

Humani Nihil Alienum
Nothing Human is Alien to Us
The Task of University in Cultural Leadership
Glenn A. Olds, Ph.D.

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Latin phrases can be prophetic, even for those to whom the language is all "Greek". They cut a wide swath in human history, bearing the harvest of a long human struggle. This phrase, *humani nihil alienum*, loosely translated as "nothing human is alien to us," is no exception. It describes and prescribes the essential curiosity as well as the moral commitment that informs all "higher" education. Small wonder that it was used as a motto for that prophetic pretension that launched the first universities of the western world.

Could anything be more telling as a clue to the cultural leadership of the university than this simple phrase, "nothing human is alien to us"? Every word carves out a cultural domain to be created against great odds and at great cost.

NOTHING: Here is **the creativity of the universal negative**; inclusive through rejecting the notion that "anything human" is outside the scope of the educational concern.

HUMAN: Here is **the creativity of the creature**, central to the educative task, as the basic clue to its perspective and possibilities in the primacy of the person.

IS: Herein lies **the creative affirmation** of all creation, "to be or not to be, that is the question," and it is answered in all higher education affirmatively. The word must become flesh, the pretension of education to be concerned with everything human becomes a moral mandate, a prescription of what is "to be" realized.

ALIEN: Here is the **creative tension of broken relationship**, "otherness," standing as challenge and invitation to everything distinctly human. Here lies the cultural task of re-creation, unification, and integration, whole-making which lies at the heart of education. Here is a clue to the dilemma of modern man and the task of the university as well as the church.

TO US: Here is the urgency of the unmistakably personal, the relevant realization of my/our, responsibility. Education, and singularly "higher" education, is shot through with this kind of personal participation, a self-involvement and collective concern that is distinctly human.

The task of the university as previewed in this Latin phrase is pretentious. Higher education presumes to be concerned with the *whole* man and the *whole* human scene. Nothing human is alien to it! The task and its torment lie precisely in the perplexity of this pretension, and are gathered up in the complexity of the two central terms, *human* and *alien*.

Animals are trained; Gods are worshipped. But, only human beings are educated. Only the human is educable, participates creatively in its own responsible change and transformation. But what is human? This is the perplexing question. This is the ambiguity at the root of all education. This is the primary dilemma of the contemporary university. What is the meaning of human? Do we take our primary clues from Dachau or Lambar? A cave or a cross? The natural or the moral order? Is man primarily a body, or does he merely use a body? Is man primarily a mind or does he merely use a mind? Is man primarily spirit or does he merely manifest it in rare moments? What are the distinctive marks of the human? Reason? Language? Choice? Devotion?

What is the relation of the non-human to the human? If the stellar stars and subtleties of sub-atomic energy are not alien to man, what are they to him, and how shall this relationship be understood?

Equally profound and puzzling as is the meaning of human, is the mystery of alienation as a central term and task of higher education. How does education understand and deal with alienation? How does it reconcile conflict, contradiction, and opposition, in thought, person, and action? How does it understand and deal with the schism in the soul, within man himself? Between man and man? Between man and his ultimate meaning? How shall education restore the alienation when the educated and the educator are themselves alien? When man falls away from the source of his ultimate human meaning, he falls apart within, and against his neighbor. He becomes anxious, empty, and violent. He becomes an

alien in his own universe, his own eyes, and the whole human society. How, as alien, shall he overcome this alienation through education? He must answer this ambiguity or perish - as human - however, that is understood.

Yes, beneath the simple semantics of our Latin phrase, lurk the larger issues. They require for their setting and searching out, the mysterious music of man himself; and the task of the university, as with any complex symphony, may be understood in four movements with their appropriate moods and tempo centering around the central themes *alien* and *human*. They are:

1. The pictures and patterns of alienation.
2. The processes of alienation.
3. The recovery of the distinctly human.
4. The transformation of human from alien to citizen.

