

children. The book is reviewed by Edwin J. McDermott, S.J., a long-time astute observer of the fortunes of school vouchers.

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THE DYING OF THE LIGHT: THE DISENGAGEMENT OF COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES FROM THEIR CHRISTIAN CHURCHES

JAMES TUNSTEAD BURTCHAELL, WM. B. EERDMANS PUBLISHING COMPANY, 1998.

Reviewed by James Heft, S.M.

For years now, in Catholic circles at least, the “secularization hypothesis” of higher education has been hotly debated. Until the publication in 1994 of Marsden’s *The Soul of the American University*, few historical studies carefully chronicled that process case by case. James Burtchaell now adds a massive case by case study to that important literature. For those who would like to think the threat of secularization to religiously affiliated colleges is small, Burtchaell’s study will provide no support. A Holy Cross priest, theologian, and author of eight books, Burtchaell served as provost of the University of Notre Dame in the 1970s and now is a writer in residence and chaplain of a community of sisters in Princeton. By far his most ambitious undertaking, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* tells the stories of 17 Christian colleges and universities from seven different denominations: Congregationalist (Dartmouth and Beloit); Presbyterian (Lafayette and Davidson); Methodist (Millsaps and Ohio Wesleyan); Baptist (Wake Forest, Virginia Union, and Linfield); Lutheran (Gettysburg, St. Olaf, and Concordia-River Forest); Catholic (Boston College, New Rochelle, and St. Mary’s of California); and Evangelical (Azusa Pacific and Dordt). At the beginning of the story of each denomination, Burtchaell provides a history of the theology and polity of the denomination as it took root in the United States. His treatment of the history of individual colleges invariably focuses on the presidents of the institutions, especially their public addresses and statements; the structure and membership of the board; the relationship of the Church authorities to the colleges; the percentage of the students and faculty

who belong to the founding denominations; chapel requirements; policy on hiring faculty; and the curriculum they create.

The stories often differ from each other. Colleges from some denominations (Methodists and Baptists) hardly had an intellectual tradition initially and others had intellectual traditions that sharply divided over theological interpretations and slavery (Lutherans and Presbyterians). Still others (Catholics) received no money from the Church and were founded by religious communities. Specialists in the histories of the various denominations and colleges which Burtchaell chronicles will have to evaluate the accounts he provides. Different though the stories may be, however, they all conclude with a predictability that seems inevitable, with their leaders and faculties caving in to the forces of the secularizing culture. Burtchaell's thesis can be stated best in his own words:

The elements of the 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 reductive 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. (p. 837)

Nearly 10 years ago, Burtchaell set off the first warning signals of widespread secularization in the academy in two articles, one on Vanderbilt and a second on a few Catholic colleges (see *First Things*, April and May issues, 1991). Burtchaell's study is similar to that of Marsden's in that both trace the secularization process through studies of individual colleges and universities. However, Marsden focused on mainline Protestant establishments that became prestigious private institutions (e.g., Harvard, Yale, Stanford). Burtchaell's study covers a much wider range of Protestant establishments, and includes three Catholic institutions. One can easily think of examples of Protestant colleges that have successfully resisted the process of secularization—for example, Calvin and Wheaton Colleges—but Burtchaell has chosen to study only those that demonstrate his thesis.

This study, over 850 pages in length, is the fruit of a prodigious amount of research, including long hours in archives and interviews conducted with various members and historians of the colleges studied. In the preface, Burtchaell tells the reader that "whoever reads it [the book] all will emerge

as a journeyman, *honoris causa*,” since it is so long (a good editor could have trimmed it to nearly half its length), and recommends instead dipping into a few cases and then skipping to the final chapter, “The Story Within the Stories.” Having made a vow at the beginning of my academic life never to review a book I had not read in toto, I now deserve honors. But most readers should have little trouble staying with it through to the end because the stories are interesting (especially when Burtchaell digs out records of scandals over drinking, racism, dancing, creative forms of student opposition to mandatory chapel exercises, and conflicts between presidents and Church leadership) and because of how well Burtchaell writes about them. Burtchaell’s text consistently rises well above the level at which most academic writing seems woodenly stuck. Concerning the Congregationalists, “[T]he longer their minds were no longer engaged by discourse proper to a believing community, the more likely and indeed inevitable it became that their moral convictions were more framed by the manners of their class, region, and political party than secured to the gospel by the tether of a lively faith tradition” (p. 8). Concerning the response of the Presbyterian Church to the president of Lafayette College, Ralph Cooper Hutchinson: “The usual decennial rumbling from the synod geysered up in the latter years of Hutchinson’s tenure” (p. 159). Concerning the Lutheran pietists:

