



A Revised Transcript of an Address given by Mr. Steven Esthimer in Chapel during Academic Week, February 1, 1983, St. Mary's College.

The topic which I am going to explore with you is the place of the study of religion in a liberal education.

First, I must ask what a "liberal education" is. St. Mary's presumes to offer such a thing -- it says so in the College catalog. Traditionally, we take this to mean the studies (such as language, literature, philosophy, history, and the abstract sciences) in a college or university intended to provide chiefly general knowledge and to develop the general intellectual capacities, such as reason and judgment, as opposed to professional or vocational skills. But what do we really mean by "education"?

To make my answer to this question clear to you, I must point out that I am taking two things for granted: First, that humans are limited. Time and space keep us relatively fixed in our places, in spite of our imaginations. We cannot live forever; we cannot be everywhere in the universe at once; and we cannot think everything there is to think in the cosmos. The second point, though, seems to fly in the face of the first, because I want also to hold that we are, to a large extent, self-determined as human beings because we can shape our environment (including our bodies) to suit ourselves. We create and discover myths which shape our views of ourselves and our world in general. So, because of our limitations and our flexibility as humans, we formulate ways to get a handle on a world which always outstrips our capacity to know it in its entirety. We perceive our subjects, no matter what they are, even ourselves, through these various myths and theories.

I think that education should involve the interaction between these forms of one's perception and the content of some subject. In and through education we should seek to develop those forms of perception which are most adequate to our subjects, whether they are found within the human or natural worlds. In addition, in education, we should seek to enlarge the learner's vision and teach him or her how a subject might or might not be employed in his experience.

Now, we may enlarge vision in many ways, but let us try to avoid the transmission of a rigid, dogmatic outlook from teacher to student, parent to child. Rather, I would say that education should give the student (and the teacher) the freedom to search, interpret, and evaluate his or her findings. This means that questions and imagination become the primary tools of the teacher, and the discovery of an

answer becomes the burden of the student. The notion that knowledge or answers are predetermined must be abandoned if true education is to take place. The way for novel perspectives must be kept open by allowing the teacher and student to explore and compare results. In all of this, the teacher must direct by identifying the questions and indicating resources, but he must not block passage to new answers by insisting that there is already a single best answer. And when the student arrives at a conclusion, the teacher cannot merely say that the answer is as good as any other. The teacher should challenge the student with a contrasting conclusion. Education is not simply a matter of dispensing facts. It is also a matter of critically evaluating the ways in which facts are established, interpreted and patterned.

I can reduce all of what I want to say on this point to this: Do we learn to pass, or do we think to learn? In education, we must do the latter because there is so much to think about in the process of learning how to be a human. We are unique in the world of living things in that we have so much we must learn in order to know who and what we are as beings. We learn, though, by thinking first.

Now, on the matter of "liberal education," the "liberal" refers to the general nature of the studies that are appropriate in the process of learning who and what we are as human beings. As I have said, language, literature, art, music, philosophy, history, psychology, sociology, mathematics, and the natural sciences are all parts of this rather large picture. In addition, the numerous interconnections of all of these fields of human experience and inquiry must be sought in order to construct a unified concept of human being. Finally, the term "liberal" refers to the goal of promoting growth, broadening vision, and liberating the mind from the entrapment of blind tradition, ignorance, and superstition.

Now, I move on to the first part of the topical question: what do we mean by the "study of religion"?

I think that a distinction must be made between the teaching of religion and the teaching about religion. Teaching about religion is not aimed at evoking commitment. First and foremost it attempts to transmit facts and formulate perspectives associated with religion. Instead, for example, of making the claim that Jesus is Lord, this approach would teach that a central notion of Christianity is the claim that Jesus is Lord. Presumably such a method insures greater objectivity than the teaching of religion. The latter is, of course, the explicit aim of many church-related schools, more concerned with gaining converts and retaining believers than fully explicating the

subject matter at hand. At St. Mary's you will find that religion is approached in such a way that we may teach you about the major traditions of the West and East. Criticism and open discussion of questions and issues are central to the academic approach to religion as a field of study. Yet this is not incompatible with religious belief. In fact, there is an important connection, a personal dimension to the study of religion.

We see the overall subject of the liberal education, the human being, as a vital, dynamic, acting person, then we must find a personal element in all conduct. Even in the conduct of scientific inquiry, it is always a person who is behind the inquiry, observing, judging, and making decisions. In all human actions there is a commitment to or trust in a principle which at the time is not itself in question. To recognize this does not lead to the destruction of our pursuit of knowledge. It should lead us to keep in mind the fact that a human being is a whole being, constituted by a body, mind and spirit, all of which come into play when the person acts. It should be a commonplace, in education, that one be concerned for the whole person.