I. The Pictures and Patterns

Every age has its primary cultural pattern, in part *created*, in part *conserved*, and in part *criticized* by the university. Though some may think the university is a kind of cultural island, insulated in objectivity and sterilized of any stain of the wider culture, it is not so. Even as Donne saw for man, we may say for the university: none is an island. Beneath the surface, our higher learning touches the common life as partner and participant in the spirit of the age.

As an age widens its cultural contact, compressing in space and time, a richer complexity fused with an urgency and ambiguity distinctly human, its pattern eludes a simple, single symbol or analysis. Still, oversimplification, however dangerous or inadequate, helps provide a handle with which to grasp the setting of contemporary education and its primary task.

Three pictures suggest the pattern of contemporary culture in which the university shares and takes its primary initiative. They give a special cast to the canvas and characters. They illustrate, whatever else may be said for our time, that it is an *age of incredible alienation of the distinctly human*.

The first picture is the final veiled scene of *Death of a Salesman*. It finds, you will remember, the wife and two sons of Willie Loeman, the salesman, at his graveside. In Willie's mad scramble for possessions, pleasure, and power, he misses the meaning of life to become progressively an alien to himself and those he loves, finally to take his life. The death of this salesman becomes a window to our time, the obituary written to a man or culture alienated from any significant human meaning. Biff, the son, speaks volumes in his single final sentence: "Poor dad. He never really knew who he was." Alien to any abiding human meaning in his work, pleasure, or love, he loses in suicide his identity, his sense of self, and his final significance as man.

But meaning is the root and crown of man's rationality, the vital nerve of all intelligence, the nourishment of curiosity, the consummation of all true learning. Without confidence in some abiding meaning as the measure of the human venture, man slips back to the momentary measure of the animal - to transient, sensuous delight or a mad scramble for survival. But not for long. Once tasting of the fruit of the tree of knowledge, man cannot live by bread, or sex or savings alone. Without meaning - dependable, human, significant - he dies! This is a mark of our time, in which the university is set.

The second picture is the fateful leap to death of James Forrestal, our first secretary of defense. See in it another symbol of the "fall of man," an incredible alienation. Here is a man who in the name of human freedom gives his life and leadership to secure us in defense against threats from without, to be finally besieged and taken by threats from within. You remember the lines from the Greek tragedy Ajax that Forrestal left open and underscored by his bed before he leaped to his death from the hospital window. They told the torment of a man alien to himself, misusing his freedom as a fatal flaw in the strategy of defense, which in its desire to destroy the other, destroys the forces of freedom and self in the process. It is a picture of the precarious power that is man's freedom, when alien to itself and its true nature, turning creativity to destruction. This, too, is a touchstone of our time to which the university must give itself.

The third picture is the painful portrayal of Riesman's *Lonely Crowd*. Alienated from meaning and himself, Ian turns or returns to the social womb that begat him, only to find, no longer a child, that the community has become a crowd and he a stranger. If he returns on the crowd's terms, he surrenders loneliness for enslavement, and substitutes conformity for the integrity of conscience, sociability for responsibility. If he refuses the crowd's terms, his loneliness rarely deepens into prophetic solitude, the strength of singularity, but debases into bitterness or despair. Here, too, is a clue to our culture.

Each picture is a partial portrait of the perspective within which the university works, the climate of the times. But what are the processes of alienation producing such a pattern? In these, too, the university participates.

II. The Processes of Alienation

One of the clues to a culture lies in what is sown in secret. What may appear as an innocent development is rooted in a deeper logic. Man's alienation was doubtless never meant or planned, but it was prepared - innocently, inevitably, if one understands the human. That universities participated so fully and faithfully in the preparation is a tragic fact. That they may also participate in the recreation of man at a new level of insight and humanity is a chief ground of our hope.

