

“The Dying of the Light, by James T. Burtchaell”

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As the twentieth century comes to a close, among mainline Protestant denominations support for Christian higher education becomes more tenuous. During this tumultuous century, Christian churches and communities and the colleges and universities they parented have been linked to one another by increasingly slender threads, threads which suffer frequent strain and often break or are voluntarily severed. Though bound inexorably for almost a millennium, church and university now function in circumspect seclusion, with little to say to one another. In the dominant academic culture, the very idea of religious higher education is problematic.² Consequently, religiously identified and church-sponsored universities that were once the norm are now the anomaly; what was once paradigmatic is now paradoxical.³ Indeed, some academics regard both Catholic and non-mainline Protestant colleges and universities as necessarily "sectarian" and unlikely to be "real" colleges and universities. Some leaders of universities that once were proud to call themselves a Presbyterian or Methodist or Baptist university are embarrassed now by their religious connections and prefer to regard those religious ties as part of their quaint past. As religiously-identified colleges and universities and their sponsoring religious denominations or communities ponder the practical options available for preserving and reinforcing an institution's religious identity, university and faculty fears about coercion and loss of autonomy dominate the public media's treatment of the issue.⁴ Consequently, the few universities that seek to maintain a religious identity while achieving regional or national prominence as academic teaching or research centers face a seemingly intractable tendency toward the alienation of church and university.

The standard histories of higher education in America chronicle this process of alienation alternatively as liberation or secularization.⁵ One conviction, however, remains unchallenged by



those who laud and those who lament what has happened to American universities in the twentieth century: Mature universities inevitably distance themselves from sponsoring religious bodies.⁶ This conviction has conventional wisdom about colleges or universities.⁷

The conventional wisdom raises disturbing questions for universities that still endeavor to cultivate a serious relationship with the churches or religious communities who founded them and who regard these colleges and universities as extensions of the work of the church.⁸ Why is it obvious that genuine universities are free from religiously informed influences? What supports this conventional wisdom? What is gained or lost from the disengagement of such colleges and universities from their sponsoring religious communities? What causes the alienation and disengagement of church and college or university? What can be done to arrest or overcome such alienation? Should anything be done, for that matter? If so, what models of relationship or partnership between church and college or university are available that might revivify the relationship?

In recent years a number of important essays and books have appeared as in-depth attempts to answer these questions. Three of the most important are George Marsden's *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief* (1994), Philip Gleason's *Contending with Modernity: Catholic Higher Education in the Twentieth Century* (1995), and Douglas Sloan's *Faith and Knowledge: Mainline Protestantism and American Higher Education* (1994). To that impressive list, we may now add James Burtchaell's massive *The Dying of the Light*. My colleague, Ralph Wood, calls it "a bear of a book . . . huge, hairy, and angry."⁹ I agree. Eight hundred and sixty-eight pages in length, with 1730 pages of footnotes, Burtchaell "roars" about the sad state of much of what goes by the name of Christian or "church-related" higher education.

Burtchaell's thesis is clear from the title of the book. No longer are most Christian colleges or universities attempting to engage the claims of knowledge in the various academic disciplines with the light of the gospel, nor do they engage the claims of the gospel from the perspectives of the academic disciplines. Consequently, Christian higher education as found in American colleges or universities is hardly Christian at all. This sad state is correlated with the disengagement or alienation



of colleges and universities from their sponsoring Christian churches or communities and education was an intimate one for the founders. Education was one form missions naturally took as the church spread the gospel. Thus, was education a missionary activity, and so were colleges and universities extensions of the work of the church.

Burtchaell acknowledges that his work supplements the already "magisterial work" of Marsden, Gleason, and Sloan. Marsden's work recounts how America's most influential universities—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago—moved from being informed in significant ways by a Protestant evangelical framework, through a significant Protestant liberal effort to make education nonsectarian by identifying the Christian character of the school with, first generic Christianity, and then finally to exclude even its Protestant liberalism in the name of allegedly universal moral and democratic qualities. The movement of the university to identify its aims with the nation's liberal democratic values and national academic prestige was correlated with a growing alienation of the school from its denomination and finally to the loss of its Christian identity altogether, claimed Marsden.

