

## The Dying Of The Light: The Disengagement Of Colleges And Universities From Their Christian Churches

By James Tunstead Burtchaell (Eerdmans, 1998)

---

Reviewed by John Peter Kenney

Copyright (c) 1998 First Things 86 (October 1998): 43-50

When I entered Bowdoin in the autumn of 1970, I came as a Catholic student to what I thought was a Congregationalist college. I recall sitting at my first convocation that fall, in the splendid First Parish Church of Brunswick, and listening, with a mixture of curiosity and ecumenism, to President Roger Howell speaking from the pulpit. To my surprise, only trace elements of the Protestant religion could be detected that day. Coming from Massachusetts, where denominational apartheid then held sway, I had hoped to observe and perhaps even to imbibe some of the spirit of Protestantism. But the tepid and at best vestigial religiosity of that Convocation was by then the norm at Bowdoin. Chapel services had been eliminated as a requirement in the late sixties and were largely defunct as a voluntary endeavor by the early seventies. The old and noble Congregational tradition, with its once great zeal for salvific holiness and for social causes like abolitionism, had quietly disappeared. My old Classics professor, Nathan Dane II, a scion of the old Bowdoin, prophesied in those days that the college chapel would become in my lifetime a museum. He was only partially wrong; I understand that it now serves as a concert hall, available for occasional religious services.

Bowdoin's transition from a denominational to a secular college was repeated at hundreds of academic institutions throughout the United States in this century. This puzzling and perhaps alarming phenomenon is the topic of James Burtchaell's inquiry. In order to approach this immense topic, he has written a very large book, rich in detail, sometimes diffuse in its argument, but finally compelling in its force and insight. He brings to this topic considerable authorial presence, derived from his academic training at Notre Dame and Cambridge, his experience as Provost at Notre Dame, and his theological formation as a Roman Catholic priest. As his title suggests, Burtchaell's attitude is elegiac, tempered by a withering sense of irony. Although he offers no solutions to those who rage against this dying of religious light in the academy, he does present a clear-eyed account of the forces, process, and rhetoric of its extinction.



Burtchaell narrates seventeen case studies drawn from seven distinct denominations. These include: Congregationalist (Dartmouth, Beloit); Presbyterian (Lafayette, Davidson); Methodist (Millsaps, Ohio Wesleyan); Baptist (Wake Forest, Virginia Union, Linfield); Lutheran (Gettysburg, St. Olaf, Concordia-River Forest); Catholic (Boston College, New Rochelle, St. Mary's of California); and Evangelical (Azusa Pacific, Dordt).

Each study is based primarily on presidential terms of office, so that the book offers interwoven stories of individual figures and institutional histories. These form a brocaded pattern across the denominations, with striking symmetries emerging—often unexpectedly—at different times and at ecclesiastically distant campuses. The author wisely recommends sampling these narratives, based on one's denominational affinity, and then reading others for comparison. A final chapter reviews "The Story within the Stories"; the complete package thus serves as a supplement to George Marsden's work on the secularization of Protestant universities (*The Soul of the American University*) or Philip Gleason's study of the Catholic academy in the last century (*Contending with Modernity*).

Burtchaell discovers subtle denominational variations on one theme: the gradual but effective separation between church and academy. As a result of that process, the academy has become a culture increasingly alien to religious life, and it is no longer a vested contributor in the life of the church. At the same time, religion has come to play a much diminished role in the education of college students, even at those schools retaining some religious association. All this has helped to reinforce two key modern dogmas: that religion is, if not wholly irrational, at least nonrational, and certainly outside the bounds of intellectual articulation; and that religion is but marginally significant in human life. While none of the denominations represented in this book would formally endorse these attitudes, Burtchaell shows how their colleges have come tacitly to accept them, and how, in consequence, those colleges have lost their ability to challenge secular culture. Several common factors led to this institutional loss of religious identity:

The elements of slow but apparently irrevocable cleavage of colleges from churches were many. The church was replaced as a financial patron by alumni, foundations, philanthropists, and the government. The regional accrediting associations, the alumni, and the government replaced the church as the primary authorities to whom the college would give an accounting of its stewardship. The study of their faith became academically marginalized, and the understanding of religion was degraded by translation into reductionist banalities for promotional use. Presidential hubris found fulfillment in cultivating the colleges to follow the academic pacesetters, which were selective state and independent universities. The faculty transferred their primary loyalties from their college to their disciplines and their guild, and were thereby antagonistic to any competing norms of professional excellence related to the church.



