

# Education for a New Civilisation in the New Millennium

*Dr. Paulos Mar Gregorios Metropolitan inaugurated the International Ecumenical Assembly on 16th January 1995. The text of his address follows :*

Let me at the outset thank the organisers of this Ecumenical Assembly for their bold, timely, wise and insightful initiative in calling together such an assembly of Christian Colleges and Universities all over the world. The educational institutions run by Christians seem to be steadily losing their reputation, as they gradually fall, not only in standards of character and academic excellence, but more basic, in a Christian vision which inspires and empowers. As leadership passes, both in the Church and in Christian institutions, from men and women of vision and commitment, to bureaucrats and fundraisers, the vision fades and everything becomes pedestrian and painfully prosaic. Christian higher education is a casualty to this process. The educational endeavour of Christians all over the world stand in need to total rethinking and radical renewal powered by a fresh vision; doctoring up the old ideas and prevailing structures will simply not do. I hope we can begin to see that vision here.

I am particularly privileged to be here, because I have pleasant memories of the not insignificant role I was asked to play, along with Fr. Mathias and Dr. Dickinson, in setting up what is now known as AIACHE, and to cochair that most memorable inaugural Assembly of the Board of Christian Higher Education at Tambaram, Madras in December 1966. This seems to be the only genuinely ecumenical institution that has survived the tosses and turns in the climate of ecumenical cooperation in the last three decades. Credit goes to the more than two hundred Christian colleges of India, and to the leadership of people like Fr. Theo Mathias and Dr. Mani Jacob; I salute them and congratulate them for this new initiative on a global plane.

In what follows my intention is not so much to please as to provoke; I am aware to the dangers in such an exercise. Frankness can be easily misunderstood as rudeness; but then undue politeness may also do violence to the truth. So let me begin with some fundamental

statements on which it is easier to agree; I note that many in my audience are more endowed on the administrative aspect of higher education than on the vision that should power it.

The first affirmation I have to make may seem somewhat platitudinous. I have come to realise that educational reform is rather futile, unless it is an integral aspect of social reform. The idea that educational reform can precede social reform and can even engineer social change has proved to be largely a false assumption. I myself have learned to focus on social reform as the larger matrix in which educational reform has to seek its place.

A closely related second affirmation that I would like to make is that the present crisis in higher education

is in the first place a cultural crisis, and cannot be fully understood except in terms of some cultural changes which have overtaken us in a scientific-technological, urban-industrial, liberal-capitalist civilisation.

Let me illustrate. Recently I was doing some reading for a paper on the ethics of genetic engineering in the sumptuous library of a prominent American

University founded by Christians. When I got tired of a lot of dry technical stuff on the subject of my investigation, I turned for some diversion to a university catalogue that was lying by in the Reference section of the library. I was intrigued by the preponderance of courses on business management and money making. I decided to pull out from the shelves a catalogue from the university of the 1950's and make a comparative analysis, I saw that the trend was away from courses on human living together, on human cultural history, on humanist concerns in general. Of course there were the usual new courses on women's concerns and on the environment, which I welcomed. But the financial well being of the university seemed to depend on the large number of new courses on money making by trade, commerce and industry as



well as by financial wizardry. This simply reflects the trend in society towards commercialisation and commoditisation of all values, and of education itself.

To me this is an advanced stage in the deterioration of human society, and consequently of higher education as well. I am reminded of the New Left fulmination of the student revolts of 1968 in California and France. I remember Daniel Cohn-Bendit's Marcusean thesis that the present urban industrial civilisation is totally dependent on the universities and other institutions of higher technical education which supplied the enormous fund of trained manpower needed to run that rotten society. The leader of the revolting French students was arguing that the easiest way to demolish that society and pave the way for the new, which would of course, by the inexorable laws of Marxist dialectics, arise spontaneously from the ashes of the old, was to destroy the University as such. And I remember that students in the University of California on their own, as well as the students at French Universities like Nanterre and Sorbonne in league with the trade unions, made a bold and temporarily successful effort to take over the universities and run them. Those were the roaring Sixties and the frustrations of that over-optimistic decade of the post-war baby boom younger generation seemed to have thrown a wet blanket over all aspirations of that generation for a new society.