Gleason's *Contending With Modernity* tells the story of the development in twentieth century America of an impressive network of Catholic colleges and universities united by a commitment to a neo-scholastic philosophy, a transnational identity, and a historically particular identity by virtue of their founding and sustaining religious communities as well as their geographical and cultural locations. He tells of how the scholarly self-confidence engendered by the Catholic Renaissance of the 1930s and 40s underwent a serious reversal in the 1950s. He notes that by the late 1960s, the presidents of Catholic colleges and universities felt constrained by the "sectarian" character of their institutions. Many presidents of Catholic colleges and universities rewrote charters and laicized boards to receive federal funds and to make themselves less Catholic and more acceptable to the mainstream American academy. Most soon identified with the Land O' Lakes document that states, "The Catholic University must have a true autonomy and academic freedom in the face of authority of whatever kind, lay or clerical, external to the academic community." Gleason concludes that the desire to escape academic mediocrity and to achieve national recognition in higher education weakened these colleges' and universities' commitment to a Catholic identity.



Douglas Sloan's *Faith and Knowledge* reveals how mainline Protestant denominations, led by such powerful thinkers as the Paul Tillich and the brothers Niebuhr, attempted after World War I to regain a central role in American higher education by reuniting faith and knowledge and how this effort collapsed by the late 1960s. Sloan not only provides an impressive, detailed picture of the creative efforts by mainline churches and the academic community to rebuild a fruitful relationship between church and university, but he also provides a powerful explanation of why this re-engagement failed.

What prompted, in part, the retreat of religion from the academy was the insistence that faith and knowledge are entirely separate spheres of human activity. One familiar version of the story about faith and knowledge goes like this. Faith is essentially a private matter. Its truths are impenetrable by, or inaccessible to, scientific or common sense knowledge. Christian churches rightly consider the truths of faith to be necessary for human flourishing and proclaim them to the world. According to this story, the primary task of modern American universities, however, is to discover and to transmit knowledge—knowledge that is gained by experiment and publicly verifiable tests and that is the basis for technological and material success.

The leaders of the Protestant theological renaissance did not challenge the intellectual and religious frameworks that suggest that religious faith and human knowledge exist in two separate spheres, having nothing in common. Instead, they left unchallenged this bifurcation of human life into one of the many dichotomies that are so characteristic of modernity. Their contribution to the problem of faith and knowledge is an epistemological paradigm, a two-realm theory of truth, which degenerates easily into a private/public (professional) dichotomy with the consequence that religion and religious perspectives are left homeless in the modern university.

Sloan contends that the two-realm theory of truth is the typical response of mainline Protestants to an increasingly narrow conception of knowledge centered in positivistic science. He argues that this response is grounded in Kantian-inspired reconfigurations of faith and knowledge whose ultimate consequence is the claim that knowledge is a cognitive matter while faith is not. Finally, Sloan argues that such a separate realm epistemology is an inadequate response by the religious



community and its scholars and public figures to the intellectual crisis, which has displaced religion from the principal academic centers of the American culture.

Burtchaell's book adds to Marsden, Gleason, and Sloan's work in two important ways. Marsden's book focused only on the America's elite research universities and Gleason's only on Catholic colleges and universities. In contrast, Burtchaell provides detailed narratives of both comprehensive national universities and small regional liberal arts colleges at widely differing levels of accomplishment, across a broad array of Christian denominations, and with a wide geographical distribution across the country. First, Burtchaell provides compelling evidence that the pattern of alienation of school from church and the correlation of that alienation with the loss of religious identity is found in all these places, not only in the elite research universities. Second, Sloan's book focuses more on individuals and movements than institutions. By following the stories of various institutions across a variety of denominations, Burtchaell's work supplements Sloan's intellectual history of the collapse of the Protestant theological renaissance, which began in the 1940s by showing the consequences of the two-realm theory of truth for Protestant and Catholic institutions alike.