But all these public changes are ultimately grounded in a failure of belief and of nerve, in which the members of these religious communities lost the will to express their theologies in the academy. In each case, academics—even if they were religious—came to believe that faith did not yield knowledge apposite to the disciplines or relevant to public life. As Burtchaell points out, few of these institutions originally cultivated a vigorous, intellectual theological culture. Most—the Jesuits a notable exception—combined a classical education with haphazard Christian catechesis. They soon found their theological resources no match for the intellectually corrosive and religiously scornful demeanor of modernity. Many academic leaders came to accept that faith was a private matter, so that the church as such should have little standing in the academy. "Bible penknifers, miracle rejectors, God minifiers, man magnifiers, hell expungers, and those with animal ancestors"—all these were anathematized by President Eli Reece of Azusa Pacific University in 1919, back when a denominational college still retained its religious salience. We do not see his like today. Amidst all the detail of the book the cultural tectonics of this shift appear, allowing us to glimpse a recurrent pattern of collegiate history that might be called Burtchaell's law. Denominational institutions gradually changed from an initial period of theological specificity and commitment, through a period of "pietism," followed by indifferentism, to a final stage of rationalism and secularism. For Burtchaell "pietism" is the key phrase. "Pietism" signifies not so much the zeal of the religious reformer, but the program of those who simplified, mutated, and finally replaced the tradition with a liberal Christianity which viewed theological articulation as a sectarian narrowing that stands in the way of a truly personal Christianity. The bother of theological clarity and definition was supplanted by the comforting vacuity of a more "inclusive" but "solo" faith. On Burtchaell's account, this led to indifference regarding theological matters and finally to a secular rationalism that is hostile to religion itself. The great paradox of this story is that academic pietists revised their religious traditions in the apparent hope of making them more durable, but only hastened their final collapse.

Burtchaell wryly suggests that the production of "covenants" and "vision statements" is a leading indicator of a college's estrangement from its founding religious community. Yet it bears remembering that Burtchaell's analysis tracks the academic symptoms of the much larger cultural malaise of modernity. We now find ourselves amidst a widespread critique of modernism within the academy itself, with determined opponents—both religious and nonreligious—coming to the fore. There are those who believe that a post-secular period has commenced, and that, at the very least, our intellectual culture may become more hospitable to religious traditions. The "cultural place" of religion could well be shifting from the margins to which modernists had assigned it to a more central one. This holds some promise for the religious academy. It suggests that those institutions that have maintained some measure of their religious identity may now be positioned to accelerate this renewed appreciation of religion's importance. Rather than offering vague commitments to



unspecified forms of "diversity" within themselves, these colleges can contribute to a reemergence of a theologically articulate diversity among institutions simply by being themselves.

It is too much to expect that another freshman will one day sit in the nave of the First Parish and hear the President of Bowdoin call the assembled members of a Congregational college to their predestined tasks of Christian sanctity and social justice. This is beyond the promise of the new millennium. But at some colleges a religiously grounded invitation to moral renewal and social action is well within the bounds of possibility. Such institutional rhetoric will have effect only if those colleges have resolved to permeate the academy with the core credenda of the Christian faith. James Burtchaell's substantial volume can serve a premonitory role to those intent on that task, warning of the prevailing dangers and reminding of the cost of failure.

---

John Peter Kenney is Dean of the College at Saint Michael's College in Vermont, a Roman Catholic liberal arts college founded by the Society of Saint Edmund.

