The university is the most important artifact of Western culture."

This was the opinion of the late Ralph D. Winter, noted missiologist and my mentor and friend. Dr. Winter, as his friends called him, often lamented that American evangelicals took a detour away from the university tradition at the time of D.L. Moody, when they began founding Bible Schools, which have only recently become universities. Winter bemoaned that "evangelicals … have not gotten into politics nor into university structures until very recently. How can you go as a professor from a Bible school to a university? You can’t. … That was a mission strategy that went wrong, that refused to contextualize" (Winter 1998).

The unfortunate result for other nations of the American evangelical detour is highlighted by Moussa Bongoyok in his paper, "Blessing the Nations through Christian Universities": "Seminary graduates are not allowed to teach in the universities [of Cameroon]. How are we then impacting the leadership of our nation? There is a lack of training in holistic development, and yet we are to present the whole gospel to the whole world" (Bongoyok 2010). An institution that seeks to understand and integrate all aspects of truth, of the universe, is needed, not just an emphasis on Bible and theology. As Ken Gnanakan has stated, “the parts of any whole cannot exist nor be understood, except within their relation to the whole” (Gnanakan 2007, 19).

In his address at the dedication of the Billy Graham Center of Wheaton College, Lebanese statesman Charles Malik affirmed that university education is crucial for nation building:

The great universities control the mind of the world. Therefore how can evangelism consider its task accomplished if leaves the university unevangelized? And how can evangelism evangelize the university if it cannot speak to the university? And how can it speak to the university if it is not itself already intellectualized? (Malik 2000, 45).
Value of the University Tradition

The University and Worship

Without a strong university within a society and without believers and leaders who have a strong university education, people will not know how to worship God as he deserves. All God’s works praise him. We cannot fully worship him for who he is if we are ignorant of the handiwork of God and the orderliness and beauty he has built into creation. Astronomy studies the music of the spheres, the orbits and inter-relations and beauty God designed at a macro level. Chemistry studies the music of the spheres, the orbits and inter-relations and beauty God designed, at the micro, atomic level. Without a knowledge of God’s works gained through the university tradition, people cannot adequately praise God for who He is and what He has done.

The University and Culture

Without a strong university within a society and without believers and leaders who have a strong university education, people cannot fully appreciate the complexities of the cultures of the peoples God loves. Through the study of culture we can appreciate that people who are different from ourselves can understand and reflect God’s character in ways our own culture cannot, so that in the age to come some from every nation, tribe, people, and language are worshiping around God’s throne (Revelation 5:9; 7:9).

Without the discipline of a university tradition, people will have blind spots in their assessment of themselves and of their own culture. We will not be able to see that, as philosopher Marilyn McCord Adams terms it, we are all complicit in horrors that are intrinsic to the functioning of any society (Adams 2012). Ralph Winter once asked, “How do you both believe in Christ, following a cultural pattern that you’ve grown up in, and at the same time object to features of that culture that you don’t feel are really very godly?” (Winter, nd).

The University and Biblical Truth

Without a strong university within a society and without believers and leaders who have a strong university education, people cannot adequately apply biblical truth to daily and national life. With a Christian university education, believers can integrate biblical insights with insights from science, history, and culture. As Ken Gnanakan says, we need to combine these disciplines “so that they work together to form a whole” (Gnanakan 2007, 17). People can learn together to propose theological answers to the questions of their societies. Andrew Walls urges that Africa, Asia and Latin American must become centers of creative thinking so their universities can produce world leaders in biblical and theological studies (Walls 2011).

The University and History

Without a strong university within a society and without believers and leaders who have a strong university education, people cannot know and learn from the history of human life on this planet. History teaches us what people have learned from their choices, both right and wrong.

Ralph Winter used to say, “A person who can draw on insights from history can make better decisions today.”

George Santayana said in his book, Reason in Common Sense, “Those who cannot remember the past, are condemned to repeat it.”