Burtchaell narrates seventeen case studies drawn from seven distinct denominations. These include Congregationalists (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). All the institutions examined are colleges and universities founded under church sponsorship. In Burtchaell's judgment only a few remain strongly tied to their sponsoring religious community; only a few are seriously Christian colleges or universities. Burtchaell's pessimistic evaluation of a cross-sample of Christian colleges is in stark contrast to the optimistic assessment of fourteen Christian colleges and universities provided by Richard Hughes and William Adrian in their book *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-first Century* (1997). Hughes and Adrian concede that it is difficult for Christian institutions to develop into highly successful academic institutions while maintaining and nurturing the religious commitments and identity that gave birth to them. However, they contend



that all of the institutions in their cross-sample are successful at blending the twin commitments of religious fidelity and academic accomplishment, though these institutions represent quite different theological traditions and models for exemplifying Christian education.

Burtchaell's selection of schools provides considerable denominational, geographical, and historical diversity. For each school, Burtchaell tells the story of the college or university in some depth, but with attention to important moments in the development or decline of its character as a religiously-identified institution. Typically, the central characters in these stories are the president of the institution and other important denominational leaders, especially those involved in advancing Christian higher education for the denomination. Burtchaell's stories suggest that it is typically the decisions by presidents that often, whether unwittingly or intentionally, move the school away from the traditional forms in which its religious identity had been expressed. One moral to Burtchaell's story is that institutions who want to retain a seriously religious character must be both self-critical and highly intentional in their hiring policies and their curriculum choices, especially as the desire for broad cultural acceptance and academic acclaim increases.

Burtchaell developed his narratives by reading the founding and other essential institutional documents, and by making campus visits for interviews with key church, denominational or academic officials responsible for maintaining the religious identity of the institutions under review. No doubt, even sympathetic readers of the book will worry about whether he has read documents and interviewed persons selectively in an effort to support hypotheses he wanted to defend.

Surprisingly, the book contains no general introduction and only a brief preface to begin. Each section of the book is devoted to a particular denomination and begins with a brief introduction, and the whole work ends with a long concluding chapter called "the story within the stories."

The book is absorbing a good read. Burtchaell tells fascinating stories about the seventeen different colleges. Many of the book's readers, according to my unscientific sample, read only a few of the stories. Typically, they read about their own denomination or church and then one other with which they have some familiarity for the sake of comparison. Add the book's final chapter, "The Story within the Stories," and one has read enough to discern the book's main themes. Yet, despite



size and detailed documentation, it is worth reading in its entirety, for Burtchaell writes in a lively, engaging style, with wit, humor, and devastating irony. For example, Burtchaell describes how the split between Wake Forest and the North Carolina Baptists was a loss to both, though taken by the architects of the change at Wake Forest to be only gain. He quotes a long letter from a North Carolina minister named Charles who would have been regarded as one of those rednecked, white-socked, polyester-suited preachers from the hills whom Wake Forest President Thomas Hearn distrusted. Burtchaell then speculates about what it would be like if its author would have matriculated to Wake Forest. Near the end of his speculation, he comments:

. . . this collision of hick and hip might have another yield; of the mind and of the spirit. Charles might learn that his knowledge of Jesus's call has suffered much from his backwardness, and he might realize especially that to venerate the prophets and apostles whose writings are handed on to him he must make the effort to put them in context and find what they meant to say to their addresses. His Wake Forest companions might realize that any wisdom of theirs which they cannot put to the test of Charlie's mind, imagination, and conscience might, no matter what its currency in the Chronicle of Higher Education, be culture-bound and biased.¹⁰

The stories of Baptists and Catholics exhibit well the central themes of the book.¹¹ First, Burtchaell forcefully points out that many Protestant denominations have driven away their colleges and universities by hampering their efforts to be good academic institutions. Thus, churches established conditions, which encouraged their schools to distance themselves from their denominational identity. Three common conditions repeatedly appear. First, denominations typically provided relatively little financial support. When the federal government or other substantial patrons offer private money to colleges to become first-rate academic institutions, denominational colleges often had little financial reasons to remain tied to their sponsoring religious community. Second, not enough members of their own denomination were inclined to seek the benefits of higher education or seek it at an expense that was sufficient to sustain private as opposed to state supported higher education. This meant that the denominational college or university had to recruit students from outside its denomination for survival. Consequently, it became hard to maintain a distinctively denominational identity on campus. Third, the denomination, through its



