

STUDENT EXPERIENCE AS A DOOR TO RELIGION¹

OUR Chapel at the University of Chicago has a separate student door—the very existence of which our more casual visitors rarely suspect. Three hundred thousand such visitors came to see the Chapel last summer during the five months of the Fair, drawn by its fame as one of the great architectural monuments of the city if not of the nation. They entered from the boulevard by the great south door with all its ecclesiastical symbolism, where the solemn statues of “saints, apostles, prophets, martyrs” look down upon them. Then in the narthex they came upon the memorial tablets that commemorate those of an earlier generation by whom and for whom the Chapel was given to the University. That door, with its traditions and its memories, is the main entrance to the Chapel.

But round on the west side of the nave, nearer the dormitories where the students live and the quadrangles where they gather, is the student door to the Chapel. It is narrow and inconspicuous; but it admits students direct from the campus to the nave by an entrance all their own. Over that door in stone are the profiles of two undergraduates who have left an abiding influence on the religious life of the University: Spike Shull in his soldier's helmet, who won his varsity letter three times in each of three sports, and is commemorated in the Illinois stadium also as a worthy and

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honored athletic rival—whose coffin when it came home from France bore the Distinguished Service Medal awarded him by Congress after his death in action; and on the other side Margaret Green, President of the Y. W. C. A. twenty years ago, who was snatched away from us suddenly in the midst of her college course—but whose memory and spiritual influence are fruitful among us still. By its symbolism as well as its location, that door is the students' own.

Now the question I propose today is whether there is any similar distinctive and direct access from the educational experience to the religious experience; whether the process through which we pass as undergraduates here for four years, and then carry forward as alumni, may become for us a door to religion. Surely it is timely to raise that question at this landmark in the life history of this class of 1934, which passes over today into the larger company of the alumni of the Rice Institute; for it is a question that looks both ways for its answer, into undergraduate experience that lies behind you, and into the alumni relationship that lies ahead. I need hardly remind you how many there are today among students and faculty and alumni alike, who find the traditional entrances to religion, with all their ecclesiastical fixtures, uncongenial if not impossible. They cannot say the creed, they find the traditions and the symbols and the phraseology archaic or even unreal, which seem to church people the main entrance to religion. Rather than go in with the multitude that traditional way, they are disposed to pass it all by—or pass it up! Our question is, whether there are certain aspects of their relationship to Alma Mater which may admit them to a glimpse of religion's inner shrine, and open up to them an approach of their own to religion's deeper experiences.

Consider in this connection first the history of our relation

with our own Alma Mater. Almost certainly our acquaintance began with her outward aspect alone. When we first visited her campus, we had eyes only for her buildings, and by them chiefly we rated her in comparison with her rivals. When we came here as freshmen, we were oriented first into her outward appearance and arrangement. Now that outward beauty of form and color will always be a real element in our love for her, that like all love is curiously interwoven of aspects outward and inward. What Cornell graduate will ever forget the view from his campus—

Far above Cayuga's waters
With its waves of blue—

or what Yale man the old-world vistas through the portals of the Harkness quadrangles? But most of us live long enough under Alma Mater's roof to discover that there is much more in her hospitality than the cost or the beauty of the roof itself. We have seen her house altered before our eyes by the erection of new buildings that change not only the comforts but the currents of her daily life. So we come to understand the feeling of the older graduates who come back to find the old place changed into another place that they never knew. Outwardly it has become another place: as we shall find in our turn when we come back twenty-five years hence to find her outward aspect changed yet again. These are Alma Mater's garments. Like all garments they wear out, and have to be laid aside. And though we love her best in the garments we have known best, we love her most for something inward and unseen that endures through all these changes.

Now that familiar experience of the alumnus may become for him a door to religion. For religion sees the whole of life in that same perspective and from that same outlook. There is a tourist view of life that sees chiefly its outward

appearance and its big statistics, and a sophomore view that is very proud because it knows its way about the contemporary world: but as people grow in insight, they see deeper than either of these. Our country went through such a sight-seeing stage not so long ago, when we were boasting about our skyscrapers and our statistics, and still more recently through such a sophomoric stage. But religion reminds us that what really matters far more than our bigness or our up-to-dateness is the inner quality of our life, and the chance it gives the plain man to live more abundantly. Religion reminds this class of 1934 that what matters most about you is not so much the marks you got in college or the salary you will get in life, as the attitude and the ends for which you live. What matters most about the universe itself is not its bigness or even its changes, so much as the values it produces and sustains. And religion has its own classic statement of that perspective: "Man looketh on the outward appearance, but the Lord looketh on the heart."

What now is this something more and deeper that lies below the outward appearance? It is a truism that nobody can ever answer that question about a college from outside. Only her own sons and daughters, those who have shared the process of her daily life, have shared the fellowship of the exploring mind and the expanding spirit together, know Alma Mater as she truly is. Others may read or hear or talk about her: but only those really understand her who have thus shared her common life on the inside. And this fellowship is far wider than we realize when we are undergraduates. As seniors we are proud of our place at the head of the academic procession: but on Commencement Day we suddenly find ourselves the youngest class, bringing up the rear end of the procession; and out ahead of us march it may be sixty classes, bound together across the genera-

tions by a common experience, a common gratitude, a common devotion. But no one of them, nor all of them, know all that Alma Mater is, or is yet to be: only the process of the generations can fully reveal her.