Well as we stand at the threshold of a new millennium, some of those aspirations seem to be rekindled in the minds of many. Let me confess to you that I am very skeptical about the theme of this Conference: "Preparing the Humankind for the Next Millennium through Ecumenical Partnership in Higher Education". For a number of reasons. Quite apart from the clumsiness and awkward grammar of the formulation, the very assumption that we Christians can prepare Humanity for its task in the next millennium, smacks to me of rabid Christian cultural hybris. Equally fallacious is the assumption that it is higher education which is going to do that preparing. Higher education today is an entrenched vested interest within the structure of the old. It can neither transform society, nor even transform itself.

I remember again the famous Kothari Commission report of the Sixties on Reforming Higher Education in India. I have great respect for the two main creators of the report, Mr. Kothari, one of our most eminent scientists and humanists of that generation, and Mr. Jai Prakash Naik, a devoted Gandhian and a self-sacrificing servant of the India. They were both good friends of mine. In the very opening pages of that report one finds however the strange contention that education should be regarded as an investment. The authors of that report probably meant that if we put more money and resources into education, that investment would bring in profits for the nation in terms of accelerated socio-economic development and overall increase in the Gross Domestic

Product.

That may be true, but is there not a basic and unforgivable distortion in making the production of more commodities the driving purpose of education? The same philosophy is reflected in that odd name of the Indian Ministry of Government within which the educational concern is presently lodged - Ministry of Human Resource Development. Whose property are these "Human Resources"? Who disposes them for the "development" of who or what? Education and Culture, the main components of this Ministry - are they resources for someone or something else, or are they ends in themselves?

In that context I would like to introduce the main argument of my brief address this morning. The English words Education and Culture in their current sense are creations of the 18th century European Enlightenment, and embody in themselves some of the basic assumptions of that European Enlightenment, which shape the present global civilisation within which we are living. If we want to know what needs to be done about Education and Culture today we need a thorough examination of these assumptions, for which I have no time here. I have made an attempt in my last two books: "Enlightenment East and West" published by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Shimla (1990) and in "A Light Too Bright - The Enlightenment Today" published by the State University of New York Press, Albany, New York.

In 1784, five years before the French Revolution, there was an interesting debate among prominent German philosophers in the pages of the *Berlinische Monatsschrift*. In the September 1784 issue of that wissenschaftliche journal, the famous Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn wrote:

"The words Enlightenment, Culture and Education (*Aufklaerung, Kultur, Bildung*) are still newcomers in our language (German). They belong at present to the language of the elite (*Bauchersprache*). The common people understand nothing of all this. Should this be taken to mean that the substance of it is still quite new to us? I do not think so... Education, Culture and Enlightenment, are modifications of social life, effects of the drives and desires of human beings to better their social existence."

First we note that all words receive a new sense with the Industrial Revolution and the Bourgeois Enlightenment. Mendelssohn is right in saying that the substance of the three words are not new to the Europeans in the 18th century. But it is a fact that 18th century Europeans gave a totally new connotation to the three words. And it is that new 18th century European connotation that most of the educated people of today are familiar with, in any part of the world. We will refer to that new connotation in a moment.

Second we note that the three words Education, Culture and Enlightenment in their modern sense came

into being jointly and simultaneously, as ideals to be pursued by the bourgeoisie, and to be kept away from the masses. Moses Mendelssohn in that article of Septemeber 1784 made the clear distinction between Human Enlightenment (Menschenaufklaerung) and citizens' or Bourgeois Enlightenment (Buergheraufklaerung). The two are in conflict. If all are enlightened, who will do the dirty work. With enlightened workers how can the Industrial Revolution make any progress ? One had to wait till Marx and Engels six decades later to hear about a Workers' Enlightenment or Arbieteraufklaerung.

Thirdly, there is no way of seeing a new vision on higher education in general or Christian higher education in particular without looking at the new meaning Europe gave to Education, Culture and Enlightenment in the 18th century.