pastors or institutional leaders, often presented itself as at odds with the educational tasks of the college or university. For example, Baptists have been beset by an often virulent anti-intellectualism among a portion of their laity and ministers for much of the twentieth century. Thus, it was easy for the institution to become entangled with its denomination in squabbles over what ought and ought not to be permitted on campus, with "preachers coming down from the hills" to straighten out the institution in the name of the gospel, democracy, and human decency. All too often the skirmishes are about customs or manners, rather than substantive theological or moral issues. Such skirmishes are tiresome, of course, and annoying to a highly competent faculty and administration. When those skirmishes turn into pitched battles in an open warfare, faculty and administration might naturally yearn to be set free. This freedom becomes especially attractive if more and more of the campus community identifies less and less with the sponsoring church or denomination, and if they see little to gain and much to lose by continuing the relationship.

Second, Burtchaell insists that the colleges themselves created the conditions for alienation by their inability to discern when allegiance to the church took priority over the academic culture, on the one hand, or American popular or political culture, on the other. This was especially debilitating for many Protestant denominations, especially those of the free church and evangelical traditions. These groups often identified democracy and its values with authentic Christianity.¹² For example, beginning in the 19th century, Protestant colleges typically represented themselves as Christian, but non-sectarian. Pragmatically, this representation helped meet the need to recruit from a wider base than the denomination itself. But for most Protestant schools there was an additional reason: many affirmed a deep theological conviction, arising from the Pietist reform, that too much energy among Christians is devoted to controversies about theologically inessential doctrines. Sectarianism becomes identified with an unhealthy focus on secondary theological distinctives, rather than on a few biblical doctrines that all Christians share. In higher education, sectarianism and denominational identity, or particularism, became identified. Sectarianism is viewed as not only theologically misplaced but also undemocratic, especially when seen through the lenses of shared liberal democratic values, such as tolerance and equal treatment regardless of race, religion, or gender. Unfortunately, these easy identifications disarms Protestant schools of their ability not only to seek faculty of their own



denomination, but also to seek Christians rather than Jews, Muslims, Agnostics, or Atheists in hiring.

Tellingly, too, Burtchaell points out that few Protestant institutions cultivated a vigorous theologically informed culture at their origins. Most combined a classical education with a Christian overlay of some sort or other. When confronted by the epistemological challenge of positivism or the moral challenge of liberalism or pluralism, these institutions had few resources to engage the challenge. In most cases, as Sloan's work suggests, these Protestant schools resorted to a "two-spheres view" as a means of preserving a place for religion, but doing it in a way that provided no engagement with secular learning. Institutions that attempt to recover, retrieve or develop distinctive Christian forms of learning by engaging secular culture will be hampered by the academic culture's current ideological commitments. Attempts to mine gospel, biblical or theological resources for intellectual insights into the work and construction of the academic disciplines is widely regarded as wrongheaded, both because doing so is not "objective," and hence intellectually inappropriate and because such an approach is biased and, hence, undemocratic. Promoting Christian thinking becomes intellectually offensive and morally repugnant to the mainstream academic community. Consequently, professional competence in one's discipline is touted as the only relevant criterion and religious faith will be eliminated as a relevant category in faculty hiring. And even Christians in a Christian university have difficulty conceiving the matter differently.

The story of Wake Forest illustrates these themes for Baptists quite well. In this century most Baptist colleges have been legally tied to their Baptist state convention and the college or university board was appointed, wholly, or largely, by the convention. The financial contribution by the denomination often represented a significant percentage of the annual budget when the institution was poor. But as some Baptist colleges grew in wealth and academic aspirations, they came to regard accountability to the denomination as too great a liability. For example, when the R. J. Reynolds family offered to become a patron of Wake Forest, if the school would move its campus a hundred miles to Winston-Salem from the town of Wake Forest, the promise of significant financial benefits easily outweighed reservations expressed by some pastors about whether it was wise to be beholden to tobacco money. First the board and then the convention resolved quickly to take the gift. Wake



Forest capitalized on the Reynolds patronage to increase the number of wealthy businessmen on the board and their involvement in other roles at the university, with the natural consequence that they become significant financial patrons of Wake Forest. Thus, as the squabble with the North Carolina Baptist Convention intensified, financial independence was available in a way in which it had not been, even a couple of decades earlier. The benefits of Wake Forest remaining tied to North Carolina Baptists was not worth its costs in terms of its institutional ambitions, ambitions soon clearly defined in terms of a national reputation as a major comprehensive university.