Without a university a society is doomed to repeat its mistakes; it is doomed to perpetuate its horrors; whatever it has overlooked that could benefit its citizens, it will continue to overlook. Without the university keeping learning alive and building upon God’s truth, a society is doomed to repeat the failures of its past.

The University: A Beacon of Hope

Universities provide the means of educating both leaders and followers in nation-building values and skills. Universities give the opportunity for people to discover the order God has built into the
universe and to learn how to make shalom, bringing order out of chaos, through right relationships with God, with other humans, and with creation.

Within the academic traditions of the university, right relationship with God is the sphere of theology, the queen of the sciences according to Thomas Aquinas. Right relationship with humanity is the sphere of such disciplines as business, economics, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and history. Right relationships within creation can be discovered through study of the disciplines of biology, chemistry, physics, mathematics, ecology, engineering, or history.

In those parts of the world where there is a strong university tradition (America, Europe, China, and Australia) there is less disease and violence. In those parts of the world without a strong university tradition there is often a higher incidence of infant mortality, disease, and violence. Notice in the maps below, the strong correlation between the areas of the world with an absence of world-class universities (white) with the areas where infant mortality rates are high (red). Similarly, in areas where there are few strong universities, there also tends to be a higher incidence of violence (red and orange).

But societies and nations can learn how to bring order out of chaos, following principles God has built into the universe. In his Confessions, Augustine spoke about a disciplined and well-ordered mind that is able to grasp the truth. Disciplined thinking is necessary to disciple a society for nation building. Order in society allows for the flourishing of health, peace and safety and reflects some aspects of God’s nature, even if seen through a glass darkly.

Impact of Universities through the Ages

The impulse to collect and organize and disseminate knowledge is one of the ways humans reflect the image of God and one of the ways God is able to use humans to restore order to His creation. The institution of the university arose,
according to Catholic theologian and scientist, Stanley Jaki, because of “the belief (a belief specific to the Middle Ages) that it is meaningful to search for universal knowledge, precisely because there is a universe, that is, a coherent totality of things and minds” (Jaki 1982, 43). Through the discipline of advanced scholarship, universities have kept learning alive through the ages although at times throughout history, advanced education has deteriorated within a society and has had to be replaced. In the West advanced education had to be reinstated by Islamic and later by Celtic civilizations. Later we will see that Andrew Walls is calling for Africa, Latin America, and Asia to gird themselves now to be the new standard bearers to keep creative scholarship alive as it is deteriorating in the West (Walls 2011).

We will start our brief overview of the history and impact of universities with the Greek academy, following at first the Western path of the development of organized knowledge, then integrating glimpses of how learning was developing in other parts of the world from the past to the present. Prior to and during the European Middle Ages, flourishing civilizations in China, India, the Middle East were collecting and disseminating knowledge in which faith and practical learning were tied together. It is only recently that faith and learning have been segregated in the Western university tradition, which is one of the reasons for Walls’ pessimism about the Western academy (Walls 2011).

The Greek Academy and Early Christian Learning

The Greek academy, Walls explains, “marks an important phase in human history and at its height, Plato saw philosophy, love of wisdom, not as an academic, but as a moral and religious discipline” (Walls 2011, 238). But, according to a pattern we will see again and again, the Greek academy declined until eventually Justin Martyr “found philosophy and the academic life had become a job, a career, a profession” (Walls 2011, 238). The historical pattern continued with the rescue of a declining civilization by the scholarship of another civilization that integrated the older learning with new ways of thinking. Christian philosopher-theologians such as Origen revived the Greek culture and academic tradition illustrating the assumption that “it is the task of the church to gather the fragments of truth and reunite them to the body of truth as a whole” (Holmes 2001, 21).

Monasteries and Mosques Keep Learning Alive

But once again learning was in danger of being lost to the West as Rome declined under barbarian invasions. Libraries were often gutted and the revival of learning took centuries. Monasteries in Ireland kept learning alive during this time by copying biblical manuscripts and other important Christian literature. Also during this time of chaos in Europe, Islamic scholars copied much of the ancient Greek literature and added to the knowledge of mathematics, astronomy, and medicine. The Muslim integration of faith and learning can be seen by the fact that the early Al-Azhar University was originally founded as a Mosque, becoming an Islamic university in 998. (Islamic Education Online).

