

Ulusan Buku/*Book Review*

Abdul Rahman Embong. 2005. *The Role of Universities in the Quest for Peace*. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. ISBN 967-942-747-1. 32 pp.

University has been perceived as a key social organization in building civilization by nurturing socially responsible and professionally competent citizens and by advancing knowledge through research. University traditionally champions the highest of human virtues and ideals, cherishes the freedom of inquiry and expression. It stands as a citadel of truth, an epitome of the courage of conviction, an institution that nurtures and promotes the culture of peace and pluralist tolerance and acceptance. It is these features that make university education higher than education in general. These are some of the salient points raised by Professor Abdul Rahman Embong in his *The Role Of Universities in the Quest for Peace*, delivered as a public lecture at the 2004 General Conference and Seminar of Association of Southeast Asian Institutions of Higher Learning.

Rahman argues vigorously and passionately for the university to reaffirm its place in civilization building and to act as conscience of society. He quotes with approval the late Edward Said: "Humanism is a project with the objective of mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence, of creating understanding between peoples, cultures and civilizations, of cultivating the spirit of community among mankind as opposed to domination of the other that leads to injustice and suffering." Peace is more than the absence of conflicts; peace is an expression of the harmonious relationship between fellow humans with themselves as individuals, groups, communities, nations and states as well as with the physical environment. He puts forward the idea that peace is cultural. Thus, "we can talk about the culture of peace, involving world views, belief systems, mindsets, habits, and practices of people at everyday level that help cultivate and, in practice, preserve justice, freedom, harmony, respect, understanding, and pluralist acceptance of others, as well as respect and care for the environment." These are lofty goals and values that form the cornerstone of human civilization. "Without these values, civilization loses its humanity and we will sink into the dark abyss of modern-day savagery."

In pleading for a role of universities in peace building, Rahman has history on his side. A few decades back, in the 1960s and early 1970s, at the height of the Vietnam War, university campuses represented a powerful force in the quest for peace.

Rahman's contribution is timely given the current state of many universities (especially the newer ones) in Southeast Asia and elsewhere. Unable to meet the demand for higher education from a growing middle class, governments

have multiplied the number of universities and even opened the field to profit-oriented firms. Many of these newer universities are not adequately staffed and they operate like teaching universities. Profit oriented universities naturally do not care too much about research. Courses are targeted at acquisition of skill and competence that have earning power at the market place. With the erosion of the traditional role of universities, critics point out that universities have become more and more like degree factories.

Why have we ended in a sad situation like this? Why is it that the space for the university to play its civilizational role creatively has become smaller? Rahman attributes this to the forces of globalization and neo-liberalism. Besides these external pressures, university authorities have not been able to display deep commitment and strong leadership. Universities have adopted the practice of the commercial world. They refer to potential students as market and educational courses as products. There is much value attached to the measurables. To get these figures means tons of paper work and diversion of academics' time and energy from their core activities of research and teaching.

Seen from the broad perspective of social change, the changes in universities reflect the culture, spirit and ethos of our time. No longer is Albert Einstein the role model for most young people; rather it is Bill Gates. History and other humanities, which dwell on peace, ethics and culture have lost their appeal as key subjects of study, and their eclipse means that students have less exposure to the subjects. Meanwhile, intellectuals and universities have been marginalized. Such development has taken time to evolve. But evolved it has and it has in fact taken roots. It will take some time for this undesirable feature to fade out, to be replaced by a fresh and rejuvenating one.

Seen from the perspective of history, university was an institution formed in the service of the state. In spite of this fact, universities have generally been able to retain their autonomy, academic and critical freedom. It is because a powerful nation state needs the service of well-trained professionals and production of new knowledge. By its very nature, knowledge is cosmopolitan. And the pursuit of knowledge is best conducted in an atmosphere of freedom and openness, curiosity, creativity, hard work and critical inquiry, free from political and religious interference. This point is well recognized and is being adopted by giant firms like General Electric and IBM, which have Nobel Laureates working in their cutting edge research laboratories. It is strange that the most advanced transnational companies have discovered these intellectual virtues while states have neglected them.

Another point to learn from history is that knowledge, no matter how fantastic and profound, is incomplete and can even be dangerous without the ethical dimension. We just need to recall the fact that many of the military commanders, secret police officers, scientists and engineers in the service of Hitler's war machine were highly intelligent and technically very competent. Some of them were even avid readers of poetry and literary classics, connoisseurs

of fine arts and collectors of paintings. Knowledge and ethics are like the wings of a bird or like our two legs.

By and large, universities are still performing their traditional roles as knowledge transmitters and in the case of research universities, also generators of new knowledge. And as an arena where scholars and students meet, they provide a platform for them to know each other, establish friendship and grow networks. With globalizations, universities have a substantial number of foreign students. This is a new phenomenon, which can hopefully broaden the outlook of students and nurture inter-cultural and international understanding.

Universities play a dual role in ruining and promoting peace. US universities provide the setting for the neo-cons to do the ideological homework, which has been used to shore up the current policies of the Bush administration. At the same time, the same setting has produced peace loving scholars and intellectuals who continue to work for peace. Though the establishment has sidelined the forces representing the best of American tradition, the struggle must go on. Rahman recognizes this point. Even at this low ebb of peace activism, universities have the opportunity and responsibility to offer a worldview of humanism to the young during their formative years in their intellectual life. This is a powerful reminder contained in Rahman's lecture.

Reading the lecture reminds me of the famous speech of the late Martin Luther King *I Have a Dream*. I close my eyes and could almost hear the confident voice of our good professor:

I have a dream. I have a dream that one day, our students and intellectuals will proudly and courageously assume their role as conscience of society, hold high the torch of social justice, peace, freedom and equality. In doing so, they will advance the most lofty and brilliant intellectual traditions of all civilizations. The phoenix of peace will rise up again from the ashes. I have a dream...

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