When Wake Forest set itself free legally from the denomination, it did so in the name of being "more faithful to Baptist identity" than its critics allegedly permitted. However, the hard truth is that only in a relatively few cases have institutions that cut their ties with the denomination remained in sympathy with the Christian faith as a stockpole for the institution's identity. Wake Forest, Richmond, Stetson, and now perhaps Furman are all institutions founded by Baptists and sustained by church and denominational effort. All of these Baptist institutions that freed themselves from denominational control in an effort to resist anti-intellectual tendencies among Baptists are measurably less Christian now, but also measurably more academic. Indeed, Burtchaell's three institutional stories about Baptists seem to verify the conventional wisdom that mature universities inevitably distance themselves from their sponsoring religious communities. Virginia Union is the most Baptist but the least resourced and academically developed, while Wake Forest is the least Baptist and the most resourced and academically developed of the three institutions examined.¹³

What about the Catholic story? Burtchaell is a priest of the Congregation of Holy Cross and former provost and theology professor at the University of Notre Dame. It is not surprising that he devotes more space to the Catholic story than any the others. Through the stories of Boston College, College of New Rochelle, and Saint Mary's College of California, Burtchaell reminds us that from the 1930s through much of the 1950s, Catholic higher education enjoyed a kind of insular self-confidence in its intellectual and spiritual vibrancy and was viewed by Catholics as a genuine alternative to secular higher education. Resistance to Americanism and Modernism by the Catholic Church prompted Catholics, in higher education, as in public life and popular culture, to accept the



same kind of sectarian or outsider status many evangelical or sectarian Protestant Christians embraced as God's providentially ordained role for them in American life.

Catholic education in colleges and universities had a characteristic form and content. All students were required to take a set of courses that deepened their understanding of the Catholic faith and to complete two majors, one in the student's chosen field and the other in philosophy. The philosophy major included eight or ten courses - logic, epistemology, psychology, cosmology, natural theology, metaphysics, and ethics - systematically arranged in an ideal Neo-scholastic order. The aim of such a curriculum was to exhibit the basic Catholic and Thomistic conviction that faith and reason, exercised properly, are in harmony, and that these sources of human belief complement one another in an integrating, unifying manner. It is the thought one finds underscored in Pope John Paul II's recent encyclical, *Fides et Ratio* -- faith fulfills reason and reason is the discipline by which faith comes to understand itself. Armed with this kind of education, Catholic educators believed that Catholic students would be equipped to serve church and society in a discerningly self-confident way. Their intelligent faith would provide them the resources to say "yes" or "no" to the larger American culture at the right time, in the right circumstance, and for the right reason.

This was, of course, the ideal. In practice, the ideal was too infrequently achieved. Too few of the priests and religious assigned to teach these courses had the scholarly training or aptitude for teaching philosophy or theology in an effective, compelling manner. Consequently, students were often bored or repulsed by the ham-handed teaching of Catholic dogma and Scholastic philosophy. When John Tracy Ellis' famous address, *American Catholics and the Intellectual Life* (1956) appeared, flagellating Catholics for their academic mediocrity when compared to the Ivy league universities, Catholic confidence on the intellectual competence of their colleges and universities plummeted. By the early 1960s the intellectual self-confidence engendered by the Catholic renaissance faltered, and the system which at least to some extent fostered it, came unraveled within a very short time. Boston College is illustrative on this point. In 1964, the philosophy requirement was reduced from ten courses to five. By 1971, it was down to two courses. The theology requirement was reduced from four courses to two. Many Catholic institutions now mimic the modern university's approach to core curriculum. At many Catholic colleges and universities, rather than require courses



hierarchically arranged according to the perceived intellectual, moral, and spiritual needs of its students, core requirements are met by selecting from a smorgasbord of offerings, even in philosophy and theology.

So what follows from these changes in the core curriculum in Catholic institutions? No longer were Catholics educators convinced that the Catholic faith and the wider Christian intellectual tradition, the oldest continuous scholarly tradition in the world, offered intellectual advantages. They had lost confidence in centering the academic practices of Catholic colleges and universities around a tradition to be passed on to the next generation of Catholics as their cultural, intellectual, and spiritual inheritance. This Burtchaell succinctly describes as a failure of nerve.