No one would consider the primary preoccupation of modern man and his universities with nature as anything but innocent. Nature is obvious, objective, dependable, measurable, and manageable. Knowledge of her processes is power. It turns wheels, lifts loads, and to the pure scientist, is beautiful and an end in itself. True, nature as object or power, does not value, purpose, choose, worry, or worship. These are human characteristics - variable, unique, and difficult, increasingly marginal in man's magnificent mastery of nature and her powers.

But what of human nature? Why not adapt the successes of man's conquest of nature to human nature? Why not view him as an object, measurable and manageable? So ran the thought of modern culture! To think this way is one thing. To act it out is quite another. This movement in method and mentality has created its own monster - a man alienated from that meaning that is distinctly human, given not in the measurement and management of things in space-time, but in the creative freedom that transcends space-time in choice, commitment, and rational control. This process of alienation is the product of a primary preoccupation that turns the human wrong side out, shifts the emphasis from self to thing, from value to fact. Loosely described as a growing preoccupation with the natural sciences and technology, it is rooted in a deeper drift from the distinctly human in our learning and in our culture.

A second process of alienation follows from the first. Preoccupation becomes perversion. The next step to viewing man, as an object is to treat him as one - coldly, clinically, and critically as a "thing." Even as the first *devalues* man, this mood desecrates him. It surrenders any sense of the sacred in human life. For a sense of the sacred is the counterpart of a self-awareness that separates man from a thing - any man from any thing. The baffling barbarism of our sophisticated cultures is rooted here. Reverence for life gives way to a ruthless rooting out of sanction and significance on which human life climbs from the

pit. This process of alienation is an inevitable consequence of dehumanizing nature and mechanizing man.

A third movement in this process is from the insecurity of violence to the security of self-surrender. The popular appeal of every form of authoritarianism, economic, political, or religious lies here. The lure and impact of every form of modern collectivism, fascist or communist, is given in an initial reaction to the alienation of violence and the restoration of security - at a *price*! Indeed, it is at the terrible price of the surrender of the significance and integrity of the self. This alienation is the final folly, for it is a Pyrrhic victory, in which the operation succeeds but the patient dies. For to be human is not to find the collective happiness of the ant hill, however secure and efficient it may be. It is to affirm the awe-full insecurity of the security of a creature whose being is becoming. But how shall we recover the distinctly human in our culture? This comprises the unique initiative of the university.

III. The Recovery of the Distinctly Human

Why is the initiative of the university distinctive in the recovery of human alienation? Though often partner in founding and function with the church, it sees the peril inherent in all religions in their temptation to deprecate the human in the interest of the Divine. Indeed, much popular appeal for religion lies in its often-easy assurance, that human alienation is healed from above and beyond man, almost in spite of him, rarely because of him. In this way, it resists the effort to dehumanize man from below, but often does the same thing from above. In either case, man is somewhat of a thing, acted on from below or beyond himself, in which his self-surrender disfranchises the human.

The university on the other hand, stands under no such natural temptation. True to its universal intention it must take into account the religious reason and corrective but only as one among several perspectives. Even when it is the crowning perspective, as with all genuinely Christian or religiously oriented universities, it is chastened and clarified by fidelity to the whole spectrum of human experience within which the human is affirmed and dignified.

In the West particularly, this initiative of the university in the clarification of the uniquely human, thereby healing man's alienation from meaning, himself, and others, derives from and transmutes 1) the Greek, 2) the Hebraic-Christian, and 3) the modern views of the meaning of man. These traditions root in a unique aspect of the human with their implications for education.

The Greek fastened on man's *freedom of rational choice*, the intimate dimension of education, a clue to self-discovery, meaning at once objective and personal, and the creativity and communication of the self.

The Hebraic-Christian fastened on man's *freedom of moral commitment*, the *ultimate* dimension of education, a clue to covenant and control of power, seedbed of sensitivity, and the authority of the sacred, the persuasion and lure of supreme worth.

The modern fastened on man's *freedom of disciplined objectivity*, the inclusive dimension of education, a clue to the meaning of dependable order, universality, and true community.

