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HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE MORAL REVOLUTION  
(Plenary Session)

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We have been asked to speak with you today on Higher Education and the Moral Revolution. I am grateful that the title refers to a moral revolution rather than a revolution in morality. I am convinced that the seemingly chaotic state of things dramatized but not contained by the campuses of Berkeley and St. Johns may, indeed, say much to those of us with eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to care. You and I -- young or older academics -- have emerged from a culture which often identified morality with moral codes and expected behavior patterns. Each church group, each academic community had its own group-determined grading system for group-determined answers to group-determined exam questions. Morality was largely an expository codification much like a driver's manual in a given state. We had to learn the rules -- and how to break them with impunity -- in Michigan and Missouri, in New Mexico and New York. We took verbal tests on the manuals in ethics classes and action tests on the manuals under supervision. We violated specific tenets in personal situations, sometimes with guilt, sometimes with rationalization, sometimes with conviction. But it seldom occurred to us to question the manuals for their inclusions or exclusions. We learned to live within the system or systems. Sometimes we compromised the system here and there, and no one bothered too much if our compromise didn't alter the basic system too much. Sometimes we compromised ourselves by accommodating to the system and its expectancy behavior demands. But most of us lived within fairly closed societies and the expectancy behavior demands of any one closed society are, I submit, fairly predictable. Mine were the demands of a parochial Roman Catholic environment. Yours may have been the demands of a parochial Bible Belt fundamentalism, of a Jewish ghettoism, or of a smug atheistic intellectualism. Whatever our closed systems, they provided for us a degree of comforting support by that closed system. Objective moral codes must be learned and basically adhered to, but they need not -- indeed, perhaps must not -- be personally made.

I submit that the moral revolution we are witnessing on our campuses today is, indeed, calling the codes into question and rightly so. In my own sub-system students are not only "violating" some of the carefully calibrated norms of morality-behavior with guilt and/or rationalization, but they are calling into question the validity of many of the tenets themselves. The present soul-struggle of my Church today in reexamining its stand on birth control is motivated much more, I believe, by the responsible skepticism of the Church's own members than by the pressure-concern of the Rockefeller Foundation concerning over-population. I am sure that some of the fundamental groups have long been meeting the same responsible skepticism over drinking and dancing and cards. I am sure, too, both from the rush of articles in popular magazines and from common sense, that more sophisticated religious groups and sophisticated student personnel officers are meeting responsible skepticism over any fixed and given propriety in sex relation and in marriage laws that attempt to cover all possible situations with a single prescription or proscription.

At this point, I am obviously vulnerable to the charge that much of skepticism, on both the theoretical and pragmatic levels, may be totally or largely irresponsible, that human beings always have and always will use rationalization to cover their own license and weakness. I accept the charge even before it is made. At the same time, I suggest that our challenge at this moment in time is to accept the skepticism, to encourage it, to nourish it, even to share in it. It is difficult to encourage or demand responsibility for an area of action which we have forbidden or discouraged or ignored. Inasmuch as we as academics, as religious people, as concerned humanists, admit the need for responsible skepticism in every human area and, therefore, in every moral area, we will begin to give our junior colleagues whom we call students the responsibility of freedom. Only if a man is allowed to frame his own question can he be really responsible for his own answer. Only if your students are encouraged to frame even more relevant and profound questions can they be really responsible for relevant and profound answers.

I have said that the moral revolution on our campuses today is, indeed, calling the code-prescriptions into question and rightly so. The most encouraging phenomenon of the questioning is its preoccupation with the "sins" of omission rather than the "sins" of commission of the codes. The Puritan-Jansenist codes had much to say about sex and sobriety but precious little to say about the human rights of minorities and the force of passive resistance. The Puritan-Jansenist codes had much to say about responsible behavior but precious little to say about responsible skepticism of the compromise which society has made at any given time on any given social issue. The comparative closure in which we lived even in the pluralistic society that is America made it comparatively easy, I believe, for the codes of each of the closed systems to endure.

Today, however, you and I in middle age and our students in the blessed and productive naivete of youth live in what I have been calling the ecumenical world of search. Transportation and communication have potentially at least destroyed the ghettos of nationalism. The open and instant press has potentially at least destroyed the ghettos of religious thought and reopened the channels of religious thinking or contemplation. The system of higher education beginning to open itself to all socioeconomic, national, religious, racial groups will experience with growing intensity the stimulation and disorder of this ecumenical searching. The social and philosophical and religious and moral systems will be subject to the personal pressure and cross-pressure of persons interacting in an open society. Students in such an open society within a college or university are not likely to allow the college or university to remain segregated from the real issues of Vietnam and Vatican II, of Watts and India. For the world of open communications reaches into the ivory tower and the fraternity house and asks the ivory tower and the fraternity house to respond to the real world.

Tielhard de Chardin, the Jesuit paleontologist who died in 1957, wrote in an essay in 1920:

"I maintain that it is possible, by following this road, to find substantial reasons for belief in Progress.

The world of human thought today presents a very remarkable spectacle, if we choose to take note of it. Joined in an inexplicable unifying movement men who are utterly opposed in education and in faith find themselves brought together, intermingled, in their common passion for a double truth; namely, that there exists a physical Unity of beings, and that they themselves are living and active parts of it. It is as

though a new and formidable mountain chain had arisen in the landscape of the soul, causing ancient categories to be reshuffled and uniting higgledy-piggledy on every slope the friends and enemies of yesterday: on one side the inflexible and sterile vision of a Universe composed of unalterable, juxtaposed parts, and on the other side the ardor, the faith, the contagion of a living truth emerging from all action and exercise of will. Here we have a group of men joined simply by the weight of the past and their resolve to defend it; there a gathering of neophytes confident of their truth and strong in their mutual understanding, which they feel to be final and complete."

It is "the ardor, the faith, the contagion of a living truth emerging from all action and exercise of will" that can produce, I believe, the social, moral, intellectual evolutionary break-through that modern man needs and must have. Only persons who are responsible skeptics and responsible decision-makers can effect such a break-through. You and I, the middle-age academics are part of one culture involved in producing another: part of a culture of two world wars trying to produce world peace, part of a racist, segregated society trying to produce integration, part of a ruggedly individualistic capitalism trying to produce personal responsibility and social concern, part of a moralistic religious society trying to allow the morality of empathy and compassion. Perhaps the only honest and productive things we can do is to join with our students in the ecumenical world of search in producing the new worlds of our own academic institutions and of our society at large. I cannot afford to question the institution that is my college without the insights of my students. Neither can I afford to question my world at large without their blessed naiveté. I can encourage them and myself to examine and reexamine every tenet of the present codes lest our skepticism be irresponsible and superficial. If I merit their trust by the honesty of my own scrutiny in its rigor and its freedom, we shall become co-searchers and co-makers of the society which one day you and I must leave to them that they may continue the search and the making with their children yet not conceived.