But not only did the core curriculum come unraveled. Other events were taking place in the Catholic life and the wider culture that would act like earthquakes, sometimes wreaking havoc in the immediate locale, always sending shock waves through the entire Catholic educational enterprise. These events would produce a high mortality rate among Catholic colleges and universities and generate cataclysmic changes in those that survived. According to Burtchaell, there are four major seismic shifts. First, in the late 1960s the impressive growth in religious orders that began after World War II reversed itself with a failure to attract new members and a loss of mature, experienced long-standing members. As enrollments soared, Catholic colleges recognized that they would be unable to rely on the traditional sponsoring religious orders for even a "critical mass" of its faculty. Second, as the number of lay faculty increased to meet the need for additional faculty. Catholic colleges and universities suffered annual deficits, some for the first time. With no endowment to speak of, and small contributions from the diocese, these schools were tuition driven. Most served a predominantly Catholic clientele, many of whom could not pay high tuition charged at an Ivy League school. They needed money to avoid financial collapse.

Third, ironically, as financial aid for students, as well as grants for academic buildings, for student housing, and for research was burgeoning in seemingly exponential ways, from state and especially federal sources, government policies made it difficult for Catholic (and other "sectarian") colleges and universities to receive these monies without abandoning the Catholic or Christian character of



the institutions. Fourth, Ellis' attack on Catholic academic mediocrity converged with a longing for cultural assimilation and acceptance and a pervasive embarrassment about things Catholic.

According to Burtchaell, a characteristic pattern of response emerged among Catholic colleges as exemplified by Boston College. The institution was put in the hands of an energetic, bright young president. He was given unprecedented power by his own order. In an effort to gain access to the full wealth of the state and national treasuries and other public and private moneys, he led his order and the institution to laicize the board, making Boston College virtually independent of the Jesuits and thus an autonomous university, like its colleagues and rivals across town, Harvard, MIT, and Boston University. Soon, in an effort to achieve full academic credibility, only professional competence would be relevant in hiring and professional competence would be defined by the standards of Harvard, MIT and Boston University. Thus, Catholic convictions and traditions become irrelevant for professional competence at Boston College. Not surprisingly, according to Burtchaell, Boston College has no idea how many of its faculty are Catholic. 14

How can a university be Catholic without a Catholic faculty and a curriculum that requires students to engage the Catholic faith, its intellectual traditions, and how those traditions engage, or fail to engage, the best of non-Catholic learning? Burtchaell contends that Boston College is illustrative of the typical Catholic response. At Boston College, various rhetorical strategies and new initiatives emerged that linked the Catholic and Jesuit tradition to the practices of the modern university. These new initiatives also reassured any of the constituency who might question the Catholic presence in the ethos of the university. So, for example, the inquisitive are reminded that "God is found in all things, according to the Catholic and Ignatian tradition. This truth validates " free and open inquiry," "valuing learning and artistic creation for its own sake," and "educational achievement in service of others," three essential characteristics of Boston College. These are Catholic characteristics, claimed former Provost William B. Neenan, despite the fact that these three educational goals are rhetorically embraced by most public, secular American universities. Or they are reminded of the vast array of ways in which Boston College students are involved in community outreach programs that exemplify of the deep commitment of Jesuits to social justice. Or they are assured that all that is needed is a "critical mass" of Catholic or Jesuit faculty to sustain the Catholic



identity. Or that Jesuits are developing "strategic hamlets" of Catholic/Jesuit influence at Boston College-expressed as think tanks or research centers, such as the Jesuit Institute, as chaplaincies, faculty discussion groups and many kinds of service projects for students - which will preserve the Catholic identity of the school. But will these measures preserve and enhance the Catholic character of Boston college?

