

SPECTRUM

Knowledge for What?: *Spirituality and Education*

Last Thursday Campus Ministry sponsored a lecture entitled "Knowledge for What?: The Spiritual Dimension of our Education." It was presented by Stephen Dempster, professor of Religious Studies at Atlantic Baptist college (Moncton).

Not many link education and spirituality. Just as Tertullian posed his famous (rhetorical) statement, "What has Jerusalem to do with Athens?" (ie. religion with the university), so too many assume the two are mutually exclusive. But are they?

One of the objectives of higher education is to engage in the critical study. This means developing the ability to step back and analyze what one reads and hears. The new Women's Studies Program at UNB, no less, is doing just that. Such endeavors, properly done, contribute to the growing body of knowledge.

We have long assumed the pursuit of knowledge to be largely objective, even neutral. But Robert Lynd, on the eve of WWII, questioned this whole notion of academic neutrality. In an article entitled "Knowledge for What", Lynd criticized the pursuit of knowledge apart from a moral vision.

Edward Teller, father of the atom bomb, stated that "we would be unfaithful to the tradition of Western Civilization if we should shy away from what man can accomplish." But what moral vision lies behind modern human accomplishments?

No doubt we have produced many, many beneficial things. But our inventions and pursuits also have a (very) dark side. Western technology was (ingeniously) used to create places of mass death and destruction. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, the Gulf War and Chernobyl come to mind.

Dempster stated, and he is by no means alone, that the basic objective of modern society is the pursuit of knowledge for

power and control. And, the economy and the university have been directly tied to this pursuit. Courses and research projects are increasingly influenced by government and corporated interest, something one can easily glean from our own UNB Perspectives.

Is this so bad? Not necessarily. But it does raise serious questions about the role and purpose of higher education. Have we (unwittingly) created a modern multi-versity, complete with its ample industrial-military research grants and contracts, which provides clients (students) with a professional passport to "the good life"? Is the moral vision we have adopted for humanity (and the university) one of power, where varying interests compete for control and government funding?

Spirituality is not marketable today, religious hucksters excepted. That may explain in part the lack of interest in Religious Studies. It may also account for the willingness to ignore rather than explore our spiritual nature, heritage and vision and their relationship to the meaning and purpose of education. But if that is an increasing tendency, then students are getting a raw deal.

Although examples of hostility to scholarship abound, the Christian tradition has always had a strong belief in its importance. Why? Because the world is the theatre of divine glory and to pursue knowledge is to pursue God's thoughts. The goal of education was for love and service (in all areas of life, including science and engineering), not autonomy.

The biblical book of Genesis, interestingly enough, spells that out clearly. Humans (ie. both

men and women) were made in the divine image and given the task of developing the world. Pursuit of knowledge is a necessary part of that task. Thus, a Women's Studies Program, for example, is essential in order that women (and men) may come to know where and how they can attain an equal partnership in developing and opening up the world, something they have in large part been denied.

There were, however, restrictions placed on the pursuit of knowledge. The "tree of the knowledge of good and evil", a symbol of autonomy, is off limits. Why? Because it leads to death and destruction.

Ancient Hebrew literature stressed the importance of wisdom and knowledge. But it summed up this pursuit in one poignant statement: "the fear (awe, respect) of the Lord is the beginning of all knowledge." Behind this statement lies an awareness that the search for knowledge can go astray. Not everything humans invent, do or use is in their best interests. Witness our military weapons arsenal, the exploitation and abuse of women and children, and the destruction of the environment.

The Christian Scriptures stress even more vividly the meaning and purpose of education. They place before all humanity the intelligence of god fleshed out in the figure of Jesus. In Him consist the treasures of wisdom, and He embodied the purpose of knowledge: love and service. The manger, the miracles, the cross - all demonstrate the placing of the divine mind at the service of love: not power, not wealth, not control, not dominance, not elitism.

Is this wisdom foolishness? Does it explain the rather low attendance at the lecture? Conspicuously absent were those whose business it is to direct the path of and create a vision for university education.

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continued from page 12

of academics. Again, we're not talking about the over inflated craziness they have in the States. Those kids were minor celebrities in high school and are superstars at places like Notre Dame, Miami, Penn State, etc. I say, if UNB (all of us) can take an interest in sports where we can get involved as participants or go and watch because we know the individual(s) from class or the dorm or whatever, let's make it happen! Last year we had some pretty darned good teams in several varsity sports. But if sports aren't supported at the intramural level, they won't be at the next level. As far as I'm concerned it's a hell of a lot more fun to attend a sporting event (or participate) when you know the folks around you.

Discouragement of intramural

sports is just the beginning. There is a synergy for activities of all sorts. Take the recent "Harvest Jazz and Blues Festival". I hope it was a success! This is supposed to be a city where the population is "somewhat enlightened". We need to have arts, lectures, sporting events, movie festivals, et cetera complement the academic lifestyle we must lead as students, faculty, and staff.

It's too bad the intramural department can't see fit to make an effort to let some young people let off some steam. I like a good beer just like anyone else. But it's pretty sad when UNB's major activity for students is getting toasted three or four times a week.

continued from page 13

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