

*A distinguished educator examines the past and present responsibilities
of higher education and thoughtfully answers the question:*

WHOSE UNIVERSITY?

by Rosemary Park

"Whose University?" is an old and recurrent question which arises when the power structure of society changes or when religious and philosophical viewpoints shift. No one today would wish to deny that ours is a changing society in all its aspects. Therefore, the university's relation to society—indeed, the very structure of the university itself—may demand some re-examination.

A few brief historical observations will serve as background for my attempt to answer this perennial question.

Most of us know that of the first universities some were controlled by students and some by faculty. But all which aspired to more than local recognition were licensed by the church or by the state, that is, by either ecclesiastical or political authority. This relationship of the university to the state has been a continuing one, which has provided on occasion protection for the academic group from oppression by the community, but on other occasions has exposed the university to undue influence, even to exploitation by the state itself. Nevertheless, the university has successfully maintained its right to set its own aims within its own constituency. Nor has the state ever desired or attempted to force citizens into the academic life.

Throughout its existence the university has continued to be a voluntary association of members whose aim is the establishment or the discovery of truth. At times I think we would all agree this aim has been poorly stated and misunderstood. Erup-

tions within the university and tensions without have made the historical account of universities a very lively topic. Through it all, however, argumentation and revolt seem to have arisen, not because men doubted the university's aim was sound, but rather because the evidence for truth itself had shifted.

It takes some courage to enunciate these very general statements today since we are all apt to be concerned more with information than with structure or meaning. Nevertheless, in full awareness of the danger, I shall proceed to make one or two more such statements.

In medieval times, when the universities first arose, truth was primarily determined by the study of revelation as contained in the Scriptures, and as interpreted by councils of the church, through which, it was believed, the Holy Ghost spoke. The agent of this study was human reason, implanted in man by an omnipotent and an omniscient deity. This was a closed system, built on a faith in this omnipotent deity. It was also a system which required a great deal of human reason, as reason endeavored to explicate the truth of revelation.

Time passed, and the power and the authority of the church declined. Concurrently, there was increased confidence that human reason was capable, without revelation, of discovering the truth about the universe and about man. Characteristic of these new times was the statement of a German critic, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, that, had some deity offered him a choice between absolute truth and the pursuit of truth, he would have chosen the pursuit.

Within universities and among the philosophers and scientists, who at that time were often the same, a method of study gradually developed, founded

"Whose University?" has been adapted from a lecture given by Rosemary Park at Caltech on February 23. Dr. Park, president of Barnard College who will become vice chancellor for educational planning and programs at UCLA in June, spent three days on the Caltech campus last month as a YMCA Leader of America.



Unscheduled talks with students are just as much a part of Rosemary Park's visit to Caltech as her scheduled lectures.

on the assumption that the universe may be comprehended by man's reason alone. This so-called scientific method led to extraordinary discoveries in the physical world, and these successes in turn tended to establish the conviction that the only acceptable evidences for truth were the results of the scientific method. It is, perhaps, a slight overstatement to maintain that this method became as absolute in its claim as the dogmas of the church at an earlier time. If it was not approved by the church council, it was not true. If it was not the result of the scientific method, it was not true.

The basic difference between these two positions is that one operated within a closed system, controlled by an omnipotent and omniscient deity, the other in an essentially open system. I mean by this

that we cannot know in advance what the scientific method may bring to light about the universe and man. We cannot be sure, therefore, that this knowledge may not be destructive for man. And since there can be no assurances that the method and its evidence for truth will be favorable to man's existence, to pursue truth by this method requires not only honesty and accuracy but a kind of courage to face the results of investigation with equanimity.

Under the older system, in the words of the New Testament, the truth made men free. Under the modern one, the truth might also destroy. Indeed, it became clear that neither the religious, social, political, nor economic structures of a society could count on support from the universities if their claims differed from the evidence produced by the scien-

tific method. It is significant that the older system spoke of "error" and the newer speaks of "failure."

Since error could lead to eternal damnation, its existence implied moral as well as intellectual weakness. Failure, on the other hand, meant nothing worse than disappointment—an indication that the second, third, or even fourth try should be undertaken, no value judgment having been made. The critical spirit of this new method dissociated itself for the most part from moral judgment and proved a firm ally in undermining the traditional structures of an aristocratic and feudal society.