The first tradition is the voyage of *self-discovery*, the second of *self-transcendancy* and the third of *self-determination*. Each in turn and with fresh emphasis affirms and heals the human.

(1) The university is a prime mover in the affirmation of the freedom of rational choice, the intimate dimension of education. It is a corner stone set against every form of tyranny, the foundation of the essential inwardness and integrity of man qua man. It lives in the confidence that reason moved against its will is of the same opinion still, and that no external power can finally substitute for or dislodge man's intentional choice. Here is the precious and precarious privacy of the person, the climate and conviction that makes the discovery and affirmation of the self so surprising, so fresh, so baffling.

This conviction is parent to a host of children. It is the university, in this conviction, that cultivates and trusts curiosity and individual eccentricity, tolerates and encourages honest controversy, nurtures and rewards originality. How original can one be in any other institution? Only the originator of a church can be too original. Others need beware lest they, too, be martyred and then remembered. Yet, it is expected by the originator of a university that originality will be part of its continuing life, its encouragement. The university, as with the Greeks, sees no conflict between individuality and universality. It knows at a deeper level that distinctly human creativity meets in the glad affirmation of the freedom of rational choice, however differently the ways lead out from that central citadel of the self. To nurture this conviction, at whatever cost, is a primary task.

(2) The university is initiator in a special way of the *freedom of moral commitment*, the *ultimate dimension* of education. This sounds paradoxical, when so many modern universities claim immunity

from concern with any ultimate commitment, leaving religion, thus defined, to the church. Still there is a real sense in which here it is the university, not the church, that is the initiator.

The church approaches ultimate commitment, not freely, but with prior commitment. It often persuades from within through the lure of fellowship, rewards, and punishment, the drama of despair and hope. It surrounds choice with the crutch of self-interest, the final trap of moral and religious freedom. It segregates the sacred and secular, and makes a profession of the custody of the first.

The university, by contrast, approaches ultimate commitment more freely. It claims no final truth, only the commitment to seek and follow the truth wherever found and wherever it leads. It trusts the truth and the freedom of human commitment as ends in themselves. It seeks to eliminate (however unsuccessfully in our growing utilitarianism in education), as far as possible, the blight of bargaining. It knows that man's ultimate commitment should be freely given to what is ultimate. It is searchingly critical of man's idolatry (ultimate commitment to what is relative) as well as lack of integrity (relative commitment to what is ultimate) or dilettantism (relative commitment to what is relative). It knows that the unknown outruns the known, and that man's posture in commitment must be open and growing. It knows there cannot be a sharp schism between sacred and secular in God's world, and dignifies all discovery with the delight of revelation. It professes that truth is open to every man on the same condition, and that no man can profess a special pipeline to the truth, or sanctity because of it. The university should be the seedbed of self-transcendence in which the self is remade in its commitment freely given to the highest and best one can know.

(3) The modern university insists on the *freedom of disciplined objectivity*, the *inclusive* dimension of education. Disciplined objectivity does not mean that one treats everything as object. This is a perversion of a misguided modern method mentioned above, a truncated "scientism." Disciplined objectivity means to treat anything as it is for what it is. It accords, thereby, the dignity of privacy and self-determination, which it claims for itself, to every "other." It does not indulge in maudlin sentimentality, which talks of love of neighbor, or child of God, as though everyone were similar, or that one is something he is not. Rather, this love is truly disinterested. It loves the other for its own sake, not for God's sake, country's or Yale's.

This insistence on disciplined objectivity is the root of that universalism uniquely at work in the modern world in the name of common humanity. Where churches and religions have failed to unite men, this logic of the universities moves them toward rejecting truth as in some way "special," chosen," or "mine." The language of objectivity, however shallow and abstract, seeks out the human idiom to universalize it, render it into some coherent whole. It refuses to believe there is a Russian truth, an

American truth, a Christian truth, a Moslem truth. It lives in the conviction of an order and ordering principle open to all men in knowing which, when men follow, freely faithful, leads them back to the human and true in every man.