Now that experience also may become a door to religion. It helps us to understand that religion deals with realities greater than our human ability to understand or explain them: realities that reveal themselves to us with greater and greater clearness and fullness as we share the fellowship of a common devotion to them. It is one of the oldest testimonies of religion that it is only to be understood from the inside, by those who have shared in seeking for God and finding Him. And it is one of the oldest and truest of the Bible's promises, that we shall find God when we search for Him with all our hearts.

How now is any graduate to describe Alma Mater, as she has thus revealed herself to him in this deepening fellowship? The only terms he can use are symbols drawn from his own experience; and every one of these symbols will be a partial and inadequate statement about a reality greater than any or all of them. Ask what is Alma Mater: and one man will point you to eleven men on a football field; another to the cheering section; a third to an investigator peering through a microscope in a laboratory; another to a student reading alone in a library; and the wisest of all, to Mark Hopkins sitting on his famous log, with a student at the other end. But there are certain aspects of a college that even that classical symbol does not suggest. One of them is best embodied by a group of youthful seniors and gray-haired old grads singing their college song together on Commencement Day. Now the words of that song are probably a bit sentimental, and its music very likely a borrowed love-song. But beneath all these inadequacies, imperfectly

suggested by any of these symbols or all of them together, is a great reality—the institution that through generations and even centuries has been moulding the lives of her children and of her country. Above and beyond these symbols which are all we have when we talk about her, is the college to which none of them does full justice. She is real, and she is good: and we love her.

In a time of religious transition and confusion, when men's thoughts of God are changing as their ways of thinking change, and the older forms of that thinking make religion difficult if not impossible for so many thoughtful people when they are rigidly insisted on, this familiar fact about the college may become a door to new religious insight and experience. If Alma Mater is a reality only to be described and discussed in symbols that are inevitably partial and inadequate, how much more the Infinite Mystery and Reality that men call God. The language of religion when it speaks of God is inevitably symbolic, and can never be anything else. As Josiah Royce used to put it to us in his lectures on philosophy: "God never sat for his photograph"—which is another way of stating the New Testament insight: "No man hath seen God at any time." The symbols which man must always use for God are inevitably drawn from his own experience, and must change as that experience changes and grows. Jesus recognized that when he took as his best symbol for God human fatherhood at its best, and then added, as if to point out its limitations: "How much more. . . ." The reality was for him greater and better than the symbol. It must always be that way when men think greatly and worthily of God.

But this fact does not take away Alma Mater's moving and lifting power on the lives of her children. Suppose that for a moment we go realistic rather than sentimental, as the

younger generation would very much prefer to have us do; and point out that Alma Mater's voice by no means always speaks to us in the sentimental words and saccharine melodies of a very "collegiate" college song. Some of us heard her voice first in relation to some entrance examinations that we had to pass to qualify for her concern. If we could not meet that test, there were plenty of others who could; and she would be too busy with them to bother with us. Her voice has never lost that sterner and exacting note, bidding us measure up to certain standards, not only of work, but of sportsmanship, of cooperation, of character. Unless we could meet those tests, out we went. . . . And in the years since, how often her word to us has been a judgment on our compromised standards, our shoddy performance, our self-centered living.

That experience is certainly a door to religion. For one of the most marked characteristics of religion today is that the note of judgment is so definite in it. After a period of sentimental and superficial optimism, when our preaching was too much like our college songs, we have been brought by the war and its aftermaths into a far more realistic time, when the burden of our younger prophets is a message of doom unless we repent and radically change our ways. God is judging our social order for its injustice and exploitation of human rights: unless we can speedily and radically reconstruct it, it will be flung upon the scrap-heap of history—like so many that have been found wanting before it. God is judging our civilization, because it is mastering the techniques of science only to use them in wars foreign and domestic that will be our destruction, unless we are redeemed from our selfishness and our lust for power. The Day of Judgment is no discredited dogma of an outgrown eschatology. It is here—and now. It is the day in which we live.

But all this of which I have been speaking never *comes alive* for any graduate, unless it has become incarnate in some individual whom he has known and trusted and loved. Unless in our own experience there has been some teacher or college officer or fellow-student who has cared enough about us to be the Mark Hopkins on the other end of our log, we will hardly believe that Alma Mater really cares about us: she will be to us only a name, or a joke, or a vacuum. . . .

The religious implications of that fact of frequent experience are profound. Men rarely believe that God cares about them, or have any living faith in the love of God, until they come across some person or persons in and through whom that love has likewise "come alive." Our own generation has more people than ever who doubt very much whether they matter at all in the universe, or whether there be a God who cares about them or about anything: and one of the main causes of that widespread loss of faith is the mechanization of our civilization into a series of impersonal relationships, and the loss of the personal contacts and confidences out of which grow faith in man and faith in God. Here also appears in a new light the characteristic and creative contribution which Jesus has made to the spiritual life of humanity. He has quickened in all generations and races the confidence that he at least has never been too busy, or not interested enough, to sit at the other end of the log with "all sorts and conditions of men"—and especially with those who "labor and are heavy-laden"; and that personal relation with him has brought to life in them the faith that God cares about them, even as he does.

Through one or another of these experiences there is quickened within many students and graduates an inward change of attitude and purpose, that sheds light on what religion calls conversion. They came to college at first more

or less frankly for what they could get out of it—a purpose by no means entirely reprehensible in an adolescent seeking self-development. But long before graduation there was born in them a sense of obligation and devotion that has led them to ask what henceforth they could do for Alma Mater. Religion lifts the limits of that change of attitude, and applies it to the whole of life. Dedication to the will of God is the deeper meaning and larger fulfillment of life itself. “Anyone who aims to preserve his own self will lose his soul, but anyone who loses himself in the cause of the Gospel will find himself.”

CHARLES W. GILKEY.