Book Reviews

A Purpose beyond Reproach: A Question of Means

The Idea of a World University. MICHAEL ZWEIG. Edited and with a foreword by HAROLD TAYLOR. Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale; Feffer and Simons, London, 1967. 224 pp. $7.

This book is about a controversial subject. A reviewer must therefore be at pains to divide his comments into two parts: an objective part, describing what the book contains; and an inevitably subjective part which takes a position about the controversy.

The book contains a clear and well-documented account of proposals to found international universities and of actual experiments in international higher education. Like many other generous ideas for promoting the brotherhood of man, this idea arose from the tragedy of war. It was in 1919 that Paul Otlet founded the International University at Brussels. It failed to get financial support even from the League of Nations. Since then there have been a dozen or more similar experiments and scores of paper-proposals. The experiments have, so far, failed, and the paper proposals collect dust on library shelves. Zweig has assembled a useful summary of the experiments and the proposals, and this modest book is certainly worth reading for this summary alone.

But Zweig and Taylor are clearly in favor of a world university and they want the experiments to continue. Here they enter a zone of controversy, and a reviewer is obliged to follow them. The first point which needs to be made is a simple one: the fact that experiments have so far failed is no reason for discontinuing them. To establish a world university is at least as difficult as to land a rocket on the moon. Anyone who is disheartened because the first few experiments fail has no right to be in the business at all. But there is an antecedent question to be answered: is a world university the most effective way to achieve what its advocates have in mind?

The purpose of those who advocate a world university is beyond reproach. They want—all of us want—to dispel international tensions; to diminish misunderstanding between men of different race, religion, and political opinion; to promote peaceful coexistence. They assert that teaching in all existing universities is colored by nationalism. And who would dispute this assertion? (Zweig quotes a nice example from the catalog for the course Diplomacy 10A of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy administered by Tufts and Harvard, which mentions "the Sino-Soviet *threat*." Presumably a similar course given in Peking would use a different epithet.) If one could only educate young Communists to think rationally about capitalism, and young Muslims to appreciate Christianity, and young Americans to assess the policies of Mao and Castro as sympathetically as they do the policies of some of their own leaders, how much better and safer the world would be.

Undoubtedly. But is a world university (with Russian, Chinese, African, and American professors of political philosophy, for instance) likely to accomplish this? And are our existing universities defective because they allow nationalism to corrupt the truth in ways which a world university would not allow? Anyone who *advocates* (rather than just *describes*) experiments in world universities must examine these questions more perceptively than Zweig has done.

Consider two cases of successful internationalism among universities. In the year 1500 there were 70 universities in Europe, covering a million square miles and serving a dozen nations. Teachers and students could move freely from one campus to another. Wherever they attended classes they heard the same language, they knelt before the same altar, they found the same curriculum, they read the same books. Every university was, in fact, an international university. The reason for this isomorphism was simple: the university dealt only with matters about which there was, in the western world, a consensus. The second case of successful internationalism is under our eyes today. In the year 1967 there are hundreds of universities covering most of the world and serving all nations which claim to be civilized. Apart from aberrations too ephemeral to matter, chemistry and physics and mathematics are taught in all these universities in similar ways. Students and professors who would share no consensus over politics or economics do share a common allegiance to Ohm's law and Avogadro's hypothesis.

These examples illustrate the basic difficulty which, in my opinion, stands in the path of Zweig's arguments. A university is not a campus with buildings; it is a society of scholars whose disputes (and of course disputation is essential in universities) are conducted within a framework of common beliefs. Without the common beliefs there can be no coherence of thought. Where there is a wide area of common belief (as in science) international institutions are unnecessary except (as for CERN) to have equipment which individual nations cannot afford. Where there is no wide area of common belief (as in political philosophy) the only way to achieve coherence of thought is to limit the area of inquiry; and this makes international institutions impracticable.

This is not a counsel of despair. There are other ways to achieve what Zweig—and all of us—deeply believe to be necessary. Last April, in a midwestern university, I saw a heap of American passports on a dean's desk. They had just been returned with visas for study in the Soviet Union. Three months later students from this university were sitting in lecture rooms in Moscow. This is less dramatic, less newsworthy, and less expensive than schemes for a world university. But it works. So also do some of the more modest endeavors such as the East-West Center and the College of Europe. Perhaps, therefore, these are the most profitable leads for further experiments.

ERIC ASHBY
Clare College, Cambridge University, Cambridge, England