The scientific method had results other than the shaking of the traditional beliefs about man and his world. The facts it discovered about the universe could be exploited technologically, and in time they produced an affluence hitherto unknown in any society. In proper concern for the physical welfare of its citizens, the secular state encouraged the establishment of universities, so that knowledge might increase and be applied to raising the material well-being of the community. Thus, the university became the courted handmaid of economic and political interests, while at the same time it was suspected of subverting many of the traditional values.

Since the university's production of knowledge continued to bring wealth and health to increasing numbers of people, it was natural that the possibility was examined of encouraging the material advance which the university made possible, but of containing, somehow, the havoc which its knowledge wrought in religious, political, and economic orthodoxies. In very recent times, some governments have forcibly intervened to this end and have dared to prescribe the areas and the results for which the university was to be responsible.

This was a time of martyrs, such as the university had experienced occasionally before and not unlike the ages of persecution the church had known in its history. In Russia and Germany, the state endeavored to define the university's aims and to subvert the search for truth as determined by the scientific method. Persuasion and violence were used to enlist the university's support in sustaining a given ideological structure.

To some areas of the university instruction and study, this imposition of new aims from without did not seem to matter, because the knowledge these disciplines produced under the scientific method did not impinge upon the ideological or traditional value area itself. The specialized learning of the times permitted a man to work with good conscience in his laboratory or at his desk, while the society about him collapsed. Some men suffered for their convictions about the nature of truth and evi-

dence. Others, almost equally honest and accurate, continued their investigations using this same method, but untouched—or at least unmoved—by the destruction of their colleagues.

Some of us remember these times. In Germany, the social, political, and economic structure had been eroded from many causes. The university was forced to support a desperate and evil system and was given no choice except such as it had convictions and power to enforce. But on political and social issues there was no single conviction. Instead, there were voices within the university from the extremes of right and left—some, too, from the center. The university, then, could not honestly speak with one voice. It had no power except through extra-university channels, and these were blocked by dictatorship.

Of immense significance is the fact that, at this point in time, many people expected the university to be a bulwark of strength against the evil of the times, and the university was not. It could not be.

The problem for us today is not very different in kind, though perhaps it is in degree. The universities are the most influential centers of modern intellectual life. They supply the knowledge which undergirds our economic and governmental system. Without them our civilization would freeze in its present form and atrophy into the timeless fellahin culture Spengler foresaw for those civilizations in whose midst great decisions are no longer made. To avoid such a withering away, the scientific method must continue to increase basic knowledge, to challenge yesterday's solutions, and to dredge up the forgotten and unobserved facts which can undermine confidence in the accepted answer.

But what about the pattern of society within which this university exists?

As the knowledge explosion becomes a commonplace, I think I hear people saying to our universities: If you know so much, why don't you know more? This is a very moving question, because it arises from the same kind of need which had raised hope in Hitler's Germany that the university could resist. With us it is not resistance which is required, but vision. Our community has not disintegrated like the middle European world of the thirties. But many of our young people are alienated from, or neutral toward, their society. They press the university to take a stand, to define the good life, to say what should be done to create justice. And in answer we talk to them about honesty in observation, care and accuracy in tabulation, and courage in facing the results—all these things which characterize our method for ascertaining truth.

The question we need answered is not "How can

we do?" but "What should we do?"

To these questions the university seems to reply that such things are practical matters which each man must decide for himself as best he can. This is an honest answer. It overlooks the fact, however, that there is no other institution today which can give a reply. When the church answers, it does so from different presuppositions, and it is an institution with the weight of the past great upon it. The family can speak of what was, but it is at best uncertain about this new generation which—though it is inexperienced—finds it relatively hard to listen and yet is seldom at a loss for an opinion.

The university must, nevertheless, take the question of priorities and goals seriously and must study in all humility and earnestness its resources for responding. It has an honest method for ascertaining truth. It has men and women whose integrity in the use of this method is beyond reproach. It knows too that it deals primarily with intellectual matters and can observe that the questions at issue today come from a different sphere of experience, in which the scientific method may not now be productive. At least no one yet maintains, I believe, that the scientific method can establish ethical priorities.

In this dilemma the university might do well to remember a famous distinction of Plato's, the distinction between truth and right opinion. Experimentation as an essential aspect of the scientific method can validate truth. An experiment is repeatable. It follows that truth, once proved in this way, can be demonstrated at will before any audience. Right opinion, however, can only be communicated. It is not founded on logical structure or experiment; it is not the product of the scientific method. It seems to me, however, that those who have studied and learned—and have the courage to face the results of their experiments, as the scientific method requires—are best able to express opinions on matters which may not be susceptible to their kind of proof.

