

THE PLACE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES  
IN A WESTERN UNIVERSITY<sup>1</sup>

In the long history of man, not the least interesting moments have been those ebullient and often creative occasions when two of his civilizations have met and mingled. One thinks most readily of the Hellenistic period, that entrancing millennium in the Near East from Alexander to Muhammad, which gave rise to so much ferment and so much of permanent and profound consequence for all our lives. One might think also, perhaps, of "Indo-China," as designating not a political entity today but a cultural occasion and achievement in the classical past; or of the Muslims of India, who also for a millennium have for good or ill been the children as it were of a broken home—itsself based on a shotgun wedding. These, it might be argued, would repay intensive study in our day, for an understanding of intercultural contact, more richly than can the oversimplified instances, dear to the anthropologist, of the one-sided impact of massive, dynamic "civilization" on the so-called underdeveloped cultures of our contemporary "primitives." Yet these occasions in the past of civilizations in mutual impingement, fascinating though they be and instructive, and

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deserving, I think, of much more attention than they currently command, nonetheless adumbrate only partially what is happening in our world today. It is something unique that is going on before our eyes.

For the first time on earth one civilization, the Western, is spreading over the entire planet; relentlessly, sometimes cruelly, sometimes constructively. Yet at the same time, the great civilizations of the Orient are themselves upsurging into dynamic renewal. China, India, the Islamic world, are all reviving their self-assertiveness. What will come of this interpenetration of cultures, this simultaneous westernization and oriental-ization of the world? Less aloofly, what can we make come of it? How can we in the West develop our own culture so that it is no longer hated and feared in Asia? How can we learn to get along with alien peoples, to become adequately cosmopolitan? How can each of man's cultures evolve a new ingredient: compatibility?

Our universities, as custodians and nourishers of our culture, are by questions such as these involved in new responsibilities. The task is a double one, and of imposing proportions. First, there is the training of students: rearing a generation that is intelligently aware of civilizations other than our own. This must be done both at the level of a few specialists, and, more diffusely, as setting a world context for the studies of every educated man. Secondly, there is creative research: pursuing questions for which answers do not yet exist. Here, the task is not only one of discovering new factual knowledge, but also of evolving new methods of inquiry and a fundamentally new human attitude. I think it not too fanciful to compare it to the introduction of science into the universities—which has involved more than the training of technicians: it has meant also the development of a quite new outlook, the scientific spirit. This spirit, once developed, has reached out into every corner of the campus; and it is surely not unfair to say that the problem posed by its relation to the earlier, humanities, tradition, which was the universities' original and basic rationale, remains still unsolved.

Similarly, it seems certain that the construction of any adequate intercultural program will involve not only teaching about Asia but also, as a prerequisite of understanding, the discovery and eliciting of new attitudes, both to ourselves and to other peoples, and to the world in which we and they live. This, in itself, is monumental enough. In addition, the problem will, I imagine, remain long unsolved as to the relation between this new duty and the original, still crucial, supremely valuable function of a university, whereby our own civilization, our most precious heritage, is cher-

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ished and organized, purveyed to succeeding generations, and creatively extrapolated.

Is this too grandiose? I suggest that the problem can be appreciated only if viewed in some such dimensions. The actual working out in curricular and administrative detail of what is to be done will depend on the local situation, structure, and tradition in each university. More fundamental are the concepts and interpretation that obtain of what needs to be done, and our understanding, if we can clarify this, of the profound process through which we are hurrying. These are the matters to which I should like to give attention.

Some clarification is gained by our very noting that already our universities accommodate, and indeed are constituted by, two orientations not fully integrated. There is the original orientation of the humanities, stemming from Greece and the Church, and stressing man's cultural heritage, his understanding of the world, and his pursuit of truth. Secondly, there is the scientific orientation, stemming from the first, though in its applied aspects diverging from it and stressing man's natural environment, his control of the world, and his pursuit of action. From both of these stem oriental studies in their present form—to constitute a new, third orientation, influenced by the other two, and soon, no doubt, once it is somewhat developed, to influence them in turn. For it is part of my persuasion that the study of cultures other than one's own is too large a matter wholly and for long to fit within and to be subsumed under one of the orientations already extant. The university would betray its inherent nature if it failed to epitomize, transmit, and develop the civilization that for two thousand years we have laboriously built up in the West. It would also, of course, but unthinkable now, betray itself if it failed to preserve and develop the technological command of the environment which scientific man is achieving. But, further, it would fail to meet the new situation if it either neglected man's other cultures now before us, or if, more plausibly, it succumbed to the temptation of trying to subordinate this task to either of the other two.

Let us see how the two traditions have brought us, in these matters, to the present situation. First, and in several senses, basic to the issue: there has been the matter simply of increasing human knowledge. There is a subtlety here, not unparadoxical. For one must grasp the fact that this vast impulse towards understanding and knowledge, this boundlessly inquisitive curiosity that insists upon exploring the universe and man, is peculiarly Western; it is a striking and crucial characteristic of our par-

ticular civilization. If our civilization dies, this eccentricity may die with it. Indeed, if our civilization loses touch with its own past, especially Greece, this impulse towards dispassionate investigation may dry up, or at least the funds to support it may disappear.

