Academic orthodoxy: God and man at Rice

BY RAY NEEDHAM

By my second year at Rice, I was sufficiently accustomed to the Thresher's weekly blast of pious platitudes concerning "academic freedom" to ignore them. By my third, I am curious as to why this disregard seems to have become general.

Perhaps the average undergraduate does not take this grandiose phrase seriously since he has not seen its effects here at Rice. Where is that interchange of ideas, that debate of viewpoints, that search for belief for which we all entered the University? At Rice it has been destroyed. Our greatest virtue—the independence of a private university—is being swallowed in a futile search for orthodoxy, acceptance, and adoration.

The power structure of the academic community is a familiar one. There are the elite, institutions and instructors whom all lesser parts of the structure strive to emulate. Our administrators long ago set out to pattern our development after these giants of the prestige market.

Rice of the South

Whether we are to become the Cal Tech, the Harvard, or the Stanford of the South, no one has decided; however, the suggestion that we should try to be uniquely Rice University is lost among hoots of Southern backwoods bumpkins.

wardiness and catcalls of reactionism.

Our staff largely fits the same pattern. Numerous assistant professors crank out reams of copy designed to impress their betters in the structure of power and improve their position in the Establishment. Does one do this by challenging the entrenched forces of academic conformity that stifle free exchange? No indeed! One not only aids in perpetuating the Establishment, he Believes and Evangelizes.

What effect does this have on the undergraduate? None, unless he makes the unfortunate mistake of questioning the orthodoxy. And then, my friends, he is looked upon with pity, as an ignorant, warped misguided child.

Undergrads Denied

It is not the faculty member who is denied academic freedom, it is the undergraduate. Consider for a moment the disgusting performance of our history department in the recent election. Personal belief for them became a Holy Crusade, and students were impressed for the Army.

The Goldwater movement, as one particularly rabidly orthodox instructor put it, "is a reaction of the rural mind to modern society." The student who disagreed was accused of intellectual dishonesty. Obviously this was not an interpretation one could question. This was not a matter of free debate. One could not escape the impression that the instructor was just going through the motions. He let the disagreeing student speak, not because he was interested in his ideas, but because tradition compelled him to allow it.

Keynes Above All

Look at our basic economic course, which is the sole exposure of many to the complex and critical subject. Can anyone seriously deny that at Rice the exposure is strictly Keynesian and that opposing theories are introduced, not to allow the student to reach his own conclusions, but to be ridiculed as "unenlightened"?

Why hide it from a beginning student that modern economics does not begin and end with the good Lord Keynes? But the sophomore presentation is orthodox we are told. Collectivism is the wave of the future and other theories are only for ridicule in a "university of the first class."

Do not fail to note an extremely popular history course in which the growth of monopoly in American business was considered. Students were required to read selections by Messrs. Lloyd, Chandler, and Josephson, all three of whom present the socialist viewpoint.

Alternatives Ignored

When a student inquired why the opposite point of view (ably espoused by Allen Nevins) was not presented, he was told that it was difficult to find adequate published material on that "theory." Not only was the class allowed to see just one viewpoint, it was told that there was really no other way to look at it! Where then is this free exchange of ideas that we all hypocritically pretend exists?

Ask the English major if he is required to think in most courses or if he is expected simply to memorize the instructor's point of view.

Recall that popular English course in which the instructor, a dynamic speaker and brilliant analyst, holds his large audiences spellbound. Recall also, however, that all his students know the only way to do well in the course is to play back his interpretation on exams. Any other approach invites a stinging note on the blue book that labels your idea as "shallow."

Totalitarianism

Perhaps so, when compared with those of the Great Man, but it is strange that more specific criticism is seldom levied. Disgusting is the only term for academic totalitarianism that labels anything with which it disagrees as shallow and poorly reasoned. This premise pushes toward the tacit assumption that there is only one truth in the particular matter, and the student is simply too ignorant to see it.

How can students spout platitudes about academic freedom and the freedom of dissent which instructors consider to belong strictly to the faculty? How may a student dissent when his instructor wears a six inch Johnson button and insists that anyone who disagrees is a backwoods bumpkin?

How should a student react when he is told that a poem has often been interpreted wrongly by critics and that only your instructor really knows what it means? The answer is obvious. The student conforms.

Individualism at Rice has been murdered by status seekers and professional scholars with a disciple complex. Yet in the face of it all we as students merely stick out our collective heads in the ground and ignore our rapid demise. Our voices are raised only to mouth the approved pious phrases and repeat the hypocritical cliches about free thought, tolerance, and exchange of ideas.

Why should we waste our breath?