On social and moral priorities the university itself will seldom be able to take a stand, because these priorities are not subject to establishment by its kind of evidence. This does not mean that teachers and learners should not express opinions, provided that they are mindful of the tests these opinions may be subject to and of their commitment to accept the results of these tests, even when they upset a dearly-loved position.

Plato said that right opinion was a gift of God, which implies, I think, that not all opinions expressed will be right opinions. It is a weighty responsibility to give opinion. And yet, I believe we must answer when questioned, making it clear that what

we say is opinion and not truth—that it is our opinion and not the university's. To speak in this fashion takes courage not unlike the courage required to face the results of scientific experimentation.

The university itself must stand for truth in the highest form. This means that it cannot take a position on all matters which are of ultimate concern to us as a society and to us as individuals. On those matters the man and women who belong to the university must feel free to speak, and the university must exert itself to see that they are free. Consequently the university will abound in personal statements, some of which can be tested by our methods for discovering truth; the rest will remain opinion.

Does this mean that the vision we seek cannot be expected from the university, except as informed opinion, and that the university can no more see ahead in our time than it could defend itself from the attack of a desperate society under Hitler? To answer this question a little more clearly I must make a concession. I have so far concentrated on those aspects of the scientific method which are intellectual and critical, which concern the examination of data and the verification of conclusions. This was the revolutionary aspect of this form for truth. I have overlooked, however, an essential aspect of the method—namely, the setting of the stage for the experiment, the establishment of the hypothesis.

I have said that our need today is for vision and not for resistance. It should not be forgotten that the kind of knowledge which we foster at the university begins with a supposition, an imaginative assumption: Suppose this were true; what would follow?

Most students probably never experience the joy or the excitement of setting up these assumptions in their undergraduate science instruction. And so they need to find creative experience, perhaps in other areas, if they are to develop and stretch their imaginative capacities. Out of this experience of setting the hypothesis, and with the help of men and women of right opinion, some of the questions directed at the university can be responded to for a while. These answers, however, can be nothing more than hypotheses, because they are subject to further examination and observation. We can act as if the hypothesis were true. We can act as if justice were possible, as if love as well as logic were built into the structure of the universe. But I do not think we can prove that these things are so by the only method available to us today.

The university provides us a method which is not totally applicable to all human experience. Some of us believe that ultimately it may be. This is a kind of faith and one which has moved men to great sacrifices. The power to set the hypotheses for the

future is within the university's capacity, and we need only to strengthen this power in our students.

Today students have learned our critical techniques too well, and in a kind of frustrated idealism they have turned this knowledge against the one social institution which could help them find a juster and a more honest world.

So then, whose university is it? My answer will be equivocal at best.

The university belongs to no one—not to the students, who seek to remold it, perhaps before they have honestly examined it; not to the faculty, whose studies and investigations demand so much attention in the midst of the present explosion of knowledge; not to the administrators, who try to preserve its freedom amid the pressures from within and without; not even to society, which is called to support it at ever increasing cost and which succumbs periodically to the temptation to make it serve not truth but the establishment.

While all this is true, I believe that if any of these groups ceases to need the university or to care about it, it could wither away. They are all essential ingredients, but not in themselves controlling factors. The university is like the church which preceded it: an institution which directs its attention beyond the immediate present and beyond the existing society. It attempts to prepare students for the future, a world it cannot know. Its faculty are producing the innovations which will change the present. Like the church, it must be autonomous and free from the control of those who may wish it to serve some other cause than the discovery of truth. Unlike the church, however, it does not condemn in perpetuity. It may fail to make its method clear. It may not find men of right opinion who address themselves to present issues fearlessly and with serious purpose. Society may succeed in forcing it to undermine its discipline for a time, but when the threat of violence is removed, it returns to its original purpose.

Society may fear the unfettered search for truth which is the university's program, but unless it supports the university on the university's terms, it cannot be assured of the innovations a university program makes essential for its continued development. The church relied on her power to bind in heaven and on earth. The university has no such ultimate power, nor the desire for it. Its more modest aim is to be the primary instrument for growth in the society—by furnishing a method for arriving at truth and by offering, in addition, a place where opinion and hypotheses about the future can be presented and examined with courage and imagination. The university, therefore, is an institution which belongs to no one but is essential to all.



In providing for his daughters, John B. Kelly stated in his will that what he was about to give them would *“help pay dress shop bills which, if they continue as they have started under the tutelage of their mother, will be quite considerable.”*

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