Yet the object of our curiosity is not limited, like its motivation, to our own community. It has become increasingly recognized that there is in other societies (as in other galaxies) a vast area of knowledge to be brought within the purview of the university in its essential task. A brilliant and impressive instance of how this kind of task has been tackled might be the development of ancient Near Eastern history in a few outstanding academic centers: the extending of our knowledge of the origin and early development of human civilization, giving new horizons to man's imagination and knowledge, new depth to his understanding, new realism to his self-consciousness.

Secondly, there is the more recent, more practical, more sudden task to which the universities have addressed themselves, chiefly through the emergence of "area studies" centers. These have arisen not primarily out of the inner impetus towards disinterested knowledge, but in response to a stringent practical demand—the need for "experts," for men who can deal with concrete and specific problems that have arisen because of intercultural activity, particularly at the governmental level. And here comes into play that brilliant and dangerous Dewey-esque half-truth, according to which "thought is interrupted action." This, of course, is an oversimplification. It leaves out too much; specifically, it leaves out thought in the humanities tradition. However, it approximates not too inadequately to the pragmatic reflection of the scientist, especially the applied scientist; and it characterizes perhaps not too inadequately one dominant aspect of the recent development of universities on this continent. The vast expansion of America has been against the frontier, has been economic and industrial achievement, has dealt with things. But in its new expansion it must deal with persons. It faces now not the open frontier, but other civilizations. The kind of thought that thereupon emerges is unquestionably interrupted action. Our society's leaders have plunged headlong into dealing with new peoples across the world. It was when these leaders stumbled and fell, when their policies were obviously going awry, when it hit them hard that one could not operate in Chungking and Calcutta and Cairo with quite the same procedures and the same success as one did at home, that they turned to the universities to ask for the kind of thought that will enable them to go back to their action and to carry it through to

success. This is the kind of thing that leaders expect from a university—and that they get in the fields of agriculture, medicine, technology, and the like. When an unexpected problem, an unfamiliar obstacle, confronts an on-going activity, the universities are called upon to solve that problem, to manipulate that obstacle.

It would be idle to deny that this principle underlies, and doubtless will continue to underlie, the stark and perhaps exhilarating expansion of oriental studies in our day. It is the source of money, of students, of whole new programs. But it would be equally idle to deny that it is full of danger, both to our studies and to the world. There is the danger of “being used”; of subordinating knowledge to policy, rather than vice versa. There is the subtler danger of acquiring seeming knowledge that is, in fact, false. For it happens to be a law of this universe in which we live that you cannot understand persons if you treat them as objects. You misinterpret a culture if you approach it in order to manipulate it. A civilization does not yield its secrets except to a mind that approaches it with humility and love. Knowledge pursued *ad majorem Americae gloriam* will, in the realm of oriental, as indeed in all human studies, fail to be sound knowledge. The reverence and humility before the facts of nature which the natural scientist had to learn, before objectivity as an inviolable principle, must be supplemented by the orientalist with a reverence and humility before civilizations other than his own.

Another point in this connection that it would take far too long to develop here in full but on which it seems to me imperative to enter at least a passing protest, concerns the concept of “discipline.” As an academic divisional concept this has to a considerable degree in American universities replaced the quite different notion of “subject.” It has done so largely because of the preoccupation with the technique and method rather than with the object of study, and, correspondingly, with manipulation and control rather than appreciation. The recent emphasis on interdisciplinary study is a backhanded recognition of the inadequacy of the whole procedure; but it is no solution. Also, the confusion in our studies over the question of “discipline” versus “area specialty” has in part arisen, I suggest, from the inadequacy, I would even say invalidity, of the presuppositions on which the “discipline” idea rests; and, in my submission, accordingly of the whole manipulative approach to the cultures of the Orient. There is a metaphysical deficiency here with and of which the discipline devotees are not concerned or aware and with which I suspect the university as a whole must come to terms before any handling of oriental studies can be

satisfactorily thought out. This inadequacy and invalidity, this deficiency, of course obtain for all studies of man; the role of oriental studies simply makes the failure conspicuous.

In this matter, as in the matter of reverence and humility, the fact is that any student mind must, to operate effectively, have a loyalty that transcends its immediate group, whether professional or cultural. In oriental studies, it must transcend both professional and cultural at once; and there's the rub. I cannot pursue this here; let me return to my simpler proposition, that a university cannot glibly subordinate its study of the Orient to the pragmatic desire of its society to cope with the Orient operationally.

