Campus religion: man and God at Rice

BY RICHARD BEST
Thrasher Religion Editor

Along with the freshness of John David Maguire's theological observations, Religious Emphasis Week also saw renewed controversy over one of the holiest religious conflicts going: the administrative order of May, 1961 whereby the old Student Religious Council was dissolved and all denominational groups forbidden to meet on campus.

On October 10, the Houston Chronicle published an account of a speech delivered by Dr. Paul E. Pfeiffer to the Association of Ministers of Greater Houston. As the chairman of the faculty committee on religious activities, Pfeiffer tried to explain the University's policy in this area.

He pointed out that, although Rice was traditionally "neutral," after 1948 religious groups were permitted to meet in the library at the request of Mrs. W. W. Fondren, a Rice benefactor and prominent Methodist laywoman. This policy was halted in 1961 when "irresponsible" groups forced the university to "revert to tradition."

SRC Abolition

Pfeiffer stated that the SRC was trying to "shoot down" the chapel program and was replaced by a chapel committee composed of interested students. He went on to praise the present chapel program in which speakers can either lecture or preach in the context of a "simple worship service."

In the Chronicle report, Pfeiffer was quoted as saying that "all too often activities of church groups must be marked as irresponsible from the university viewpoint" because they seem to be "trying to save the people from the university."

This report brought a swift reply from Dr. Louis H. Mackey who was faculty advisor to the SRC in '61. Mackey claimed in a letter published last week in the same journal that "far from trying to 'shoot down' the chapel program, the SRC did its best to strengthen it." He went on to explain its dissolution as a result of an academic "anti-clerical mentality." "Rice is not yet old enough nor mature enough to be wholly objective about religion."

'Academic Paranoia'

Again last Saturday, Sandy Trickey, a Rice graduate ('62) and a member of the 1961 SRC, in another letter to the Chronicle, said that Rice "suffers from a sort of academic paranoia; it cannot stand to be wrong or unpopular, nor is it willing to subject itself to useful criticism ... it is almost pathetic that a university proclaiming its academic excellence should be afraid of the possible adverse publicity issuing from the quiet questions of honest students of good will."

On October 25, Pfeiffer elaborated on his speech at St. Bede's Episcopal Chapel at the request of the Rev. Lane Denson. At that time he reaffirmed his support of the ouster of religious groups, but acknowledged that the administration may have "over-reacted." "I, for one, think it was a mistake to disband the SRC. He further cautioned against groups trying to "exploit" Rice by drawing students from campus activities.

Denson Joins Fray

Two weeks later Chaplain Denson joined the fray by pointing up the absurdity of a "neutrality" which builds chapels and sponsors R. E. Weeks, which sets up open house rules and tells girls to be in by 11:30 pm. Denson further asserted that there is an inescapable connection between a man's faith and his life as a member of the university. He regretted that Rice refuses to recognize this connection and deal with it with intellectual honesty.

When all the verbage and vituperation has been strain out of this tempest in a theological teapot, the controversy boils down to several salient points.

First it is undeniable that the 1961 administration did not handle the situation with scrupulous tact. But the old order has changed and let us hope that the issue can soon be buried for the last time.

Deplored Service

The SRC did not like the chapel worship service and never hesitated to make this fact clear. It felt that each address should be combined with a service of the speaker's own denomination. Today the "simple worship service" remains. It is contended that the service draws more regular attendance and it seems doubtful that dropping it will draw vast hordes to hear theological speeches.

The ban on religious groups holding meetings on campus will eventually have to go, for it clearly contradicts the right of students to meet for whatever purposes they wish. Yet there is a necessity for some sort of discipline in this area to prevent the "irresponsibility" so distasteful to Dr. Pfeiffer. Surely the various organizations could agree on ground rules for types of meetings and speakers and enforce them accordingly.

Religion vs. Freedom?

Finally, in defense of the administration it can be said that some groups did take advantage of the university's facilities; some criticisms were leveled without proper courtesy. For those who criticize the administration (myself included) it can be said that there is a certain tendency for some administrators to look at book-burning sectarians in Texas and conclude that religion is essentially hostile to the free spirit of inquiry.

Yet Rice does not really belong to Texas—Rice is part of a great intellectual community in which the names of Tillich, Chardin, and Buber are now uttered with respect and in which many find the ground of their scholarship in Faith.