African Universities: Beyond “Afropessimism”

This Egyptian university represents the third of the streams of ancient African university education summarized by an African scholar in his article, “A Historical Accounting of African Universities: Beyond Afropessimism.” He states:

The origins of higher education in Africa, including universities as communities of scholars and learning, can be traced to three institutional traditions:

1. The Alexandria Museum and Library [Egypt]
2. Early Christian monasteries [Egypt; Ethiopia]
3. Islamic mosque universities [Egypt, Tunisia] (Zeleza 2006).

He goes on to explain that the early universi-
ties founded by Western missionaries were in limited parts of Africa and “it was not until the 20th century following the European conquest that colonial universities spread to the rest of the continent.” Zeleza sees university education as “central for training a highly skilled labor force, creating and reproducing a national elite, … enhancing national prestige … [and] helping to manage and resolve the various crises that confront the African continent from civil conflicts to disease epidemics including HIV/AIDS” (Zeleza 2006).

**China’s Wisdom of the Ancestors Gives Way to the West**

In other parts of the world, a similar value has been placed on education for nation building. Ancient civilizations without the revealed Word of God integrated knowledge of what they could observe in the world with their moral and religious understandings. In China the wisdom of the ancestors was important. During the Han dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the first civil service exam included the teachings of Confucius as one of the key subjects. Those who passed these exams were then qualified to pass on Chinese cultural traditions and set rules of society for others. But this indigenous, traditional form of education basically ended at the time of China’s humiliating defeat by the British during the Opium War (1840–1842). After that, new educational models from Europe, America and Japan were set up in China, (China Education Center, 2004), including new Christian universities founded Presbyterians and others. Today the importance of universities for nation building is illustrated by the claim of the China Education Center that “higher education in China has played an important role in the economic construction, science progress, and social development by bringing up large scale of advanced talents and experts for the construction of socialist modernization” (China Education Center, 2004).

**India’s “Beautiful Tree” of Education Gives Way to the West**

Just as advanced education that integrated moral and practical learning was present in China in the time before Christ, so in India the famous Buddhist center for scholarship, Nalanda University, was founded in Bihar in the fifth century before Christ. “The important subjects were art, architecture, logic, grammar, philosophy, astronomy, literature, Buddhism, Hinduism, law, and medicine” (Ponmeli, 2010). But this university is now in ruins, illustrating once again that scholarship rises and falls throughout history. Serampore College was founded by William Carey and his friends in 1818 to focus on education in the arts and sciences and to train people for ministry in the Indian church. The present Western system of education in India was introduced and founded by the British in the 20th century. The British government did not recognize the traditional structures and so they have declined. Gandhi described the traditional educational system of India as a beautiful tree that was destroyed during the British rule (Ponmeli, 2010). In fact, a British colonial leader in India, Thomas Macaulay, said in 1835, “There was no desire to educate the masses, only to raise up “Indian gentlemen” who would fall in line with colonial policies” (Macaulay 1835).

**Western Education Rooted in Spiritual and Societal Reformation**

This British educational system that has by now encircled the globe has its roots in the revival of learning that took place during Europe’s classical Renaissance and the time of the Protestant Reformation. The Reformers “undertook to reform education because they wanted the laity to read and understand Scripture for themselves and to be prepared for their callings in society.” Luther put it plainly: ‘Where are the preachers, jurists and physicians to come from, if grammar and other rhetorical arts are not taught?’” (Holmes 2001, 58). John Calvin called for a college to prepare young people for the ministry and for civil government (Holmes 2001, 64). In Scotland, John Knox’ Book of Discipline proposed a national education plan to provide church and state with qualified leaders. (Holmes 2001, 69). Here at the height of renewed
emphasis on university education, the integration of faith and learning is prominent, along with the importance of education for nation building.