### The European Enlightenment

The concept of Enlightenment is a classical Indian concept, most clearly developed in the Buddhist tradition. It meant a new perspective on reality that comes about in the wake of years of discipline, prayer and meditation, leading to the overcoming of all dualisms : subjective - objective, knower-known, humanity-world, matter-consciousness. It is samyag - sambodhi, the joyful resolution of all contradictions and conflicts, which puts an end to all questions, doubts and perplexities, as well as to all lust and greed and desire, which are at the root of suffering. It is the experience of the Person, the individual seeker as he overcomes all individualism, and realizes his/her unity with the whole of Reality. Basically it is ananda, pure joy and self-fulfilment through transcending the self.

Buddhist Enlightenment, like the modern Secular Enlightenment, was a reaction against the excesses of religion. BE ruled out, like the SE, all reference to God, as irrelevant to truth; both proscribed external authority, especially the authority of religion and scriptures, both emphasized self-reliance in making judgments and decision; both were opposed to ritual and dogma. There the similarities seem to end.

The difference between the two seem to be well reflected in the civilisations which they engendered. The Buddhist Enlightenment, which was also in a sense secular like the European one, did not separate "fact" and "value"; in fact it did not recognize something called "fact" existing independent of the observer. So it did not abstract something called "value" out of reality. The fact-value separation is the crux of both the secular and the so-called scientific.

There is growing perception today within modern science itself that it does not really produce knowledge of truth in the deeper sense, but yields only useful operational constructs. Christians are slow in understanding the implications of that perception. In fact

it questions the truth-value of science as a whole, science which till a while ago claimed a monopoly on truth. Once we recognize that we will learn that there is no way of reconstructing higher education without questioning the foundations of our civilisation; these foundations were generated by the European Enlightenment and its Grand Secular Heresy. I shall call them the EE and the GSH. The EE affirmed the autonomy and self-sufficiency of the Human, its freedom from all external authority, from religion and from tradition.

The GSH in turn reinforces this repudiation of external authority and the enthronement of human reason as supreme. Modern Science flourished in this context and manifested its technological prowess that enabled the nuclear holocausts of Nagasaki and Hiroshima, huge engineering feats, and space travel to cap it. We were impressed by the achievements of science/technology and also in the process taken in for a while by its claims to a monopoly on all knowing and doing.

I wish to submit to you the thesis that there is no way to reconstruct higher education without exposing the false assumption of Modern Science, the European Enlightenment and the Grand Secular Heresy which audaciously proposed that we limit our attention to the world open to our senses. It is clear that the EE was wrong in its repudiation of all tradition and all transcendent reference in our knowledge. It is also clear that the GSH was wrong in marginalising, privatising and individualising religion, and in limiting, our perspective of the material and the empirical. It is clear that Modern Science has led us astray in pretending to have a monopoly on true knowledge, relegating not only religion, but also art, literature and traditional perspectives on religion to the margin of the human consciousness and the academy.

If Christians have the guts to stand up to the Establishment, they should join with the followers of other religions like Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Taoism to challenge the secular assumptions of our civilisation and the European Enlightenment which engendered it. We should not be browbeaten by intellectuals, misdirected political leaders, who advocate and propagate secularism as an unquestionable dogma and a panacea for all our social ills. A Christian University which challenges the Grand Secular Heresy is likely to be mercilessly persecuted. But if Christians cannot risk some persecution for the sake of the truth, what authenticity can their faith have ?

### The Question of Culture

As I stated above, the European Enlightenment gave a new meaning to the word Culture. The same applies to its Indian equivalent, the Samskrita word samskara. Let us not forget that the very name of Samskrita language denotes the language of the cultured elite, as distinguished from Prakrita, the language of the hoi polloi.



But neither *samskara* nor *Kultur* nor even the English Culture carried the modern corporate anthropological sense of the term : a whole way of life of a people : practices, rituals, symbol systems, institutions, material artefacts, literary and religious texts, ideas, images and beliefs. It meant in its pre-Enlightenment use, cultivated refinement of the individual person in art, music, literature, philosophy, learning and skills - not a corporate ensemble of institutions, beliefs and symbol systems.

