

The College Student

... as a minister sees him:

"a respectable

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TWENTY years alongside a university have given me opportunity to observe several generations of university students and to form certain impressions of them. During this time it has been my privilege to work rather closely and intimately with quite a number of students in quite a variety of situations. Obviously as a minister of religion the larger part of my concern with students has been in the area of religion, but my concern has not been confined to this area. Also, half of these years have been years of war, the other half, years of "cold" war or truce. Any generalization I might make bears the mark of any generalization: it hints at something but does not tell the whole story. Knowing this to be true, I shall hazard a few generalizations.

Roughly speaking, the period 1941-61 can, so far as university students are concerned, be divided into three phases: the outbreak and prosecution of war, the return of the "G.I." to the campus, the post-war era.

Students of the first phase were children of the depression, youth who knew what it meant to be deprived of material things and of that over-all economic security and actual prosperity which has graced post-war students.

Students of the second phase were those who had added to their depression experience, the rigors, bitterness, hardening and tragedy of war. They were older in years, much matured, anxious to get down to business and be on their way, many of them married and some with children.

Students of the third phase, including those now on campus, have been and are children of the war years, children who have come to young adulthood under conditions of all-out national military effort and ascending economic prosperity. They are also younger in years than their immediate predecessors and the product of the discipline and regimentation of thought and expression that come as the result of total war.

To lump all these generations of students together is an impossibility; yet it is likewise an impossibility to speak of the present generation without reference to the immediately previous ones. Whatever is said about students of the last five years is said and must be said in the light of the students on the campus during the fifteen years previous to the last five. Impressions formed on one generation are not formed in a vac-

uum, but are a product of comparison with other generations.

One impression I have of the student today is that he is highly "respectable." Respectability is something of a cult with him. He is this way, I think, because his parents and his society have wanted him to be this way. War and the conditions of war submerge individuality, variety, deviation. War subdues free and creative venture beyond the reaches of established order to see what may be out there; it compresses persons into the mold that is known and in operation. The student has been victimized by his antecedents and without knowing it perhaps has accepted this victimization with little or no protest. He is satisfied to be respectable: i.e., to think the "right" thoughts, to belong to the "right" organizations, to be interested in the "right" enterprises, to act in the "right" ways, to live the "right" but dull life unsparked by the rebellious drive which alone can release him from his parents and his society to become a free person who is in process of shaping up his own philosophy of life.

A STUDENT today is pretty much a frigid conservative—conservative not very much in terms of understanding the rational structure of his position, but more in terms of an attitude of mind which sees in the status quo the satisfaction of his private concerns and of society's needs. The "new frontiers" of opportunity and adventure lose their attractiveness before the custodial job of preserving intact the old bulwarks of American vitality and health, especially when these old bulwarks seem to touch him personally. The necessity for prosecuting the assignment of the applied sciences interests him immensely; but his interest seems motivated primarily by reason of his feeling himself and his society under constant threat from enemies without, not so much by reason of his sensing the thrill of pioneering new horizons and distant unknowns. His thoughts are concentrated upon the securing of himself against all threats, all risks, all ventures, that might unsettle the position and well-being which he believes he now has—and here again he is a child of his parents and his society.

The student today likewise is lacking a driving curiosity, a quality of mind which is a prerequisite to discovery and quest and which also is the mark of sound tutoring in knowledge and

