

# Otto Defines Christian Liberal Arts College

Dr. Otto's devotion to a Christian-oriented Mercer is of almost legendary proportions. The story of his "resignation" as Dean of Chapel, then, was enough to catch all of us off-guard. When Cluster interviewer, Larry Finkelstein, asked Dr. Otto to account for that story, Dr. Otto had this to say. "It is quite simple really. Really it is. A leave of absence. Why? The ad hoc committee studying the whole spectrum of campus religious activities and life, including chapel, needs to be free to make any investigations and any recommendation without the inhibiting presence of an incumbent Dean of Chapel."

"Further, the question of the chapel and its participation in the total enterprise of Mercer's working out its nature and objectives needs to be isolated from the question of the relative worthwhileness of the present program. The fundamental question, the overriding question, has to do with Mercer's identity and future. It is to be hoped that the more personal dimension may now be abstracted out of the discussion. My concern is for what Mercer is and shall be. The chapel is not a peripheral nor personal consideration. It is a part of the faculty-student inquiry: 'who are we?'"

CLUSTER: The first question I would like to ask you is what is your concept of a Christian liberal arts college?

OTTO: Larry, there are many factors involved. Number one is the old concept that a Christian liberal arts college wrestles over the meaning of the Christian faith and the role and impact of that meaning in the formation of what we call our Western culture. The second thing involved happens to be an outlook of Dr. Glover's with which I am in agreement. A Christian liberal arts college is also concerned in a given discipline to wrestle with the question intellectually and conceptually, what is the meaning of this Hebrew-Christian tradition and what is

the impact or implications for my particular discipline. I think this is the second dimension of what is involved in a Christian liberal arts college.

CLUSTER: How does a Christian education as exemplified by Mercer differ from that of a state university?

OTTO: A particular professor at a state campus as an individual professor may be a member of the Hebrew-Christian tradition so that in his presence and in his work on that campus something of the Christian dimension is there, something of the Hebrew-Christian ferment is there. And in this sense his presence means that at least as long as he's there his campus is not unlike what is avowedly and



self-consciously a Christian campus. But a state school could not adopt this as a central concern or goal, you see. The state campus can't, as far as I can see, say, look, we are really concerned with the role of the Hebrew-Christian faith on this campus. It can't do that—not within the confines of our country. Here its concerns are with all kinds of views and can't be concerned with having a particular kind of responsibility for a particular stance.

CLUSTER: Still in all, we can safely say that the dominant view in America is in the Hebrew-Christian tradition,

hence it would seem likely that the majority of the professors on state campuses would hold these same views.

OTTO: No, I'm in disagreement with that for two reasons. First, most of us who teach get our graduate training in a state or secular institution so that there's a really interesting bifurcation. We may in one sense, for example, be a religious person or have a kind of religious commitment. But our training and the context and methods of our training condition us how to teach and more or less what we teach in our own disciplines. There's a very interesting bifurcation between what we do on a campus and this commitment and outlook of our lives so that, I think, many times those of us who say we really have a religious commitment are really teaching out of humanist or secularist points of view without ever being aware of it. Secondly, we live in a time which is so much secular, on the one hand, and on the other hand, we live in a time when the church is so infected with what Martin Marty calls "religious in general" that I suspect whether we are on a religious denominational campus or on a state campus we're probably not dealing in any significant or profound way with the Hebrew-Christian tradition. We really are reflecting our culture more than anything.

CLUSTER: Well, doesn't that seem to contradict much of what you said earlier about the distinctions between a Christian and state university?

OTTO: Yes. Yes. I have to admit that the so called Christian or denominational church college has most of the time been remiss in that the Christian faith has usually been left out on the periphery of its purposes and work. And it's only within the last 25 or 30 years that denominational schools—church schools—have begun to ask themselves, what does the Christian faith really have to do on this campus?

CLUSTER: Would you say that

the struggle over the chapel program is part and parcel of this realization on the part of the administration?

