

# THE FUTURE OF THE UNIVERSITY

The Future of the University in Southern Africa, edited by H. W. van der Merwe and David Welsh

(David Phillip, Cape Town, 1978. R12.)

Reviewed by Edgar Brookes

In this most interesting and apposite book problems which affect Africa as a whole and the Republic in particular are dealt with in a spirit of clarity and understanding. As with most anthologies of opinion there is not complete uniformity of outlook, but there is a considerable amount of common belief and the book should at any rate stimulate and help thought. We owe a debt to Dr van der Merwe and Dr David Welsh for having compiled this book and for their own contributions to it.

They correctly point out that before 1960 such universities as existed in Africa north of the Republic were projections onto African soil of the university experience of the Western World. African universities in the 1950s and early 1960s did stand for high ideals of scholarship, for standards comparable with those of universities in the wider world and with such qualities which would make them genuine, if still junior, members of the commonwealth of learning. But they did not take sufficient account of the background and needs of African countries. Here we come to a great difficulty, for if we dwell too much on topics of African circumstances we may find ourselves supporting the ideas of the notorious Eiselen Commission.

Almost nostalgically our minds go back to the Mediaeval University. You could travel from Naples to Oxford without having to learn a single new language, for Latin was the medium of all those Universities. No European state in those days tried to force opinions of its own on the Universities or their teachers. But if **Regnum** did not interfere with **Studium, Sacerdotium** did. In other words the Church had to see to it, and did see to it, that religious error was not propagated in the Universities.

To a great extent English in modern Africa (and of course French in parts of West Africa) plays the rôle which Latin did in Mediaeval life. The Church no longer intervenes to prevent the dissemination of heresy in the universities. It is somewhat surprising that the State has interfered to only a small extent with the universities and their work — that is, outside the Republic of South Africa. True enough some universities have been created (in order to satisfy national aspirations) which have been too small. But on the whole one is struck by the way in which the independent African states have accepted university ideals even to the extent of maintaining a high proportion of expatriate teachers from Europe rather than appointing inadequately qualified professors. On the whole the university ideal has been fairly adequately maintained in independent Africa.

There are, however, questions which obtrude themselves. President Nyerere has laid down three requisites for the attitude of a university, and one of these three is

“socialism”. Unless one is by conviction a socialist, can one justify this while objecting to “nationalism” or “apartheid” as a requisite in South African universities? Before coming to the Republic one should note the considerable measure of praise given in this publication to the University of Rhodesia, which has managed to preserve an independent outlook in the face of very difficult political circumstances. It seems that real credit must be given to its Rector, Professor Craig, and to others responsible for its policy.

We now come, as alas we must come in the end, to the universities in Southern Africa. Alone among African universities and almost alone among the universities in the world, these universities are racial, or ethnic. This is not by their own choice. Legislation has enforced this, even though the universities are definitely and strongly opposed to it. The three interesting articles on “Black South African Universities” do not lead one to support this very real restriction. What matters in some ways even more is the extent of Government control over these newer universities and the lack of student freedom. After all student freedom is one of the most fundamental characteristics of a true university. It is admitted that the security police have paid student informers to report on their fellow students. Few things can be more harmful to the spirit of a university than to have to look over one’s shoulder and drop one’s voice when discussing controversial questions. Whatever is to be the future of the ethnic universities or of those white universities which are deprived of the right to teach black students, the need for student freedom is an urgent and clamant necessity.

It must be admitted that the libraries and the laboratories of the new universities have been equipped on a far more generous scale than were those of the older universities in their early years. It must be admitted that a good many academics of ability are teaching in these ethnic universities. Nevertheless the fact remains that over the whole continent of Africa, the South African universities are the ones which have departed most widely from the university ideal.

Perhaps the ideal university will never exist everywhere. But it is remarkable that Africa should have done as well as it has. There are pitfalls into which African education might have fallen but which it has managed to avoid. In the Republic of South Africa, despite the many very questionable features, university life still contains a good deal of independent and useful thought. May this increase year by year.

We tender our thanks to Dr van der Merwe and Dr Welsh and their contributors for this stimulating and valuable work. □