**Western Education Polarized and Declining**

With Francis Bacon, however, the door was opened to the polarization of religious and secular learning. His intentions were no doubt good when he spoke of God’s two books, his Word and his works. Unfortunately Bacon advocated that these be studied separately, as theology and science. In addition, Bacon shifted the focus further from the university as a place for the study of all truth to a focus on what can be done with education in practical ways (Holmes 2001, 76-77).

By the time of the 21st century these trends have solidified to the point where Andrew Walls sees secularized universities serving political and financial interests rather than the integration of all truth as God’s truth.

As with the Greek academy, scholarship has in many quarters ceased to be a vocation and become a career. … The Western academy is in peril. It may again be time for Christians to save the academy. And it may be that salvation will come from the non-Western world; that in Africa and Asia and Latin America the scholarly ideal will be re-ignited, and scholarship seen as a vocation” (Walls 2011, 239).

**The Future of the University in the Majority World**

**Avoiding the Mistakes of the West**

Ralph Winter warned Christian leaders in the majority world not to repeat the mistakes of the West as they continue to develop their educational systems (Winter 2007). In his article, “The Scandal and Promise of Global Christian Education,” Winter described three common mistakes of the West that he saw being repeated in the rest of the world:

1. **Wrong students.** He urged that proven leaders be given opportunity to advance their education through accessible delivery systems. “Most of the students in pastoral training are not the seasoned, mature believers defined by the New Testament as candidates for pastoral leadership” (Winter 2003, 3).

2. **Wrong curriculum.** “God has given us two ‘books,’ the Bible and nature/Creation. He does not want us to slight either one. But the scientific community is studying the second while despising the first, while the church community is studying the first and ignoring the second” (Winter 2003, 4).

3. **Wrong package.** “It is an important principle to speak the language of the native.” Winter urged that universities be formed, rather than seminars and Bible schools, that can present courses and diplomas in a format the world understands and values (Winter 2003, 4).

Winter concluded, “Joel Carpenter’s recent study, ‘The New Universities,’ demonstrates that if the missionaries are not going to establish university institutions, national believers will” (Winter 2003, 3-5). Since Carpenter’s 2002 study that Winter referred to, a more recent study shows that “over the past 30 years at least 178 [universities] around the world] have come into being, with 46 arising on the African continent alone” (Carpenter 2012, 1).

**Nation Building and the Conversion of Cultures**

In an article about global theological education, Walls highlighted the biblical mandate: “We are called to disciple the nations” (Walls 2011, 24). Carpenter notes the parallels to a value on nation building in modern global Christianity with the time of the Second Great Awakening in the United States in the 19th century. During this time multiple social institutions were founded, including universities, as “American evangelicals, led by the Methodists, were ‘organizing to beat the devil’” (Carpenter 2012, 5). Today, revived and committed believers in many parts of the world are
finding ways to fulfill the “second half of the gospel mandate, after spreading the good news of personal salvation … what Walls calls the conversion of cultures. The mandate is to teach the nations about God’s larger plan of redemption” (Carpenter 2012, 5).

What elements are needed in a university committed to nation building and culture change? Clayton M. Christensen lists these traits of innovative education, among others, in his book, The Innovative University:

• Increased attention to values
• Cross-disciplinary, integrated education
• Emphasis on student competence vis-à-vis learning outcomes
• Student involvement in research
• Mix of face-to-face and online learning (2011, 386-87).

Carpenter adds the element of biblical world-view as a necessary component in the curriculum for global culture-changing education:

It is difficult to see how the new evangelical universities can sustain a Christian outlook without offering a curriculum that pushes students out into the broad realms of nature and culture that the Bible claims for the Lordship of Jesus Christ, and that equips students to bring a “big picture” Christian perspective to bear on the principalities and powers of this age (Carpenter 2003, 99).

