

“The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches”

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Countless colleges and universities in the history of the United States were founded under some sort of Christian patronage," James Burtchaell begins, "but many which still survive do not claim any relationship with a church or denomination. Even on most of the campuses which are still listed by churches as their affiliates, there is usually some concern expressed today about how authentic or how enduring that tie really is, and often wistful concern is all that remains."

Congregational (Dartmouth, Beloit), Presbyterian (Lafayette, Davidson), Methodist (Millsaps, Ohio Wesleyan), Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic (Boston College, New Rochelle, Saint Mary's of California), Evangelical - Burtchaell tells their stories, college by college. They are enthralling - Burtchaell cannot write a dull page - and vastly different from each other. Finally, though, he argues, the stories are the same. Each college had been founded with two purposes, to foster the students' piety in their church's faith and their morality, and to educate them. In the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth, most of the Protestant colleges became increasingly independent of their founding churches, their presidents less likely to be ministers, more likely to see themselves exclusively as educators, educators in secular learning (theology never really had a place in these colleges or was soon sent off to seminaries and independent schools of divinity). Slowly, and then more quickly, members of other faiths were admitted to the student body and to the faculty. The teaching of defining religious dogma became an embarrassment, as did distinctive moral doctrines (abstinence from alcohol, from dancing, from eros). The piety, separated from the intellectual life of the colleges, was pushed over into the chapel, and chapel became optional. Morals gradually became manners and "social outreach." In the end, colleges became nominally Baptist, or nominally Lutheran, or secular. (Of the Protestants, only some of the evangelicals have not succumbed yet.)



And the Catholics? Burtchaell is a Holy Cross priest and, although he spends less than a quarter of the book on the Catholic situation, his particular interest in it is apparent. As late as the early 1960s, Burtchaell reminds us, Catholic colleges and universities required their students (almost all of them Catholics) both to take a set of courses in their religious faith (the life of Christ, the sacraments, etc.) and to complete two "majors," one in the student's chosen field (history, mathematics, whatever) and the other in philosophy. This philosophy major was an entirely prescribed curriculum of eight or ten courses in neoscholasticism. It presented a complete philosophical system, its logic, epistemology, psychology, cosmology, natural theology, metaphysics, and ethics. The system comported with and buttressed Catholic belief. The message to the students: in the religion classes and the philosophy major we have taught you the basic truths about God, the human condition, and the world; there is no conflict between reason and faith. Go forth; fear nothing.

This arrangement had its problems, however. Staffing the religion and philosophy curriculums had always been difficult. The priests and religious who were induced (or assigned) to teach them typically did not have the scholarly graduate education or aptitude for effective college teaching of theology or philosophy. In their hands the curriculums commonly became a protracted, amateurish dosing in Catholic apologetics, boring most of the students, infuriating the engages. In the 1960s, this way of doing things - cloistered and dated - collapsed. At Boston College, for instance, the philosophy requirement was reduced in 1964 from ten courses (twenty-eight credits) to five. By 1971 it was down to two. The theology requirement was reduced from four courses to three to two. The courses themselves, in many schools, began to come as a smorgasbord (pick two, any two). And no longer were they necessarily in Catholic theology, or "Catholic" philosophy.

But what of the students? Had not the prescribed curriculums in neoscholastic philosophy and Catholicism, however poorly taught, been "the integrative finale" of a Catholic college education? What would fill that need now? We students and liberal faculty had our answers. The pervasive "Catholic atmosphere" of the colleges, the self-confidence of our march out of our precincts into American national life, these would foster Catholic faith and intellectualism as effectively as ever did a drilling in apologetics and the Catholic catechism. The world itself, we rather



suddenly saw, was not an ungodly other - Christ's sacrifice had saved it, too. It was instinct with grace. Incarnationalism, we called it. Manicheanism was the philosophy of the ghetto. Everything would work out just fine.

Would it? The 1960s and '70s brought a dam-burst of other changes, too, and Burtchaell shows that the Catholics in those few years reenacted pell mell the earlier histories of the Congregationalists, the Presbyterians, and the rest. Presidents of Catholic colleges and universities came to function less as members of their religious communities running church colleges and more as executives in American higher education. The student bodies went from 95 percent Catholic, to 80 percent, to 70 percent. The departments of English, biology, etc., became full members of their national academic guilds: When they hired, they hired the best biologist, no longer the best Catholic biologist. More and more noncollegiate but lucrative vocational curriculums and schools (business, nursing...) were brought on campus. The terms of governmental funding, ever more important, suggested it was perilous for a school to be too Catholic.

Eventually, the question occurred: Exactly how is this college Catholic now? The philosophical heart had been taken out of the curriculum; we no longer systematically educated the Catholic students in their faith; the academic departments pursued value-free inquiry as at any other college; less and less did we pray or worship together; every year fewer of the faculty and students were Catholic....How are we Catholic? Are we Catholic?