OTTO: Well, now, I don't know about the realization on the part of the administration. I think the chapel idea can be and ought to be a significant part of the total life and work of the campus and its removal may well be a symptom of and another step in the school's becoming more and more secular or humanist. I can't, of course, say that the presence of chapel makes a campus a Christian or religious campus, nor can I say that its absence means that is no longer a religious or Christian university. If many other factors were present then, of course, the chapel program could be eliminated and the campus would still be movingly and profoundly Christian.

CLUSTER: What factors are you referring to?

OTTO: Well, for one thing, if you really had a large number of faculty who were beginning to really see and wrestle with the question, what has been the real role of the Hebrew-Christian tradition in the formation of Western culture, and what is the real meaning, contents, significance of the Hebrew-Christian tradition for my particular discipline. What is the meaning and significance of this tradition for our becoming authentically human? How is it related to the intellectual and social issues of our day? If this were predominantly true of a faculty then the fact that there were no chapel there might be insignificant. And if you had, say, a student body that began to see this and wrestle with these things, then whether you had chapel or not might be really



insignificant. On the other hand, if some of these factors were absent, then, in their absence, the removal of chapel also might

become much more significant than it would be otherwise.

CLUSTER: What do you think has been the reaction to your series of talks on chapel?

OTTO: It has opened up dialogue with the students. It has made some students more conscious of chapel. But I don't know that it has done what I'd really hoped to do—get the students to see what the issues really are. For me the issues involve the fundamental questions of the nature of the school. And I don't think that I've succeeded at all in making this clear to the students. I still hear too many students speaking about chapel in terms of their personal evaluations of what is being done. I think of a very crude analogy for example. Supposing one were to go to a medical school and take a required course in tattooing and eventually several students were to become unhappy with this course. Then they might ask, should they be required to take the course? The students say no, we don't think we should because we're bored by it. . . because we find it very uninteresting. It doesn't move us at all. Well, you know, that's an irrelevant issue. The real question is how relevant is tattooing to the business of becoming a medical doctor? Is it really relevant to what's involved in medical education? Now if the answer is no, it isn't relevant at all, then the question of whether it's boring or interesting is irrelevant. No matter how interesting it may be, if it doesn't really belong, then you get rid of it. On the other hand, if it really is relevant, then you go back, and now you raise the question of why is it done so boringly, why doesn't it communicate? Then you work not to eliminate the course, but to improve it. This is the kind of distinction I've been trying to get people to see. The question is not first, is chapel interesting or boring, the real question is, is it germane to what the school is supposed to be? Now, if the answer is finally, no, then you get rid of it no matter how interesting it may be, as a matter of fact, be. But if it is germane to what the school is supposed to be, now you come back to the question, why are we reacting like we do? What's wrong here? How can we make it interesting instead of boring? I'm afraid I just haven't succeeded in communicating this point. People are still too wrapped up in terms of their personal reaction on a given Thursday or Friday.

CLUSTER: I see. Dr. Otto, the senior class seems to feel that

you're picking on them unjustly. Many of them have said that they're the class that fought to keep you here, and now you're dealing unfairly with them.

OTTO: I may or may not be referring to what occasion they're feeling that. Either in the first or second chapel talk of this quarter, I made a reference to the senior class and I learned from some individuals who have talked with me and from conversations that have come to me obliquely and indirectly that students felt this. And I can only say that I regret that they didn't listen more carefully. That if this is a reference to the fact that the seniors have been noticeably absent and that had an unfortunate influence, obviously, on the freshmen class. But I said that in the context of and for the major purpose of judging myself. Now, of course, I had to refer to that in order to make this particular judgement of myself. I've listened to that tape because of the reaction I've gotten from students to see whether I really had garbled that in communication. But it comes out pretty clear in the tape and there are other students who did understand me. What I was saying was this had an unfortunate spiritual effect on me—that is, my own inadequacy surfaced. Instead of taking this in stride I suffered a kind of spiritual deterioration. That is I kind of resented the senior class. I found it difficult to pray for them. What that was was not a judgement of the senior class. That was a personal confession. And the seniors reacted defensively. But no, the seniors were not being judged, I was really trying to make a personal confession and judge myself.

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