This echoes Winter’s plea to keep Francis Bacon’s “two books” in dialog with one another and Ganankan’s emphasis on holistic integrated education. But an off-setting trend in Western education since the time of Bacon, being imitated globally, is toward a focus on practical and technical education for jobs, leaving out the big picture of history and God’s purposes in it. Carpenter asks, “How about course offerings in the new Christian universities—is their main idea of how to help ‘build the nation’ pretty much confined, like the secular privates, to supplying more business workers and computer technicians?” (Carpenter 2012, 6). He notes that the new universities also “show other signs of fairly shallow educational development as well, such as very little evidence of a research emphasis. And frequently their libraries and laboratories are scantily equipped” (Carpenter 2012, 6). “And yet,” Carpenter notes, “there are resources available nearby… to help these uncommon [global universities] become agents for thinking Christ into the entire cultural framework of their lands” (Carpenter 2003, 101).

Steps Forward: A Global Consortium

Resources for a solution to the worrisome state of Western and global education might be found in a virtual consortium of universities, a clearing-house for education. Carpenter commented, “What a powerful thing it might be for like-minded Christian universities to make common cause, side-by-side, worldwide” (Carpenter 2012, 8). Recently, William Carey International University (WCIU) hosted a series of focus groups on the topic of global educational networking with representatives from Africa, Latin America, Asia, India, and North America. This group suggested that library resources and curriculum content might be supplied through schools sharing online learning resources through a secure social network.

The advantages are unlimited of combining resources and expertise from all parts of the globe. Multiple courses can be posted online, created by outstanding professors from around the world, not just from the West. Participating universities, or a virtual umbrella organization such as ICHE, would agree to give credit for those courses that meet their standards, with degrees granted for completion of the right assortment of course work. Online electronic book and journal collections owned by partner institutions can be made available to other schools in the virtual consortium who have not been able to afford their own library resources. A small university, such as WCIU, could partner with other small institutions that have specialized research collections, such as Kwame Bediako’s African Christianity collection, to list this
special collection in their World Cataloging system. This would make known to scholars all over the world that the valuable African documents exist and where they are located. Dissertations in the mission world, from all over the world, need to be scanned and made accessible, and at least a summary of the dissertation should be available through the world cataloging system in English, so that, as Andrew Walls advocates, people can know what is being researched and written, and scholars can learn from each other (Walls 2011, 240).

Charles Van Engen, veteran scholar and Fuller Seminary professor, hopes to see this type of virtual consortium become a reality. He compared this approach to a consortium of Boston seminars in which students can choose to get credit from courses from any of the participating seminars. “A school determines the requirements for the degree and students select from the consortium courses. A global consortium for leadership formation would be a great contribution to the Kingdom” (Van Engen 2012).

Conclusion

WCIU envisions global leaders empowered to lead their communities to wholeness and human flourishing. Universities are needed for integrating nation-building skills, character, knowledge, and truth. Augustine felt that “the disciplined, well-ordered mind is better equipped to grasp the truth” (Holmes 2001, 30). Roland Allen continued that line of thinking when he talked about the preparation of men’s minds, through Roman and Greek civilizations, to receive St. Paul’s teaching of the Kingdom of Christ (Allen 1912). The late African theologian, Kwame Bediako talked about the discipline of the nations in terms of:

The conversion of the things that make people into nations—the shared and common processes of thinking; attitudes, world views; perspectives; languages; and the cultural, social and economic habits of thought, behavior and practice. These things and the lives of the people in whom such things find expression—all of this is meant to be within the call of discipleship (Bediako 1996b, 184).

In our ministry strategy today, might we need to plant universities to empower leaders within a society to work toward nation building through education, building toward security of travel and strong laws in order to prepare a place for the Kingdom of God to flourish and spread? The good news is that the Body of Christ contains people with the gifts to “do” or “make” shalom in many different areas: justice, peace-keeping, skill-building for economic independence, health, fighting and eradicating disease, etc. All of these peace-making and nation-building activities can potentially demonstrate the character of God and the values of the Kingdom and bring shalom into the lives of troubled people and societies.

The development of a society, including reduction of poverty, violence, and disease, requires both leaders and followers who value discipline, order, and the pursuit of truth. These are results of higher education. In this sense, the Christian university is an important artifact of Western culture.

References


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