As Burtchaell tells it, Catholic college leaders, still largely clerics, did not often give their own question a straight answer. They papered over radical change with a rhetoric of continuity - really, a rhetoric of fantasy. In a 1994 document, *Jesuits and Boston College: Six Propositions for a Conversation*, the Jesuits ask the fight question:

Some would say that [the colleges founded by the Jesuits] have adapted too thoroughly to the standards of secular academic life...In the 1990s, the argument would go, these institutions offer upper-middle-class students a vaguely liberal education colored by a rhetoric of spiritual values....Particularly in graduate programs and in the research agendas of faculty, these institutions take most of their values from mainstream American academic life, offer curriculums not notably



different from what is available elsewhere, and work to advance the same kinds of knowledge as do secular institutions.

Their answer is not as forthright:

Unlike religious traditions that have distrusted or fled the world, Ignatian [Jesuit] spirituality sees the world of nature and culture in and around us as graced at its core by God's self-giving, therefore worth our work and our study. This point of view discloses God to the discerning eye and discloses God drawing all that is of our world and all that is human into God's own life. Our very yearning for fulfillment directs our search Godwards and will be satisfied only in the possession of God for which we have been made.

What do these words mean, exactly? Really only this - we Jesuits see God lurking behind nature and society. Therefore, it is good to study them. Burtchaell, I think, would say, everyone considers it good to study nature and society - but you Jesuits claim something else, too. You claim you see God here. Yet, you don't say a word about programmatically teaching the student body how to see God through their studies. How is B.C., then, different from N.Y.U., which also has some hundreds of Catholics on the faculty (discerning God lurking)? Is not Boston College really a secular university with a (declining) Jesuit presence? And won't most of its Catholic graduates have at best a rudimentary notion of Catholic dogma and doctrine? Will they ever have seen Catholicism or theology as a subject of serious academic study? Will the idea that their faith can inform and advance their intellectual lives be foreign to them?

What is to be done? In *The Fading of the Light* Burtchaell holds back. His book, he says, has not been written to provide instruction on how to avoid the mistakes of the past, "so clearly patterned,...so lethally repeated." "Anyone who requires further imagination to recognize and remedy them is not up to the task of trying again, and better." This is too coy. Burtchaell, however, has been more forthcoming elsewhere, in *First Things* (April and May 1991). His prescription is along the following lines:

1. New Catholic colleges/universities must be founded or existing ones profoundly redirected.
2. Most (90 percent) of the students must be Catholics; applicants must be told they are coming to a thoroughly Catholic college.



3. Most faculty must be Catholic; all departments must seek out and prefer faculty who are active Catholics (do not dismiss this - would David O'Brien's work as a historian be half so interesting if he had not had his career at Holy Cross College?).
4. All students must complete a substantial curriculum of Catholic theology, taught for the most part by Catholic theologians (Burtchaell does not argue for neoscholasticism and 1950s Catholic "religion" courses; his point is that we threw out bath and baby just as a generation of Catholic clergy and theologians was being educated in the sophisticated historical study of Scripture and tradition, the dogmatic and speculative theology that flowered in the church after the 1943 encyclical *Divino afflante spiritu*; these people, he says, could have revitalized theology in the colleges, made it a center of "broad spectrum, scholarly, and critical discourse").
5. These colleges must have vigorously supported liturgical and praying lives.
6. And finally, they must be reintegrated into the church, be part of the sacramental community and apostolic mission of the dioceses and Rome (this would serve, inter alia, to foster conservative Catholic theology - though Burtchaell is wary of fools and ham-fists both to the left and the right).

If this is Burtchaell's remedy for the dying of the light - and I have little doubt that it is - it is radical, particularly, perhaps, in its last point: most American Catholic colleges and universities now are independent entities; Burtchaell wants them brought under episcopal authority. A radical solution sometimes is a sign that the problem has been overstated. There are serious people, who, while seeing many of the failures Burtchaell does, see them as events along the way, not calls for a whole new beginning. I wonder, for instance, what Burtchaell thinks of the University of Notre Dame, run by his own Congregation of Holy Cross, and where he once taught. The student body at Notre Dame is roughly 80 percent Roman Catholic. The faculty, 60 percent - "affirmative action" for Catholics is the rule. The university has made a major commitment to Catholic theology: the department has forty members, all with doctorates in theology (though the department is predominately Catholic, Protestant and Jewish scholars are hired for their specialties and perspectives). All students must take two courses in theology, the first a foundation in biblical studies and patristics, the second an elective



"theme" course. There is a similar two-course progression in philosophy required of all students. The university makes every effort to "Catholicize" the campus; more than half the student body regularly attend Sunday Mass.

Would this please Burtchaell? I don't think so. He wants a college or a university that is first an organ of the Catholic church and only then an affiliate of American higher education. He wants economics professors who ask as a matter of course "what insightful element of perfection [does Catholic faith bring] to the practice and critique of economics?" He wants a faculty peopled by "learned and articulate believers who [are] not only open to all truth, but possessed of advantages in approaching all truth: graced master insights, an interpretive community, and an authentic tradition." This language is more visionary than expository. Also, it is covertly more sectarian than it appears. Rather than try to tease out its meaning, I would ask a blunt question: Who would go to these colleges and universities? What students (and parents) would pass up Yale or Pomona or Notre Dame to attend the Catholic college/university of the diocese of Norwich, Connecticut, or Houston, Texas? What Catholic historians and biologists would choose to teach there? Would such schools become centers of excellence, or only backwaters, curious reminders of a conservative critique of the 1990s American Catholic church and of some aggressively secularizing forces in American society?

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