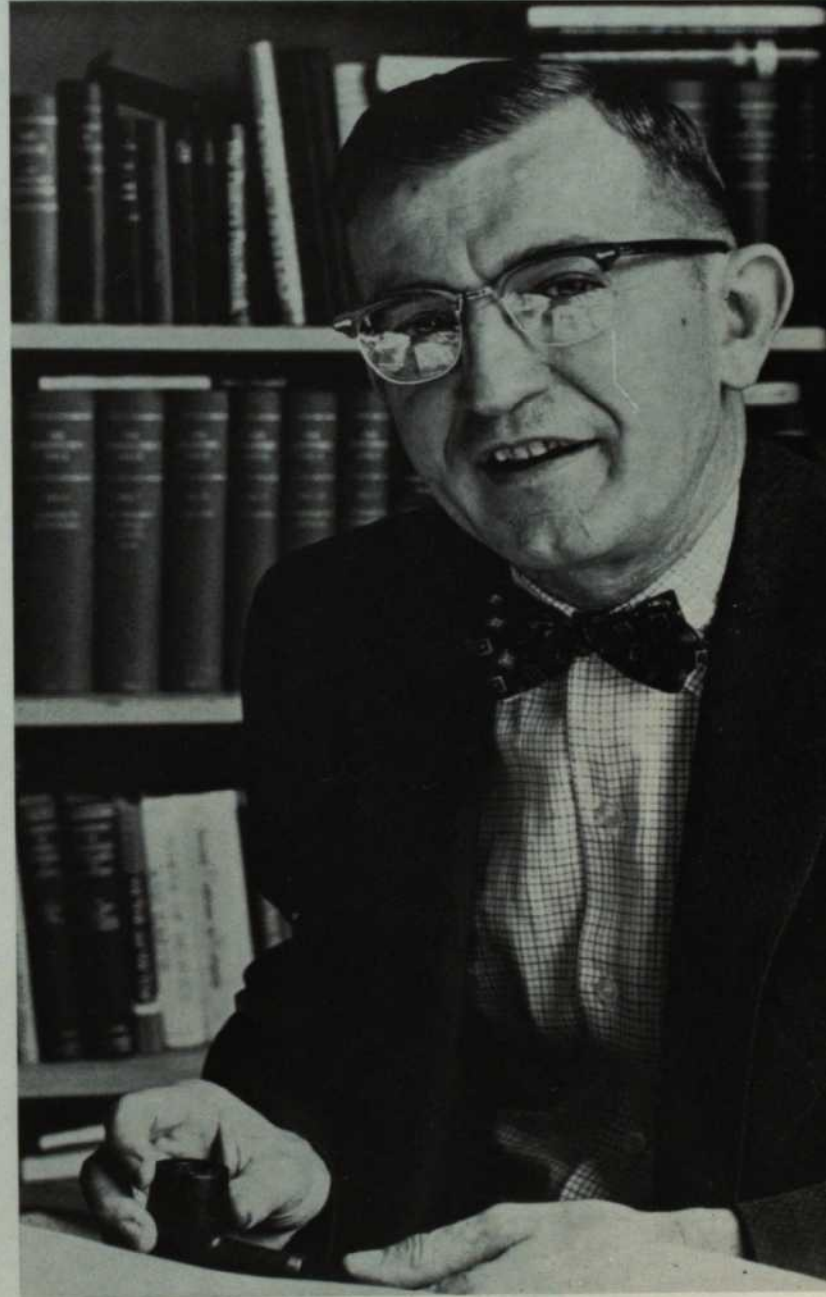
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the meaning of knowledge. There is little restlessness among students about what we know today. Their restlessness, if they have any, is provoked by some challenges being made upon the authenticity and adequacy of what we know. This attitude is less apparent, I presume, in the area of the physical sciences. It becomes increasingly apparent as we move outward from the biological sciences into the social sciences and then into the arts and religion.

“Leave us be with what we have” is a highly attractive frame of mind. And simple *answers* to the profoundest questions are the popular and insistent demand. To be certain is to be acceptable unto God; to be uncertain is to wander in a region unacceptable to God. Curiosity is a disturber; students entertain it and can entertain it only as a polite innovator of new ways and new expressions safely within the confines of the existing order.

This portrayal of the present generation of students as respectable, conservative, not-too-curious, is a fair portrayal, I believe. The conclusion, however, that they are such by reason of what they are by nature is not fair; they are what they are because we have made them that way; we have disciplined them to this frame of mind. These students have within them the qualities of greatness, daring, venturesomeness, willingness to accept risk, as deeply planted and vital as any generation of students ever.

I SENSE within them a hunger that their elders are not speaking to. I sense in them a thirst that their society is not ready or willing to satisfy. Here and there is the rumble of protest, a subdued power about to burst through the walls of the structure their parents have built for them and around them. In the not too distant future this power will exert itself; already there are signs of such a prospect in the making. What direction this protest will take, who can say? When it breaks forth, it will break as a mighty thrust from the soul of youth, demanding new life, new venture, new well-being for mankind at home and abroad. It will be a matter of “the old order giving way to new.” Youth can be kept silent, but not for long. Youth, I feel sure, is about to make itself heard again and with strength.



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