

The Case for Christian Higher Education in Asia

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“We who labor in the field of higher education are sharply and embarrassingly aware that the inadequate or indifferent response of educational institutions to the problems of race, of dehumanization, of social justice, of poverty have led our young people to question the validity of our institutions. With the end of colonialism, the supreme task of Asian nations today is nation-building. . . .”

Upon invitation of the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia, twelve college and university presidents from Asia have come to the United States for a dialogue among themselves and with American colleagues on the problems and goals of Christian higher education in Asia. Surely, in this period of social upheaval characterized by tensions, uncertainties and even despair, we should take a hard look at our own institutions and at the total thrust of the Christian enterprise in the field of higher education in Asia.

In the idyllic setting of Wingspread in Racine, Wisconsin—the conference center of the Johnson Foundation—we met in study, in fellowship and worship.

In our conference, we could not escape certain inevitable questions.

Have our Christian colleges and universities, many of them organized a hundred years ago, now outlived their usefulness and, therefore, are they due for liquidation?

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In the face of the tremendous problems now facing Asia—brought about by revolutions of expectations, population explosion, and mass poverty—is not our Christian witness through education too weak or too irrelevant to do much good?

Or, could it be that, as the American people now find themselves confronted, through the insistence of the youth, with the problems of peace and war, of racial inequality, of the underprivileged, of pollution—there could be no better time than now to put a merciful end to the travails of these Asian institutions or transfer them to state control?

On the other hand, could not this be the best time and the greatest opportunity for Christian colleges and universities to rise to higher levels of Christian witness and service?

Could not this be the opportune time for our Christian colleges and universities to show the transforming power of the love of Christ in reshaping or re-ordering our societies in Asia?

• Past Contribution

I need not dwell on the unequivocal contributions of Christian colleges and universities in Asia during the past century or two. Every nation in Asia has been—and is—a beneficiary of their educational efforts. In most countries, Christian colleges and universities served as pioneers in education and provided leadership therein. They sowed the seeds of Christian ethics, the love of truth, the worth and dignity of the individual, and the democratic way of life. They were a leavening influence upon their community and upon the nation. The dedication, the simplicity, the selflessness of the early Christian missionary teachers must have left a deep impression on the lives of their students. Of them, I am reminded of the words of the late Justice Cardozo who said: "The prophets and the martyrs do not look at the hooting throng. Their eyes are fixed on the eternities."

I come from an institution founded by men and women "whose eyes were fixed on the eternities." Silliman University came into being when a man from Cohoes, New York, by the name of Horace B. Silliman went into the offices of the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Board one day in 1900 to ask if they could build a school in the Philippines with a gift of \$10,000. Mr. Silliman was possessed of a vision for the country, for its potential future. A missionary couple, Dr. and Mrs. David S. Hibbard, obeyed the summons to build the school so that by August 28, 1901, the first class was organized. Dr. Hibbard was president and Mrs. Hibbard was the faculty. Since then the school grew as the country

grew—from elementary school to high school to college. By 1938, it achieved university status. The converse is also valid—the country grew as the school grew and produced the teachers, engineers, lawyers, nurses, ministers, and agriculturists who were needed to build the nation.

Today, Silliman and other Christian colleges and universities are being called upon to discharge ever larger responsibilities in the supreme task of nation-building.

We who labor in the field of higher education are sharply and embarrassingly aware that the inadequate or indifferent response of educational institutions to the problems of race, of dehumanization, of social justice, of poverty have led our young people to question the validity of our institutions.

With the end of colonialism, the supreme task of Asian nations today is nation-building. What does this mean?

In Asian societies where the average per capita income is barely \$100 per year, it means lifting almost one billion people from grinding poverty and despair to a level of dignity and self-respect.

In Asian societies where there is a wide gap between the rich and the poor, it means the need of restructuring society so that every man may have a chance to develop to his full potentials, to fulfill himself.

In Asian societies, where almost 500 million people are illiterate, it means liberating the masses from ignorance and fear.

Should our brethren from the West be concerned about our efforts to fight poverty, misery, ignorance and despair—about our hopes and aspirations for a better life? I say "yes," because:

1. We now live in a world shrinking into a small neighborhood and the peace and prosperity of every nation is fatefully tied to that of every nation;

2. Because a genuine concern of the developed nations for developing nations is the best approach to world peace and progress;

3. And because, in the human family, the poverty of two-thirds of its members constitute a moral outrage.

We want to change our societies but this can be done best by men and women whose lives are transformed by the love of God. Our Christian colleges and universities have the responsibility to produce men and women who are not only technically competent but morally sensitive—men and women who can give meaning and validity to the Christian paradox that "he that seeketh his life shall lose it, but he that loseth his life for my sake shall find it."