

Problems Plaguing American University of Beirut

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The American University of Beirut conferred degrees on 561 graduates today at the 97th commencement exercises, which marked beginning of celebration of the university's centennial year.

Premier Abdullah Yafi of Lebanon and six members of his Cabinet attended the exercises. The university was established here in December, 1866, by American Presbyterian missionaries under the name Syrian Protestant College. The name was changed to the American University of Beirut in 1920.

The university, which opened with 18 students, now has a student body of 2,433 men and 734 women. They come from 53 countries and represent 22 religions. However, most of the students are Arabs.

The centennial celebrations, which are scheduled to continue through the year find this major outpost of new-world thought in the Mideast embattled from without and within.

Academic Freedom's Issue

Academic freedom, including student freedom of expression, is the basic problem in the university's struggle to survive and to maintain its Western identity in an Arab land.

Critics and antagonists of the university include Arab Moslem nationalists and Western liberals, who find almost antithetical fault with institution.

Arab nationalists accuse the university of being the weapon of "American imperialism" and even a shelter for the Central Intelligence Agency. Recently they have also accused the university of insulting Islam. The cure advocated by these critics is control by the Lebanese Government of curriculum, teaching and administration.

The liberals, among them a sizable faculty group, charge that the board of trustees in New York and the chief administrators here are basically frightened conservatives who prefer stultifying compromise to a fight for academic people.

The problems of the university have been illustrated by two recent disputes involving faculty members, John Spagnolo, an assistant professor, and Roland P. Pucetti, an associate professor.

Professor Spagnolo was secretary of the faculty committee that conducted a course known as Introduction to Cultural Studies. While Professor Spagnolo was at Oxford in 1961 earning a doctorate, the course committee chose a textbook containing selections from Western thinkers.

Attack on Mohammed

The chapter on Saint Thomas Aquinas included a selection from the "Summa Contra Gentiles," in which the great medic-

nounced Islam and the Prophet Mohammed for sensuality and materialism.

The textbook is expensive, and the university adopted a practice of mimeographing chapters for distribution to students. Professor Spagnolo gave the order for mimeographing the chapter on Saint Thomas, although the lectures on the Saint were given by a visiting Jesuit professor, the Rev. James Finnegan, from the neighboring French university of Saint Joseph.

A student to whom the Aquinas material was given took it to the extreme left-wing, pro-Cairo newspaper Al Shaab, which published a photocopy of two paragraphs in which Saint Thomas attacked Islam. The newspaper did not explain the source of these paragraphs, but said simply they were being distributed at the American University and were an insult to Islam.

Students at the neighboring Beirut Arab University, founded five years ago with funds from Cairo as a rival to the American university, threatened a mass demonstration.

Dynamite Exploded

A stick of dynamite exploded at the gateway to the American university March 18 and Lebanese police arrested Professor Spagnolo after midnight, revoked his permit to work in the country and ordered him to leave within 24 hours. The professor is a Spanish national, so he had no protection from any power with influence in Lebanon.

The specter of religious violence in a country about equally divided between Christians and Moslems had frightened the Government.

Professor Spagnolo was a con-

venient scapegoat, and the Government announced his deportation the next morning. The Arab University demonstration was called off. Although the deportation order was revoked at the airport at the last minute, the Professor was warned that he would remain at his own risk. His work permit was not restored.

He elected to fly to London. The university continued to pay his salary but has had no success in obtaining permission for him to return to work. Recently Professor Spagnolo accepted a university post in British Columbia and there appears to be no prospect that he will ever return to the American University.

Faculty members found the blow to academic freedom a shock, but the administration of the school was persuaded to give at least unofficial approval to a cautious "Don't rock the boat" attitude because the State Department wants to assure the survival of the American institution. Liberals have argued bitterly but unsuccessfully that too high a price can be paid for survival if the university and faculty lose their freedom in the process.

Four months after the Spagnolo incident Dr. Samuel Kirkwood, president of the university, declined to comment on the problem. His liberal critics similarly have declined to talk for attribution.

The case of Professor Pucetti has also aroused liberal criticism. An outspoken atheist, he began to teach at the university in 1954. Although recommended for a tenure appointment, he was notified in 1964 that his appointment would terminate in September, 1965.

Professor Pucetti has charged that he was dismissed

because he was an atheist and that Prof. Charles Malik, now chairman of the philosophy department in which Professor Pucetti taught the Philosophy of Religion, was a major opponent of his tenure appointment.

Professor Malik, a former president of the United Nations General Assembly, is a Lebanese Christian. He was not chairman of the department when the university decided not to keep Professor Pucetti, and he said recently that he had not been formally consulted by university authorities on the matter. He declined "to be drawn into a controversy" with Professor Pucetti.

President Kirkwood and Dr. John A. Wilson, a member of the board of trustees, said recently that the decision to end Professor Pucetti's connection with the university was based purely on academic considerations and that his atheism was not a factor.

A report on the case published this spring by the American Association of University Professors said the writers of the report had been unable to determine whether there had been a violation of academic freedom.

However, the report said that because Professor Pucetti's appointment had been terminated after more than 10 years' service and because he had not been given a hearing, "the American Association of University Professors deeply regrets that this outpost of United States education in the Mideast has in this case not seen fit to observe the principles and practices of academic tenure and due process so widely approved in the United States."