While the teaching of religion may have a personal dimension, it is also possible to view the study of religion as paradigmatic for the overall approach to the liberal arts. Here is what I mean: since the phenomenon under study are so varied and rich, careful students in the study of religion are forced to acknowledge the limitations of every method they use. That, in turn, frees them from blind obedience to the canons and dogma. We have many of the questions, and the resources, but the way to the answers and conclusions about what is going on in the practice of any religion are never finally established. The general technique of education which I outlined earlier is always in force in the study of religion. Because the aim in all religions is access to something that is ultimately and explicitly abstract, and of "another world," those who study religion must remain open to new ways to conceive of the inconceivable. Insofar as that openness is central of the study of religion, we have an excellent example in that field of how one can truly pursue a liberal education.

I ultimately want students to think critically about their own religious traditions or what they have for perhaps many taken for granted in connection with any aspect of life. Who and what a person is depends in large part on how she sees herself fitting into or not fitting into one of our culture's largest institutions: the Church. I think that ideally the St. Mary's student should find her way back to her church or synagogue and become a resource or an irritant to the minister, priest or rabbi. Religion is discovered only in dialogue. Religion can be studied only in dialogue, since there are no predetermined, fixed answers. Religion is not a closed discipline, any more than philosophy or the natural sciences. Religion does not supply intellectual answers in a final sense. Instead it helps us to formulate questions about experience in a particular way and points us in a direction where some provisional resolutions may be discerned. And it can, accordingly, be viewed as an academic discipline which contributes to human self-understanding. For some persons traditional religious notions may be the an-

swer. But broadly understood, the study of religion is an open approach to the issues and problems of life all over the

world. This is also the aim of a liberal education.

Thank you for listening.

## STUDENTS LEAVING ST. MARY'S

Karen Lado, UNC-CH; Florence Norris, UNC-CH; Ellen Truner, Salem, Hollins; Susanna Langley, Wake Forest; and Gray Ogden, Presbyterian College.

The Seniors are: Mary Glenn Barwick, NCSU; Barbara Brame, College of Charleston; Charlotte Cochran, College of Charleston; Ruth Cox, UNC-CH, ECU; Ann Diedrick, College of Charleston; Marion Dudley, ECU; Laura Fox, College of Charleston; Stuart High, NCSU; Emily Longley, NCSU, UNC-CH; LuAnne O'Bannon, UNC-CH; Michele Pridgen, College of Charleston; Mary Ragsdale, UNC-CH; Kathryn Ray, UNC-CH; Mary Duke Sanders, UNC-CH; Lynn Snead, NCSU; Bryant Tanner, ASU; Paula Williams, UNC-CH; Robin Hardy, UNC-CH; and Robin Crummie, UNC-CH.

Please note that although these are acceptances, these are not necessarily the final destinations of our SMC graduating classes.

Some Sophomores and Seniors have been accepted to different colleges for the upcoming 83-84 school year. Those sophomores are:

Molly Brooks, UNC-CH; Nancy Dubose, UNC-CH; Susan Sawfield, NCSU; Mary Beth Hughes, ECU; Amy Hurka, UNC-CH; Carline Johnson, UNC-CH; Lynn Jones, Va. Tech; Julie Karnes, UNC-CH; Sydney Kepley, Peace, Meredith and NCSU; Diane Lee, UNC-CH; Elizabeth Rouse, UNC-CH; Katherine Sutschenko, NCSU; Virginia Smith, UNC-CH; Susan Somers, ECU; Lisa Spruill, UNC-CH, Spelman College, Fisk University; Crystal Stout, ECU, ASU; Margaret Sydnor, St. Andrews; Cree Taylor, University of Iowa; Jo Carol Walters, Brenau College, Meredith; Ann Whitaker, Duke; Susan White, ASU; Amy Younge, UNC-CH and Laurie Garlington, NYU.

The accelerated Juniors are: Holly Tulford, UNC-CH;

## Just in Case You're Interested

On the first day of Muse Week, Mrs. Angela Davis Gardner came to speak. Mrs. Gardner, who lives in Raleigh, has recently published her first novel. Her book, *Felice*, is a critical success, and has been named a Book of the Month Club Alternate Selection. During the course of the evening, Mrs. Gardner read selections from *Felice* and answered questions from members of the audience. Basically, *Felice* is the story of

an orphaned girl's life in a convent in Nova Scotia, Canada, during the twenties. The girl, Felice, possesses a lovely imagination, as well as a strong sense of religion, and the two sometimes come into conflict. Furthermore, Felice must also deal with the normal problems of growing up. Mrs. Gardner's presentation was well-received by her audience. Anyone interested in reading *Felice* will find a copy of it in our library.



St. Mary's Chapel

by Jerry Miller