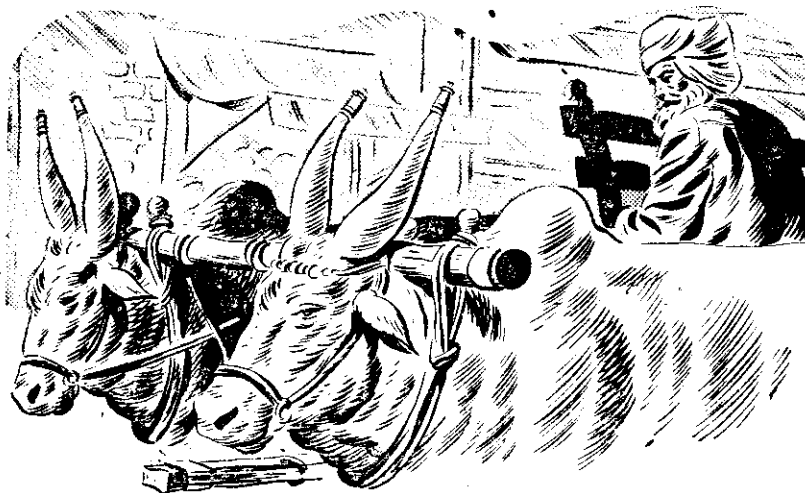


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The Toleration of Heresy

IN his recent address to the University Senate the Chancellor, Sir David Smith, dealt with a difficult question. He was speaking of the quality of academic staffs and of the need for a guiding principle when the governing body has to decide whether or, not to appoint a person who has the necessary qualifications but whose known opinions are politically awkward. Sir David quoted and approved the opinion of Sir Walter Moberly that "in making appointments governing bodies may find room for the responsible thinker who holds views which may, at least implicitly, not coincide with all the common basic values. . . . The only irreducible test is good faith." This is obviously an issue which compels a university to reveal its intellectual and moral standing. The easy solution is always to exclude the "heretic," an attitude which would be supported by popular opinion. It is misleading (the common-sense argument may run) to suggest that, because a man does not himself practise deceit and violence, but only advocates them as the instruments of policy, he is less to be feared than the wild-eyed revolutionary. Indeed, he may be even more dangerous, for he influences younger people who may pass impulsively to action. It is no defence to adopt the attitude of the teacher in the film version of Patrick Hamilton's play, *Rope*. This clever talker had thrust some pseudo-Nietzschean ideas upon students who took him seriously and killed a man to demonstrate their superiority. Violent theories, he said in a self-righteous outburst, do not produce criminal action unless there is incipient evil in the criminals. Yet some youths can be damned by older men who speak lightly to unprepared minds. A true thinker does not speak lightly; even when he is completely a

heretic, he is detached and reasonable. And it will have been noticed that Sir David Smith spoke of "responsible" thinkers when he advocated toleration. Our fear of the heretic is often based on a false notion of academic discipline. A university is surely a place where ideas should be discussed fearlessly, no matter to what conclusions they may lead. Radical thought is merely one of many influences which help to create the academic environment. Theories are balanced and tested against the lessons of history: the student learns to see them, not as dogma, but as phases in the evolution of thought; and if the moral and intellectual climate—which comes in the main from the surrounding community—is healthy, they will be studied objectively. The one argument most to be feared in a university is that any thoughts are dangerous. There is, however, an additional need—emphasised by Sir David Smith—to make sure that academic opinion is balanced. The intellectual radical is most useful while he belongs to a minority. If he provides a little shock treatment, he will be a stimulating teacher; but shocks given too frequently have a dulling effect, and radicalism can become a dreary dogmatism. Therefore, a university in which too many voices were to be heard speaking in the same key would lose the tension of thought which is inseparable from higher education. There is, however, no need to fear that heretics will be numerous. Some natures demand the lonely and non-conformist position; but scholarship has products as various as those of the world outside, and the habit of detached thinking tends most often towards a middle course. Disturbing ideas are to be found in every age and culture. The quickest way to give them an inflated value is to declare them unsuitable for discussion. They are better in the open.

N.Z. LISTENER, FEBRUARY 10, 1950.