

Searching for Utopia: Higher Education as a Panacea

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Beginning the Search for Utopia

Hope enables one to press on despite the odds. Panacea initially gives hope, but over time crumbles under the weight of disillusionment. In their classic pieces on higher education, Howard Bowen and Clark Kerr present utopian visions that inspire yet fall short due to their faulty foundations. Attention will be given first to Bowen's, then to Kerr's idea of the university. Then a contrast of a faulty and firm foundation for higher education and reasonable expected outcomes will be given, demonstrating how Christ alone serves as the true basis for hope for individual and societal change through education.

Bowen's Utopian Investment

Howard Bowen wrote *Investment in Learning: The Individual and Social Value of American Higher Education* to address popular calls for efficiency and accountability by assembling "information about the outcomes of higher education" and by reaching "reasonable judgments as to the value of these outcomes in relation to their cost" (1997, 5). Despite the acknowledged difficulty of analysis and the weakness of his data, Bowen devotes much of his attention to unabashed advocacy of American higher education. Claiming to take into consideration not only the limitations but also the great diversity of Institutions of higher education, Bowen catalogues what he even refers to as a "utopian" list of outcomes aimed at the goal of developing "the full potentialities of human beings and of society" (1997, 54).

The list falls nothing short of making the university responsible for whole person and whole society transformation. Individual student outcomes range from: increasing

individual verbal and quantitative skills to personal self-discovery to “citizenship including orientation to international understanding” to avoidance of negative outcomes (Bowen, 1997, 55-8). Societal advances in cultural, scientific knowledge are capped off with the following assertion, “Over long periods of time, exerting a significant and favorable influence on the course of history as reflected in social institutions. Progress in human equality, freedom, justice, security, order, religion, health, and so on” (Bowen, 1997, 58-9). Bowen concludes that numbers alone do not bear out the value of higher education; instead it is the moral imperative of honoring the right and duty of all human beings to achieve full development that makes the higher education worth the investment (1997, 452).

Kerr’s 1963 Multi-iversity of Promise

Kerr’s 1963 *The Uses of the University* charts the emergence and development of the multiversity through the “logic of history” as a place for the creation of new knowledge that makes the world go round (2001, 5). One can hardly miss Kerr’s enthusiasm for an institution that can be “so many things to so many different people” (Kerr, 1997, 7). For him, “[t]he ends are already given – the preservation of the eternal truths, the creation of new knowledge, the improvements of service wherever truth and knowledge of high order may serve the needs of men. The ends are there; the means must be ever improved in a competitive dynamic environment. There is no single “end” to be discovered; there are several ends and many groups to be served” (Kerr, 1997, 28-9). The money poured into research universities by the federal government keeps this dream alive (Kerr, 1997, 63). Kerr spins a utopian vision of education inextricably involved in the quality and the purpose of a nation, i.e., half of America’s growth

between 1930-60 could “be explained by the greater education of our people and by better technology, which is also largely a product of the educational system” (Kerr, 1997, 63-4). Kerr even raises the question, “Will it [the university] be the salvation of our society?” (1997, 92)

False Hopes?

In 1994, Kerr reflected on his movement “from guarded optimism to guarded pessimism to guarded optimism” (1997, 193), but returned to the “unguarded utopianism” of earlier years, “[a]s society goes, so goes the university; but, also, as the university goes so goes the society. The progress of knowledge remains so central to the progress of civilization (1997, 194, 196). The 2001 discussion of the hedgehog versus the fox leads one to conclude that Kerr can no longer kid himself. Although he still places hope in knowledge as the single-focused hedgehog of yesterday, the foundations that he strove to see established in the multi-versity have passed away leaving only opportunity for the fox to succeed. For Kerr, worry is now the beginning of wisdom as he sinks into a postmodernist power struggle account of the workings and potential future of the university (1997, 212).

In contrast to Kerr, we do not have a similar record of reflections over time for Bowen. But it would not be surprising to find Bowen, if he were still alive, to be repelled by the loss of the university foundations in ways similar to Kerr. Higher education cannot deliver the panacea for which they yearn. As followers of Christ, we realize that sin, both individual and systemic, undermines the salvific power of societal structures. Bowen’s and Kerr’s no fail approaches to a better world depend on the absence or the overcoming of deficiencies in the individuals and systems through personal

transformation and the logic of history. But sin exists in complex relationships with the good in this world, continually leading to non-deterministic outcomes. In short, life is messy. It is easy to look back and claim the logic of history, but to claim the guide the course of history is absurd. But as Bowen's confidence in his weak statistics (1997, 221) and Kerr's devotion to new knowledge demonstrate (2001, 93), single-focused, hedgehog like faith can crowd out the facts.

Solid Foundations

How do Christians extend hope for our society while still acknowledging the reality of internal and systemic sin? First, we confess that God is in charge and we are not. As long as we seek to be agents of transformation on our own, we will forget that only God changes hearts and structures. Second, we acknowledge that individuals and institutions have the capacity to offer hope because God has ordered creation in such a way that the meaning, satisfaction, wholeness, which are found in Him alone, are dimly reflected all around us. Third, we affirm that good things can come from education, e.g., verbal skills, quantitative skills, personal self-discovery, cultural identity, appreciation of the arts, opportunity, upward mobility, new knowledge.

We may even go as far as saying that common grace is dispensed as the God-invested capacities are played out through the proper uses of the university. But all of this must keep in mind that sin corrupts and God's power alone transforms and sustains. So although higher education has much to commend it, we are not to worship it. The blessings experienced by those within and without, past and present, individual and corporate are mixed.

The Journey Comes to An End

Bowen's and Kerr's utopian visions of higher education fail for the Christian because of their panacea-ic nature. In many ways they have much to commend themselves as goals and aims for education, but the end of education must have a theological foundation rooted in truth. Without the proper foundation, advocates of education spin utopian myths that come true for some but are profoundly disillusioning for many both within and without the system.

References

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