the Regulations on conduct in the Calendar, you may be surprised at some of its provisions. For instance, you are obliged to secure the permission of your Head of Department/School, or the Warden of a Hall, before you can licitly let off a firework. More importantly, harassment (including sexual or racial harassment) of any student, member of staff or other employee of the University or any authorised visitor to the University is regarded as a misconduct, and so is any breach of the provisions of the University’s Code of Practice on Freedom of Speech: the right of University teachers freely to question received opinion is formally enshrined in the statutes. In the matter of personal behaviour, the code uses general terms without much definition or foundation, such as “disorderly or improper conduct”: the definition of “the essence of misconduct” offered is

Improper interference, in the broadest sense, with the proper functioning or activities of the institution, or those work or study in the institution; or action which otherwise damages the institution.

This principle is elaborated in various examples, but “not so as to derogate from its generality”. It is also identified as a category of behaviour which the University may define, not a branch of the law of the land or an Act of Parliament. We can therefore see that the University has principles of its own, which it reserves the right to define and execute, and there is a large body of disciplinary procedure to be followed in cases of infringement.

However, the values which underlie good behaviour, social responsibility, and so forth, are not investigated or declared at any point. It is taken for granted that such foundations are present and acknowledged, not in need of reference. Similarly, the University sometimes seems remarkably short of reasoned argument about the really deep questions, like right and wrong, good and evil, the purpose of life and death, the dignity of the human individual, the nature of human society, the place of personal beliefs, and so forth. It seems to raise some questions:

- has the University's unease about religious tests caused an unhealthy indifference and ignorance to develop about the deepest of human questions?
- Does our University's discourse, in areas where such deep questions become vital, fall short of truly radical analysis: I think of areas like politics, medicine, business studies, sociology and social policy, education, ecological questions within economics, bioscience, etc?
- Does belonging to our University imply/demand, in any way, the deepening of students' awareness of the moral and ethical questions faced by the world?
- Does belonging to our University imply, or assist, the deepening of students' awareness of religious issues in the world?

(*Note: Commentators have been pointing out the way in which we in the West are analysing the terrorism we have suffered almost entirely from an economic/political point of view: terrorism's real roots, they say, are in oppression and material poverty. This might appear to be yet another piece of Western imperialism, implying that the solution is for Arabs to become members of the West, sharing its obsession with material possessions and obeying peacefully the rules of an economic community. This ignores the fact that the roots of terrorism may lie in the far deeper earth of religion, and that our main contribution might be to return to our own religious roots, and engage in dialogue with Islam on a religious basis.*)

If the University is to help us to engage the real world, it is not permissible for us to accept an edited edition. *Custom* is a perfectly valid element in sustaining traditions. It will not do as a ground for morality, or guide our ethics in vital and totally new situations, or preserve the values which lie at the very base of our civilisation. We need acknowledged and tested roots – understood and accepted, agreed by all, reasoned and firmly established. These radical factors ought to engage the University. Many of them have drawn their origins from religious faith, most are ingrained with religious traditions and modes of thought. Thinking of religion as a can of worms we would rather avoid opening up is certainly going to disable our freedom of action towards the Muslim world. More seriously, it will not help to shore up the values we take for granted in our own society.

- Is there any way in which we could include an ethical element in most of our courses?
- Is there any way in which it would be appropriate to encourage systematic discussion of the values which underpin our society?
- Might we use our multicultural and multiracial University community more effectively, so as to broaden the awareness of all students about religious, cultural, moral categories?
- Finally, would a terrorist-in-waiting find himself challenged as a Nottingham student?

The Thing – 1 15 on Wednesday, in Fr Philip's office. Bring a sandwich!