The university is the architect of universality in the midst of individuality, the unity in diversity that is the mark both of nature and human nature properly understood.

But how shall this initiative be accomplished? How do the processes of alienation get turned into re-creation? How is man transformed from alien into citizen in this university of the universe from which there is no graduation?

IV. The Transformation from Alien to Citizen

Clearly, the clues to man's modern mood lead to alienation not citizenship. The curtain comes down on the death of a salesman and Secretary Forrester - *in the dark!* The lonely crowd is not the blessed community. Yet each picture mirrors man's possibility even as he goes astray.

Man's search for meaning can never be consummated apart from the cultivation of his interiority, the artistry of his rational choice, the perfecting of his possibilities as a person. This calls for domesticating the dimensions of man, not ignoring or idolizing them.

Modern man's methods and preoccupation have mistaken origins for destiny, the natural for the moral order. Man came from nature but is not bound by nature. His security, therefore, can never be grounded in anything rooted in the fate of nature, such as possessions, sensuous pleasure, or power. Man's animal inheritance, bearing the mark of nature's struggle for survival, must be rationalized by man's moral struggle for meaning. This is rooted in the self's own freedom of rational choice and intimate awareness of its own nature and promise as distinct from that of the animal, savage, or child. It lives in the free response to those values, alternatives, and possibilities for human enrichment which lie in every next moment, and are the lifeblood of all "higher" education.

Man's search for himself can never be consummated in violence or detached objectivity. His freedom is not a thing apart, to be defended or understood by a spectator. The university must seek the shift to participant, to first-hand learning. Second hand dispensing of warmed-over truth about man will never

do. The rhythm of involvement and detachment is the cycle of all true education. The schoolroom of consequences in action must complement the classroom of considerations. The risk of moral commitment must become the context of creative choice. The sense of the sacred, not merely as mystery but also as profound human encounter and disclosure must become the climate of the campus and the character of its community. The university must help man move from the folly of idolatry to intelligent commitment, from the value of science to the science of value, from the paralysis of analysis to the education of our affirmations.

Man's search for community, relief from the lonely crowd, must follow to the universities' insistence on universalizing our insights. Even as the university insists that there are no ultimate islands of truth, but that beneath the surface each truth touches the mainland of that rational order without which no knowledge would be possible, so it must find new ways to articulate this conviction between persons and cultures. It must help show how the unique need not insist on being exclusive, nor the universal similar.

A final picture makes the final point. It hangs on my office wall. It was painted by one of my first students in philosophy at Depauw University. It is Plato's allegory of the cave portraying the plight of man and the purpose of education. It shows a group of huddled, naked men, bound by chains, staring at the shadows on the cave before them cast by moving figures behind them, breaking the light of the sun. For Plato, the purpose of education was to break the chains of ignorance and turn man slowly from the shadows of cultural idolatry and preoccupation to the light of the sun - the Good and God.

But the picture has a deeper prophecy. Two days after John gave it to me, his body was found outside town with a gun in his mouth and a bullet in his head. Some time that night he had pulled the trigger. In his room we found reams of paper, telling the tale of his tortured mind. He had come to see that what he had put his faith in were shadows, illusory, but he could not find his way to the light. He had sought release from chains from beyond himself; he did not know that he alone held the key, that though the sun provided the light, it was he who must do the turning.

And the teacher, what of him? Could he ever be blacksmith to the chains, or only one who calls from the entrance of the cave, "Come and see!"?

In a day when man, after a few fleeting centuries, crawling slowly from the cave, now hurries to build and burrow back again, we do well to pause and remember. The Latin phrase has it. For any university worth its salt, "nothing human is alien." And the way back from alienation is the recovery of the

distinctly human in man's ambiguous freedom, its intimate, ultimate, and inclusive nature. This is a university's universal task. This is the stem on which hang the grapes - of wrath and wisdom, which picked today may feed or inflame all our tomorrows .