I do not at all mean that we must accept the theoretical but reject the practical aspects of orientalist studies. The ivory tower has gone, and must stay gone. Much of the stimulus and vitality and creativity of our studies comes and must increasingly come from our close, however purely intellectual, involvement in the greatest practical issues of our age. In fact, I think it not unfair to suggest that orientalism is strikingly contributing to the revitalization of humanities studies in our day—perhaps as much as the reverse—for several reasons, of which one is the close tie in our work between cultural and practical: the evident utility here of pure contemplative understanding. Another reason is the close tie in our work between detailed research and broad interpretation: the patent unansweredness, but urgency, of great questions of significance as well as fact.

I think we must insist strongly that orientalist studies are tackling, and must strive genuinely and critically to tackle well, the deep practical issues of a multi-cultural world. Only, we must also see clearly that it is part of our job as orientalists to insist that the problems themselves, the practical issues to be solved, be discerned from a global, and not a local or one-sided point of view; and also from an historical, not a superficially “modernist” one. We shall have failed in our task as orientalists if our society continues to imagine that the problem is how we in the West can deal with the Orient. The practical problem is rather how man throughout the world can deal with the fact that he is separated from his neighbor by a cultural frontier. The kind of expert that we need is the man who has learned to appreciate new values; who can, with sympathetic insight and imaginative sensitivity, interpret behavior, thinking, and feeling which proceed on new and different presuppositions. The kind of humanist we need is much the same—one whose mind and personality can handle a

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multiplicity of value systems, and yet at the same time retain and, indeed, deepen his own integrity, his own response to value.

To learn to understand, with imaginative sympathy and objective validity, the other cultures of the world, must not be at the expense of appreciating our own culture, or keeping loyalty to it. On the contrary, it must be grounded rather in the recognition that it is of the genius of our culture (and in this it would seem to be alone among man's systems) to understand the world in which we live, including the civilizations which have preceded and those which surround us. And on the practical side also, it is only so that we can serve our culture; for only so can our society learn to live with (not to dominate) the others who share the planet and its problems with us.

May I close with an illustration on the technical side, concrete and relatively innocuous, yet one which affects us all professionally and closely. It is the question of libraries; of how to fit oriental materials into our university library systems not designed for them. To date, "library science," which handles our books, has been essentially a Western affair. The body of knowledge, the conventions, the techniques and procedures that constitute it, and also the underlying concepts, some explicit and others unconscious, that undergird it, are a reflection, as they have been a product, of Western civilization. No one directly involved needs to be reminded that all these are applicable to the materials and concepts of other cultures, only with modification or elaboration. The adaptation required is proving to be an immense task. The science, like other disciplines (here I use the word advisedly), is, of course, in process of growth. One of the next steps that it must take, and indeed is already in process of taking, though rather mincingly, is in the direction of an expansion and reformulation by which it may become a cosmopolitan science—adequate to the new intercultural age.

What has been achieved already is based on the data of Western civilization. The problem before us is not merely that of working out from this starting point new concepts and procedures that will apply to other civilizations, the Chinese, the Indian, the Islamic, though this is important and exacting. It takes, and will take, much time. More creative, and more fascinating, is the further task of working out concepts and procedures that will make possible the handling of materials from several civilizations at once and will be able to deal also with their interrelationships. One can devise a set of classification categories, procedures, etc., relevant to, say, Islamic civilization as the Library of Congress or Cutter

set are relevant to the West. But what we need is a library system that can handle both at once. This is subtler than the Library of Congress or many others have yet sensed.

I use this simply as one example of the fact that the problem of oriental studies in a university is not that of adding one more element to an established pattern, but rather of a change in pattern so that it will fit a new kind of world. A further illustration of the same kind of point might be taken from the very topic of our present discussion. The problem for the West is real. Yet it is neither isolated, nor yet precisely typical. The modern university has historical foundations in the West, yet is today a world-wide phenomenon. Every culture now has a problem of understanding its fellows. Nonetheless, it would be an over-simplification to seek the universalizing of our topic merely by rephrasing it as "the role of studies of an alien culture in a modern university." For it is not valid to suppose that the problem in, say, India is simply "the place of occidental studies in a university." This will eventually perhaps become a problem for the Indian universities. But the problem for those universities that today is really comparable, I think, yet which illustrates the subtleties involved, is, rather, what is symbolized in the problem of introducing the vernacular as a medium of instruction. This is not simply a question of translating a whole body of material, or even of transposing a set of concepts or a method of thinking, from English into Hindi or the like. It is that; but also it is the equally stupendous task of adapting the very concept of a university to another culture—of taking an alien and friable institution, and hammering it into continuity with a today dynamic, indigenous tradition. Others must find a motivation for a university; for the study of their own culture, let alone of ours. Such universities as they have are Western universities, and need adapting. I suggest that the task facing them in this adaptation is not unrelated to the kind of task that faces us in adapting our universities to the fact that we no longer live, as our parents and ancestors have done, in one civilization. We live, and all the more our children will, in a civilization within a functional context of many civilizations.

The over-all problem should perhaps be worded: "The role of a university in a multi-cultural world." The problem of oriental studies in a university is the problem of the emergence of that new kind of university that will be apt in our new kind of world.