Preliminary evidence that I have gathered together with my colleague, Dr. Larry Lyon, indicates that, however fitting and efficacious strategies such as the "strategic hamlet" may be, they are not enough. Surveys asking questions of the faculties of Baylor University, Boston College, and the University of Notre Dame on the place, role, and value of the institution's religious commitments in the life of the university were administered in fall of 1995 and spring of 1996. While the faculty of the three schools responded similarly in a variety of ways, there are striking differences. The faculties of Baylor and Notre Dame are significantly more committed to their institution's religious identity and its fundamental role in the academic life of each, than is the faculty of Boston College. For example, while approximately "84%" of Baylor and 75 % of the Notre Dame faculty "agree" or "strongly agree" that their universities should hire faculty who have a high degree of academic promise or prominence and whose religious commitments are deeply significant to them, only 53 % of Boston College faculty agree with this goal for their institution. Only 30 % of the Baylor and 55 % of the Notre Dame faculty "agree" or "strongly agree" that their schools should hire faculty regardless of their religious commitments. At Boston College, 73 % of their faculty "agree" or "strongly agree" with this hiring guideline. When asked if their university should have the goal of providing an academic environment that encourages students to develop a well-thought out Christian philosophy of life only approximately 25 % of the faculty at Baylor and 28 % of the faculty at Notre Dame "disagree" or "strongly disagree." In contrast, approximately 51 % of the Boston College faculty "disagree" or "strongly disagree" with this possible institutional objective.

Interestingly, both Baylor and Notre Dame ask prospective faculty about their religious identity. Both actively seek either Baptists at Baylor or Catholics at Notre Dame, then other traditional, orthodox Christians as faculty. The board at Baylor has stipulated the goal that at least "50%" of the faculty will be Baptist. At Notre Dame, the President Malloy inserted language into a recent



institutional self-study that stipulated that a pre-dominance of the faculty will be Catholic. At Boston College, as we have seen, no such policies exist.

As large as those differences are between Boston College and the other two universities, much larger are the differences within Boston College with respect to one and only one characteristic. While we looked at lots of variances-faculty rank, gender, college or school, time employed-the only consistently significant difference is between being Catholic or non-Catholic. Repeatedly, we found that Catholics at Boston College were far more likely to be sympathetic to Boston College's Catholic identity and typically much more interested in adopting or continuing ways of maintaining and enhancing that identity than their non-Catholic colleagues. For example, approximately "75%" of the BC Catholic faculty "agree" that Boston College should hire faculty whose religious commitments are deeply significant to them. Only about "27%" of the BC non-Catholic faculty "agree." Nearly "80%" of the Catholic faculty at BC believe that Boston College should provide an academic environment that encourages students to develop a well- thought out Christian philosophy of life. Only about "20%" of the non-Catholic faculty at BC "agree" with this possible curricular goal. Slightly over "60%" of the BC Catholic faculty "agree" that courses in the Boston College core curriculum should include Christian perspectives on God. Less than "25%" of the non-Catholic faculty at Boston College "agree" with this goal. Finally, about "77%" of the BC faculty strongly agree that Boston College can achieve academic excellence and maintain its Christian identity. Only approximately "29%" of the non-Catholic faculty think that Boston College can be both Christian and an academically excellent university. Interestingly, we found that this same pattern at both Baylor and Notre Dame. The only consistent set of internal differences at all three institutions is between faculty who are members of the sponsoring church of the university and faculty who are not.

What is the significance of these findings? Even sympathetic critics express some skepticism about Burtchaell's methods. Some claim that he visited schools too briefly, conversed with too few people, read selectively among the documents (taking the passages most helpful to his case and ignoring those passages which cut the other way), failed to take seriously enough all the positive things that the institutions he studied are doing to perpetuate and enlarge their Christian character and, thus,



drew too large a set of conclusions from his basically anecdotal data. Yet, the data Dr. Lyon and I have collected indicate that, regardless of quarrels over Burtchaell's methods, he is correct about Boston College, for example, being very secular with respect to the heart of the university, *its teaching and publishing faculty, especially when compared to either Baylor or Notre Dame.

