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Metanoia John Valk

Education without God: Truth in exile

For a week in June, 181 people from 27 countries gathered at the first ever International Campus Ministers Conference. The setting was academic — Collingwood College in the University of Durham, England. The program was balanced — stimulating for the mind, nourishing for the soul, and invigorating for the body. The theme was scholarly — "Truth in Exile: A Challenge to Church and University."

For almost a millennium in the Western World, the Christian Church and the University have been closely allied. Both are engaged in the pursuit of truth. University education originated in the Church, which set the foundations for higher learning. The Church still insists today that in-depth study — the pursuit of wisdom and truth — has to concern itself with the question of God. That is, wisdom and truth, at their core, centre on our relationship to God, each other and the earth. Education is to develop the whole person (spiritually, morally, economically, socially), for the purposes of honouring God and striving for a just, humane and civilized society.

Today, however, education is pressed in a different direction: bolstering a global market economy. This was the primary topic of discussion at the conference. Education, it was voiced, has become commercialized, and the justification appears to rest in its commercial viability. New principals view students, if not faculty, as naturally competitive individuals concerned largely with the accumulation of material wealth and the acquisition of influence and power.

The Right Rev. Dr. David Jenkins, former Anglican Bishop of Leeds and Professor of Theology at the University of Leeds, spoke of the "practices and prospects of the

Market," not only as an economic system, but as a *faith*: "Faith in the Market has replaced faith in God. The Market is universally expected to deliver prosperity for more and more people."

This god, said Jenkins, "has taken over the role of being the sole and privileged source and guarantee of all human prosperity and well being. There is no salvation and hope anywhere else." The Market god shapes and defines humans in terms of its own image, "as self-interested and materialistic consumers who, if they attain enough material wealth for their individual selves and close contacts, can then develop various interests and activities, some of which may be even moral or spiritual."

Jenkins insists that under the domination of the Market, truth is not in exile, it has disappeared. And the consequences are devastating. "Men and women and our created earth are trivialized, rubbished and trampled on by unthinking submission to the Market."

The challenge before us, asserts Jenkins, "is to restore the sense of there being a Truth and Reality which we can discover and which may embrace and enlighten us, that Truth and Reality is God. God has asserted and demonstrated the infinite worth and potential of human beings, as individuals and persons of potentially infinite relationships, by becoming one of us — Jesus Christ, Emmanuel, God With Us."

Xavier Gorostiaga, an economist educated at Cambridge University and now President of Universidad Centroamericana in Managua, Nicaragua, pressed home a different though related point. He stated that students educated at university gain important social, political, and economic advantage in their society and culture.

Their education has even more advantage in relation to, and impact upon, non-Western nations. If their education is used for individual and material gain, it contributes to the complete shift of wealth to Western nations and the resource depletion of

non-Western nations. On the other hand, if education is used in the service of others, it assists non-Western nations in reducing their poverty, imbalance and injustice.

The captivation of the university by market forces dangerously imbalances the concept of education. What then of education for the purposes of gaining truth, or more importantly, wisdom? And how are we to understand wisdom?

According to Catherine Keller, associate professor of Theology at Drew University, Madison, N.J., "wisdom represents a consciousness that is heretical to the canons not just of conservative Christianity, but also of the modern university: elite university pluralism is as inimical to wisdom as traditional religion and science." Keller spoke of the wisdom of Scriptures — "Sophia, an emanation of Yahweh." She then proffered a set of sophological criteria, as an "alternative to the static oneness of ancient philosophies and the compartmentalized databases of our university": wisdom as orthopraxis, as economics, as cosmology, as ecumenism, as woman, as pluralism, and as interconnection.

I was most struck by the concluding comments of these speakers. Those comments have been quietly echoed most notably by certain heads of universities, and even theologians, in Canada and elsewhere. They pertain not to the fact that things are not well with the modern universities, or even the institutional churches.

This is readily admitted. They pertain, rather, to a tacit belief that university chaplains may be strategically positioned to offer words of wisdom to the university and even the church, as both search for direction, healing and reconciliation in their midst.

I'm not sure how to take this. Marginalization and powerlessness (and irrelevancy?) so much define and describe the life (and feelings) of chaplains. I'm reminded of the Biblical prophets, and am inclined to act like a Jonah sent to Nineveh. I'm also fearful of being swallowed by big fish.

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