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Editorial

EDUCATION IN THE AGE OF SPUTNIK

THIS issue goes to press on the eve of the first Canadian Conference on Education, called to examine the purposes and results of our educational system. While it cannot be said that this conference represents a panic reaction to Russian missile superiority, for it was conceived months before Sputnik revealed this threat, yet it is held at a time when many are convinced that our most urgent problem is to surpass this scientific achievement. Much attention is being given to a comparison of Russian education with our own, and increasing demands are being made that our schools be mobilized to equip our best minds with the skills necessary to regain technological supremacy through a vastly increased emphasis on natural science.

Such demands make imperative a re-examination of educational objectives. Before we are committed to securing the educational means of winning technological superiority, we must consider carefully the conditions of achieving such a goal; for there is evidence to suggest that Western civilization cannot afford to meet them. In the first place, the myth that science and technology will always thrive better in free states than in totalitarian states has been shattered. It now appears that strictly mathematical sciences may well flourish in totalitarian states because within the sphere of these disciplines the scientist may be allowed freedom to be creative. As a citizen he may have no more liberty than anyone else; but mathematics is independent of value judgments and is the one sphere of intellectual activity where a significant measure of freedom may be enjoyed. If, in the second place, the scientist happens to believe in the philosophy of dialectical materialism, he will agree that the chief end of man is to produce. Having cast off the Christian "superstition" that to gain the world is to risk losing the soul, he will be able to devote himself to the race for technological superiority with a singleness of purpose that cannot so easily be enlisted in the West. These factors, together with Russia's ability to control her educational system so entirely as to make it a forcing house for the production of scientists and engineers, give her an outstanding advantage in an all-out technological race.

The price of successful competition against such odds might well be so complete a reorientation of our educational system as to put in jeopardy the most cherished values of our civilization. Though our way of life has become highly materialistic, it remains true that this is a perversion of our Christian heritage rather than a true expression of it, and that this heritage still provides the norm of our basic cultural values and social goals. If these fundamental goals and values are to remain operative in any significant

degree, our educational system must be one which is concerned to cultivate wisdom above scientific and technical competence. By wisdom is meant all that is involved in spiritual maturity and greatness. The ability to reach the moon, however impressive, is insufficient evidence of a nation's greatness. Only the cultivation of the gifts of the human spirit in an atmosphere of freedom will make possible the continuance of a great civilization. Without minimizing her technical achievements, it is fair to say that Revolutionary Russia has not made the positive contribution to the higher development of the human race that characterizes all great nations. This is not due to any inherent lack of talent among Russian people. Pre-revolutionary Russia had, in addition to outstanding scientists, great writers, poets, dramatists, composers, social philosophers. Dostoievsky, Tolstoy, Turgenev, Chekov, Gogol, Moussorgsky, Tchaikovsky—these and others have put the world forever in their debt. Revolutionary Russia has failed to reproduce their kind, and today the literary, musical and philosophical output of the West is vastly superior. Is this not due at least in part to the fact that in our educational system the liberal arts and humanities are valued both for their own sake and as an index of our social and spiritual health? For the arts and humanities invariably reflect the existing social and spiritual condition, and the Russian state does not allow its artists freedom to be creative because it fears such a critique.

Freedom has been accorded the scientist, for without it there could be no science. But a culture which concentrates on science at the expense of the arts and humanities can never be great, and can never provide satisfactory answers to the deepest problems of man. Aristotle provided an important educational principle when he observed that while high achievement is possible to the precocious child in mathematics, a significant contribution in philosophy depends on maturity of insight and experience. This suggests that an educational system that is predominantly scientific offers no assurance of developing the wisdom and insight which are the prerequisites of a mature civilization. It has been said that a dramatist or poet who lives after Newton is in no way better equipped than was Shakespeare to confront us with the truth about our human predicament. So with Sputnik: this latest device has not changed the basic character of the human problem, but only accented it. This is a problem which concerns the whole man, and it cannot be solved by a development, however extensive, of those capacities for abstraction which may be found in a precocious child. What is required is the wisdom of maturity, based on the experience of the race, which the humanities alone make available to each succeeding generation. To subordinate the liberal arts and humanities in order to turn our universities into factories for the mass production of technicians would amount to a betrayal of our heritage so complete as to signify that the battle had already been lost to Marxism. And at any rate, when man puts his faith in the guided missile—whether it be Russian or American man—this must surely be the ultimate blasphemy.

This is not to say that science and technology should be neglected, for they belong peculiarly to the civilization that has been shaped by Christianity. But within the context of the civilization which gave it birth, science has been interpreted as primarily a search for truth; to make it subservient to the demands of a race for power amounts to a prostitution of its true purpose. Sputnik has made it clearer than ever that scientific achievement is a major risk apart from intellectual, moral and spiritual control. As Dorothy Thompson has said, "Any society exclusively dominated by science will be a slavery for everyone except scientists." This is our fate if we yield to the hysterical demands of those who would make our educational system subordinate to the production of scientists *en masse*. We need science more than ever to be true to its own calling; but more than ever we need more than science. Many scientists have themselves been asking us to be morally concerned about the *ends* of science and the uses to which it is put. Scientists are not automata but men, and the education which they and we receive needs primarily to be an education in the meaning of life—an education which only the humanities, informed by theology, can provide.

C.D.J.