This is bad news to those who believe, like James Burtchaell, that Christian higher education is a great good, both for Christians and for our larger, pluralistic and democratic culture. But there is good news, too. Our data suggests the Catholic faculty at Boston College are just as concerned about the Catholic character of BC as the Catholic faculty at Notre Dame and the Baptist faculty at Baylor are concerned about the religious identity of their respective universities. The difference is that there are a lot fewer Catholic faculty at Boston College than there are Catholic faculty at Notre Dame or Baptist faculty at Baylor. Burtchaell recommends that universities or colleges who seek to cultivate their religious identity should hire faculty who belong to the sponsoring church. And on this point, our research supports Burtchaell, and Rome also. For Burtchaell's declaration echoes one of the main points of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*: colleges and universities should have a predominantly Catholic faculty, if they are to be seriously Catholic. Indeed, all seriously Christian schools need to have a seriously Christian faculty, as well as a seriously maintained relation to a Christian church. 15

Notes

- 1.[\[back\]](#) In April of 1989, the Lilly Endowment, Inc., issued an initiative called "Religion and Higher Education in Public Life." This initiative launched an extensive effort on the Endowment's part to fund research whose aim is to explore the role of religion in American higher education-its present dimensions and future prospects. Dr. Michael Beaty, Department of Philosophy and Dr. Larry Lyon, the Department of Sociology were recipients of a research grant under this initiative. Some of that research is reflected in this review of *The Dying of the Light*.
- 2.[\[back\]](#) The November-December 1996 issue of *Academe* includes six essays that discuss the problematic nature of the claim that religion has a legitimate role in higher education. See, for



example, Issac Krammick and Louis Moore, "The Godless Universe," *Academe*, Vol. 82, Number 6, 1996, at 18-23.

3.[back] Robert Paul Wolff, mimicking George Bernard Shaw, insists that the idea of a Catholic university is a contradiction. See Wolff, *The Ideal of the University* (1969), p. 129.

4.[back] See, for example, "U. S. Bishops Endorse the Vatican's Policy Statement on Catholic Colleges," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 22, 1996, Volume XLIII, Number 13, pp. A8-A9; J.Donald Monan. S.J. and Edward A. Malloy, C.S.C., "Ex Corde Ecclesiae Creates an Impasse," *America*, Jan.30, 1999; "Baylor President's Vision Divides Faculty," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, July 23, 1999,at A63-65.

5.[back] For the liberation thesis, see Lawrence Veysey, *The Emergence of the American University* (1965). For the secularization thesis, see George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*(1994).

6.[back] See Christopher Jencks and David Reason, *The Academic Revolution*, (1968) at 327 -333 for an especially compelling statement of the "maturity thesis.

7.[back] Not long after Baylor University's charter change in September 1990, a fellow faculty member opined that he regarded that charter change as evidence indicating that Baylor was now ready to leave its adolescence and become an adult. Another, in response to President Herbert Reynold's obvious conviction that maintaining a legal tie to the Baptist General Convention was an ideal he was unwilling to forsake, insisted that Texas Baptists and other friends of Baylor should see Baylor the way many churches regard the hospitals they once founded and supported. Since the churches recognized that hospitals serve the common good as public institutions, and since public support is now readily available, they let them grow into full maturity. Just as many other denominations have set free not only their hospitals, but also their colleges or universities, so Texas Baptists should accept gladly Baylor's move to maturity as a university that serves the public good.

8.[back] Baylor University, like many other Protestant colleges in the 19th century (many of them Baptist), was founded, at least in part, as the result of the work of missionaries. For much of the 19th and 20th century, the Southern Baptist Convention was an organization whose purposes were essentially to promote missions and education. My reading of Baptists founding colleges suggest that



the link between missions

9.[back] Ralph Wood, " Rest Not in Peace: The Death and Possible Rebirth of Christian Colleges," *Christian Century*, February 3-10, 1999, at 125.

10.[back] Burtchaell, at 388.

11.[back] Being a Baptist and having degrees from two Baptist (Ouachita Baptist and Baylor University and one Catholic (University of Notre Dame) university, I read these chapters most carefully.

12.[back] For an illuminating defense of this thesis, see Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (1989)

13.[back] According to the 1999 U.S. News and World Report on America's Best Colleges, Wake Forest is 29th among America's Best National Universities at 36. In contrast, Virginian Union is ranked in the fourth tier for regional liberal arts schools.

14.[back] Research associated with Beaty/Lyon survey corroborates Burtchaell's claim.

15.[back] My thanks to Baylor colleagues, Dr. Larry Lyon, Dr. Scott Moore, Dr. Ralph Wood, Mr. Tom McCasland, and Ms. Stephanie Litizette, for their significant contributions to this review essay.