The European Enlightenment created the corporate concept of culture - because the Masters of the European Enlightenment wanted to keep the Enlightenment to the "Cultured Elite", the educated bourgeoisie, the *gebildete Staende*, the *ausgebildete Mensch*. Education was the door to that Cultured Elite.

Our whole concept of modern education is tainted with the elitism of its origins in the European Enlightenment. For the bourgeoisie the contrast was not between the rich and the poor, but between the cultured and the uncultured. Higher education was especially conceived as the royal gateway for entry into the cultured elite; So was secondary education, the *gymnasien* meant for the children of the privileged.

Of course the early years of the European Enlightenment coincide with the Golden Age of German Culture - the 40 years from 1780 to 1820. Strangely enough this was a time when Germany was helplessly divided and politically powerless. At a time when West European powers in general were adventurously expanding into the world in a merciless and uncultured imperialist aggression, Germany chose to excel in Culture - in philosophy, music, literature and the arts - Kant (1724 - 1804), Goethe (1749-1832), Schelling (1775-1804), Schleiermacher (1768-1834), Schopenhauer (1788-1860), Hegel (1770-1831), Herder (1744-1803), Novalis (1772-1801) and so on. It was that German *Kultur* that the educated classes were to imbibe, in order to be initiated into the privileged and enlightened class.

Marx and Engels, who came in the wake of the Golden Age of German Culture and Creativity, wanted to take Culture and Enlightenment away from the grip of the bourgeoisie, by introducing the base-superstructure kind of edifice to reflect the nature of society. Culture was not the product of the elite, but of a social base where the workers, using science-technology as means of production and regulating the relations of production through the political economy, create the superstructure of thought and art, culture and enlightenment. Culture, as belonging to the Super-structure, was largely shaped by forces and relations operating at the base level, not by individual geniuses. The latter are created and sustained by the social forces.

For Marx-Engels, children of the European Enlightenment, Science was supreme; religion was an anachronism to be superseded, a hang-over from the feudal system. Scientific progress is the motor of society,

an idea which Jawaharlal Nehru shared with them. Not only is ideology produced by comprehensive generalisations from science; even art is only "illustrative science" to be put at the service of the march of social progress. Marx suspected not only religion but also classical culture as an "opiate of the masses". Culture was created by science and technology, a workers' culture opposed to traditional humanistic culture. Based on that later leftists began talking about a "scientific culture", a "scientific ethos" and a "scientific temper", all of which Nehru and the Nehruvians simply adapted.

Marxism in this century, before its tragic collapse, adopted a more healthy view : "the harmonious integration of scientific, technical and humanistic culture, the peculiarities and social functions of each being fully retained". (A. Ya. Zis, "On the Question of the Correlation Between the Structures of Philosophical and Artistic Thought" in "Marxist-Leninist Thought Aesthetics and The Arts", Progress Publishers, Moscow 1980, p. 118).

It was in 1959 that C.P. Snow, from an avowedly anti-Marxist perspective, sought to drive a wedge between "Two Cultures", a so-called Science - based culture and a so-called Art-based one. That effort, despite the wide publicity it received for a few decades, has now fizzled out. We really cannot make that cutting apart of Arts and Science.

But a new vision in Christian higher education must take the problem of culture at greater depth. It is not sufficient to deal with the "Emerging Agenda of Peace" - that is Caring for the Creation, Sustainable Development, Women's Empowerment, Global Interdependence, North-South Co-operation, etc., all of which fall short of questioning the existing elitist European Enlightenment Culture.

One of the fundamental propositions I want to make here in relation to Culture and Higher Education is the simple observation that religion is integral to culture and all the so-called cultural values of a secular society have religious roots. Apart from these two hundred years when the Grand Secular Heresy prevailed unchallenged culture, including European culture, has its matrix in religion - not just Judaism and Christianity, but also Gnosticism, the Mystery Religions, Neoplatonism, Byzantine and Slavonic religious heritages, and even Islam which catalysed the Second European Renaissance without which the European Enlightenment could probably not have occurred.

