

NAZARENE HIGHER EDUCATION

A European Voice

Peter Rae

As part of the Nazarene higher education family, I've been invited to respond to the preceding essays, bringing a perspective from Europe: a little like bringing a toast at a family wedding, representing a branch of the clan that shows up only from time to time. What does it mean to be part of this Nazarene family? What are the distinctive family features that show our DNA or reveal themselves in family portraits?

I am aware, first of all, that higher education itself is structurally different in Europe, and in other parts of the world, than it is in North America. The liberal arts college is a dominant part of the landscape in the United States: there, private higher education is both accepted and valued; the idea of a Christian university does not raise eyebrows. However, in most of Europe, higher education is a responsibility of the state. This no doubt reflects variant views about the respective roles of public and private enterprise in society: America embraces the core values of freedom and self-determination; Europe places high value on ordered public systems.

I say this to underline the fact that the liberal arts college is a cultural product, rather than a distinctly Nazarene creation. Most of the essays in this collection, written as they are from a North American context, or by North Americans-at-large in other world areas, assume the liberal arts university as the dominant educational structure of the church. But it is salutary to remember that most Nazarene educational institu-

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tions are not liberal arts colleges. Most Nazarene students do not attend this kind of institution. They attend Bible colleges; seminaries; theological colleges. And although the liberal arts model might be exported to areas of the world where the soil is fertile (Korea, with its large, private higher education sector, is an obvious example), we must be careful not to endow cultural structures with a sacred patina. If a key characteristic of being Wesleyan is our egalitarian theology, then we need to ensure that the voices around the table represent our global community. These articles, by the nature of their origin, reflect North American voices, but we must work to prick up our ears to hear other voices from other contexts.

The second section of this collection of essays invites academics from a range of disciplines to articulate the distinctively Wesleyan character of their discipline, and this is a helpful exercise. What it must not obscure, however, is the need to keep the study of theology at the heart of our Nazarene institutions. If faculty from a range of academic disciplines are to embed what it means to be Nazarene in their departments, then this must be in active and continued conversation with colleagues who are teaching and researching in biblical studies, in theology, in church history, in practical theology. There is no swifter way to become merely “historically church-related” than to lose this focus. And in a ruthlessly market-driven sector, where degrees in religion are discounted and alumni are drawn to the glamour of funding sports programs or business schools, it takes a determined administration to continue to fund and support a healthy department of religion at the heart of every school. We will not be Nazarene if there are not scholars in our midst who demand that we continually re-examine these core issues.

The “optimism of grace,” picked up explicitly in Mark Maddix’s essay and embedded in others, is surely a key theological theme here. And while recognizing the threat to identity and the danger of “mission drift” posed by open admissions policies, surely our Wesleyan character calls us to be ready to embrace those on the margins of community, those still on the journey. If the “open table” is at the heart of Wesleyan ecclesiology, then our educational institutions must embrace the academic equivalent. This must involve

giving opportunities to those who have not had educational advantages and rejecting the lure of academic elitism; it must commit us to enabling access to those for whom fees form an insurmountable barrier; it must make us ensure that we do not create blind alleys in education, so students who enter on the bottom rungs of higher education, anywhere in the world, can find ways to move to the levels above without the need to start over.

Maddix notes that this “optimism” encourages us to recognize that “God’s spirit is at work everywhere in the world,” outside as well as inside the bounds of the church: so the fact that Nazarene colleges in other world areas build connections with non-confessional, public universities, seeking always to know the other, affirms such actions as profoundly Wesleyan. We are not sectarian: we are catholic; we are creedal.

Space does not allow me to pick up fully the many threads of this discussion, but I will note the fact that Nazarene education must have a practical emphasis: it must be “earthed.” As we’re aware, Wesley insisted on the place of experience in his theological method. This means, at one level, that Nazarene higher education must be “earthed” in the life of the church. We must fiercely resist separation between the church and its institutions, whether initiated by institutions gravitating toward the isolation of the ivory tower or by a church distrusting the voice of its colleges. This has implications for faculty, who must themselves model this connectedness and not despair of the church; it has implications for churches and districts, who must not dismiss the prophetic voices from their colleges or seek to bypass educational processes for reasons of expediency or economy; it has implications for educational institutions, who must create both formal and informal means to respond to the needs of a changing church. Second, our institutions must address issues of justice, must engage with our culture/s, must embrace a culture of service in a society of greed. The articles in this collection underline ways in which this approach is being nurtured, both in and beyond the curriculum.

Maddix’s underscoring of the Trinitarian nature of Wesleyan theology helps us understand that Nazarene higher

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education must also be corporate and not individual: it is persons-in-relationship. This recognition is reflected throughout these essays: Nazarene higher education is “transformational learning” (Parrott); Nazarene theology is intrinsically one of relationship and reconciliation (Welch); we are “openly conversing communities” (Williams). This has implications for our future. We have, as a denomination, prioritized education. The planting of schools around the world is a history of which we are justly proud. But I write in a context of economic retrenchment: fresh news of budget cuts rings in my ears. And we are turning to technological solutions to reduce costs. Around the world, we are eliminating residential programs; we are reducing the places where teachers and students gather together; we are compressing time spent in the same space to irreducible minimums, because time is precious, money is limited, and technology is available. This is not a call to return to monastic learning (attractive though that might be!), but a reminder of the centrality of embodied learning, where ethos is transmitted over coffee, through worship, through shared experience.

And we are institutions-in-relationship. John Donne wrote “never send to know for whom the bell tolls: it tolls for thee.” The relative health of our liberal arts universities can mask the relative impoverishment of those small, majority-world institutions, which make up the bulk of our Nazarene colleges. Higher education institutions compete for students, for donors, for prestige, and Nazarene institutions are not immune. But our Wesleyan character means we must work sacrificially, collaboratively, seeking to support those on the margins, even when it is to our own cost.

The view from Europe? We are privileged to be part of a Nazarene higher education family that cares so much for distant relatives. This is a unique relationship, often viewed with wonder by academics in other faith traditions. It is often threatened, always changing, sometimes frustrating. But it spills out from who we are: we aspire to be global and egalitarian; our understanding of grace makes us risk things together and for each other; we are earthed both in the soil of our tradition and the soil of our planting; and we are not alone. We are family; we are community. ■