

# ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS — — MORALS AND RELIGION

## COURAGEOUS QUEST

by Penny Meisner

"Students must admit, at least to themselves, that they come to university knowing little or nothing about their own religion," Dr. E. J. Thompson, principal of St. Steve's, ventured. "If the university serves no other function than to clarify its students' religious thinking it has more than justified its existence. This religious clarification is vastly more important than scientific clarification."

Dr. Thompson, interviewed in conjunction with Gateway's examination of atheism and agnosticism on campus, expressed considerable concern with regard to "public misunderstanding." He feels that criticism for the supposed irreligious attitudes is "undue and unjustified." Students are searching for truth. They are "involved in a courageous quest, daring to think for themselves."

When asked whether he felt that university tends to foster atheism or agnosticism; his answer was an emphatic "Definitely not!" The university as an institution does not. University life does.

As a member of the university senate, he said, he feels well qualified to squelch this misapprehension. "We (of the senate) bend over backwards to provide each group of religious persons with opportunity to express themselves. There is no attempt on the part of the administration to foster either agnosticism or atheism."

The acceptance of an agnostic viewpoint is justifiable and reasonable. "The word 'agnostic'," he explained, "is derived from 'noscere' or 'knowing', and thus means 'not knowing'. Not to know does not mean absence of belief or faith. Faith is that which we accept without a factual explanation." Through dis-



photo by Conrad Stenton

cussions with his fellows or questions arising from his courses, a student begins to question. To refuse to permit self-questioning is very bad, he feels.

An atheist, or one who denies the existence of a God, is in his opinion "foolish and presumptuous". "I fail to find the views of such people rational or consistent. They rely on their own intellect, on the orderliness of the universe, and have faith in their findings, yet they deny God. Atheism tends to become skeptical and evasive rather than honest and inquiring."

"The so-called atheist, or the agnostic, must never have a closed mind. He must constantly ask himself 'Have I all the answers? Who am I? What is the meaning of life?'"

"It is all a matter of intellectual maturation," Dr. Thompson said. "When I was a child I spoke as a child, but when I became a man I put childish things away."

## .. YOU ANSWERED

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and receptive but discerning minds our only notebook. We do not understand that which we do not know, we do not know that which we do not examine, and we do not examine that which we do not doubt.

"The tool of doubt is simply indispensable to the fashioning of the kind of critical mind that does the daily intellectual work of the world." (John Sloan Dickey)

Persons who refuse to discuss their religious convictions are doing themselves more damage than those who skip lectures. Where else can and does such re-examination occur so freely? "I know of no more encouraging fact that the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor." (Thoreau)

Society hears our discussions and wrinkles its brow. It wonders whether we are without beliefs. No, we are merely trying to justify acceptance of theological doctrines, and to clarify our thinking. "The faculties of the mind, when not exerted, or when cramped by custom and authority, become listless, torpid, and unfit for the purpose of thought or action." (William Hazlitt)

## AGNOSTIC VIEWPOINT

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only give my own as an illustration. Basically my main aim is pleasure — but there are many factors contributing to and influencing this pleasure. I find that I get a great deal of pleasure from learning, and that's why I came to University.

Everyone works toward fulfilling wishes, of one sort or another. If one wish cannot be fulfilled, it is only because of another greater, contradictory wish. This is probably the essence of why I am an agnostic; my wish for the security and confidence of a faith in God, is overpowered by my wish for provable knowledge.

leaf by leaf  
and week by week

## THORNS FROM THE ROSE

University students should not perpetuate the society in which they live; they should change it radically. This they fail to do. Instead they reflect the lack of moral and religious values in their culture and in their university's understandable inability to inculcate what it does not itself possess.

## THEY SHOULD

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resources upon the academic aspects of 'varsity life. Although allowance is made for extra-curricular activities the university, in the restricted use of the term, does not concern itself with non-academic organizations. Consequently, organized leisure time is an addition to campus life and does not constitute an essential part thereof.

The next consideration is how is the university to inculcate moral or religious values? Since the content of these values is similar to the content of other courses it may be taught by the same methods, viz. lectures, seminars, essays and discussion groups. Having found the means of inculcating these values, difficulties immediately arise. How are the problems produced by such a program to be solved and what will be the outcome of such indoctrination.

Some of the quandaries to be faced are: how are students able to reach judgments through independent thought; how to use the instrument of intelligent doubt and yet be able to commit themselves to a dogma which maintains that it alone possesses the right and "true" way. Obviously there will be tremendous conflicts and tensions aroused by this insoluble antithesis. Or is it to be resolved by the production of intellectual misfits and moral neurotics?

How can a professor unquestioningly commit himself to a dogma or belief system and still remain a creative individual in the area of commitment? Furthermore, what type of values is he to inculcate? Is he to stress fundamental or liberal religious principles, or is he to emphasize humanistic ethical values independent of a supreme entity?

Obviously the adoption of the position that moral and religious values are to be inculcated by a university, in the restricted sense, leads to insurmountable difficulties. If however, the extra-curricular organizations are chosen to inculcate the values the problems disappear because each body can decide what values it wishes to inculcate, if any, and then direct its appeal to those students who find its type of values acceptable. In conclusion, the decision reached by this discussion is that the situation as it exists on our campus relative to the inculcation of moral or religious values is realistic and pragmatic.

## THEY DON'T

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thought. Thought leads to questioning. Therefore, a thoughtful student whether he studies history, sociology, philosophy or zoology will consider the question of God.

According to the 1960/61 U of A Students' Union cards 2 per cent of the freshmen and 3 per cent of the upperclassmen did not have any religious affiliation. Three of 1,914 freshmen and four of the 5,087 upperclassmen claimed atheism.

Inasmuch as these records contain a professed "heathen" and an "idol worshipper" the validity of the survey is questionable. However, it does, perhaps, show a trend. That being that upperclassmen appear to have been led to do more questioning. This is wise if the stimulus goes beyond cynicism and leads to a search for answers.

I have met many dissatisfied religionists as well as many satisfied ones, but I have never met a satisfied agnostic. The question exists unanswered for him.

To be fruitful, questioning must be followed by a relentless pursuit of truth. Otherwise, it ends in stagnation. Professors may instigate a flow of thought, but students are responsible for maintaining progressive motion, or for becoming trapped in an eddy.

Universities do not encourage atheism. They do encourage inquiring minds. The results of inquiry must be credited to the student. The frail questioner will lose direction if the search is long. Only "... your strong and your sane" will continue the pursuit of truth.