It is important therefore for the new Vision in Christian as well as other Higher Education to take some bold and imaginative steps to break the monolithic dominance of western culture in higher education. This is not simply a question of having a Department of Religions in each Christian college and teaching a few courses on Asian religions. The whole perspective of higher education at all levels has to shift from the secular mono-cultural to

multi-cultural, multi-religious (secularism can also be recognized as a dogmatic and unscientific religion among the others) basic perspective on reality.

One implication of the foregoing is that philosophy should find a new role in the University curriculum—not just “modern” philosophy which is under constraint to repudiate all tradition and traditional or contemporary religions. It should be a philosophy which can help the students to ask some of the basic questions about the meaning of life, the nature of reality, the transcendent foundations of the manifest universe, fulfilment in life, the nature of our symbiosis with each other and with the universe in which (not outside which) we exist and so on. The university cannot ladle out ready-made answers to these questions. But it must help the student to ask these questions without embarrassment and to find their own personal answers.

But a philosophy which is dry, academic and unproductively conceptual will not do the job. The university should enable cohesive religious communities to co-exist, interact and learn from the worship and practices of other religions and ideologies.

We cannot just bring back traditional religion in the university curriculum in the pre-Enlightenment form; not even the form in which religion is in the curriculum of many western and other universities. We cannot just reverse the process of secularisation and restore the pre-Enlightenment curriculum. I have not time here to dwell in detail about how religions in the plural are to be reintroduced in the university curriculum. At this point I can only say two absolute conditions: it cannot be just one religion, the religious context in the university should be as inclusively pluralist as possible. Secondly, it cannot be abstract or academic religion, reduced to so-called teachings or philosophies. It should be the interacting confluence of various religious communities committed to faithful practice of their religion.

### Education

I need to bring this address to a conclusion. I will do so by throwing at you some aphorisms about what could happen in the next century and the next millennium.

1. It is clear that the modern state is a creation of the Enlightenment culture, and it will be folly to count on the state to bring about the necessary changes in education, higher or lower.
2. The modern state is not the shaper of tomorrow. As a socio-economic institution of common life, it is condemned to oblivion, sooner or later. There are new power units emerging; they are the larger units of economic production, corporations both national and trans-national; power is in their hands; they are predators, judging by the record of most of them. But it will be folly on the part of the common people

to either ignore them or ostracise them as enemies. They have to be befriended without being ourselves captured and enslaved by them. The better side in them has to be appealed to, despite initial frustration. They have to be made accountable to the general public and to do some creative and innovative experiments in higher education as well as in children's education.

3. It is unrealistic to expect most Churches to understand the nature of the problem and do the needful. But they are also national and transnational corporations, with some power, thought run mostly by unimaginative and uncreative bureaucrats. But once the Christian people get the idea they can be the most powerful allies in the cause of creative educational reform. To this end a large number of seminars, international and inter-cultural as well as inter-religious, need to be held in various parts of the world to reflect deeply on the nature of God's calling on the Churches in the educational field—not to the existing ones, but to see the problems of Culture, of Science and the Secular and to devise new pioneering experiments. The best we can do here is to produce a document, or at least the framework for a basic document which can serve as a discussion starter for these seminars and consultations.
4. Schools, colleges and perhaps also universities, such as we have them now, are also products of European civilisation and are already on the verge of obsolescence, what with the ongoing Communication Revolution and all that. What we will soon have are educational communities connected by electronic devices, with all the attendant problems. The teacher and the professor will probably become less pivotal, as also the classroom, the lecture hall, the library, books and notebooks (except of course computer note-books). The fall in the level of conviviality will be substantial. With that new problems of human community could arise. Probably we can think of ways of crossing these bridges when we actually come to them.
5. Whatever we do, let us not confine reflections to just a group of Christians, however brilliant they may be. Let the inter-cultural, inter-religious pattern begin with these consultations and seminars.

Well. I must thank you for your patient listening. I stand to correction where my thinking is wrong. You will help me at that point during these our days together. I plan to spend more time with you this week, because I am passionately interested in the subject. But I am no expert. The great expert, Christ Our Lord is with us. It is the Spirit of God who can lead us into all truth. May God bless you all. □