By turning from the cumulative tradition of biblical commentaries, symbolic definitions, and theological disputation, and by drawing upon Scripture alone as a basis for doctrine and morality, the adherents of the reform did not successfully set aside the thoughts of man in favor of the thoughts of God. Too easily they simply exchanged the agenda of the sages of the past for the agenda of the preachers of the present. (p. 462)

And, as a final example, concerning the common style of the evangelical colleges: “That style is typically biblical in preaching, mildly Wesleyan or Calvinist in theology, congregational in polity, conservative in ethics and politics, enthusiastic and informal in ritual, cautious toward the regnant culture, plain in manners” (p. 743). Many other statements throughout this book combine both insight and elegance, and make the reader forget the length of the study.

Just as often, however, Burtchaell’s elegant prose submits to withering criticism the speeches of the presidents (who are, he mentions several times, rarely of an academic calling), trustee and church statements, and the now ubiquitous vision and mission statements, successive versions of which are contrasted to prove that the changes made reflect the process of secularization. He speaks of these statements, frequently the product of committees, as vapid, insipid, and boring, rising to a “level of rhapsodic banality” (p. 98), producing a “stupor-inducing vagueness” (p. 311) that causes one to “gasp for air after reading texts as anoxic as this” (referring to an address of

Thomas E. Wenzlau, the president of Ohio Wesleyan, to his trustees [p. 312]). When the Jesuits of Boston College, at whom he launches some of his sharpest criticisms, speak of a small band of Jesuits constituting a "critical mass" which will energize the entire campus, he explains that what really is present is not a critical mass but rather a landfill and an "apparently endless supply of its natural product, methane gas" (p. 632). His lengthy book closes with the following ominous sentences:

Readers may have expected instruction on how to avoid the failures of the past (and present). But that is not the purpose of this book. The failures of the past, so clearly patterned, so foolishly ignored, and so lethally repeated, emerge pretty clearly from these stories. Anyone who requires further imagination to recognize and remedy them is not up to the task of trying again, and better. (p. 851)

Such a conclusion, however, will not do. Though the reader can infer from Burtchaell's diagnosis what his prescription would be to keep colleges and universities faithful to their religious mission, he published about a decade ago a brief and clear statement of what he thinks Catholic colleges and universities need to do. As a member of a Purpose and Identity Committee of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU), he wrote in the early 1980s a description of Catholic colleges and universities as "dutiful and free." (See *Issues in Catholic Higher Education*, Vol. 9, #1, *Catholic Institutions of Higher Learning: Dutiful Yet Free in Church and State*. Burtchaell published this statement on his own in 1988; apparently the Committee did not adopt it.) Concerning the recruitment of faculty, he then wrote:

If an institution professes to be Catholic, not just nominally but in ways that are intellectually inquisitive and morally committed, then it is similarly imperative that faculty and administrators unabashedly pursue and articulate those interests and those commitments in the recruitment and the advancement of colleagues. Neither intellectual excellence nor religious commitment nor any other positive value will exist within an institution unless each of those qualities is candidly recruited and evaluated and preferred in the appointments of its faculty. The result of such a positive process must be a faculty among whom seriously committed and intellectually accomplished Catholics predominate. (p. 20)

In calling for Catholics to "predominate," he insists that the Catholic faculty should welcome to its rank others "not of Catholic allegiance," as long as the latter "each find the way to support the institutional mission and its spirit." And though *The Dying of the Light* criticizes colleges and universities that have severed their ties with their founding churches, in his 1988 article he calls for genuine academic freedom and institutional autonomy for Catholic

colleges and universities. If we assume that he stands by his 1988 thesis, Burtchaell holds that, despite the threat of secularization, Catholic colleges and universities should not enter into a juridical relationship with the hierarchy. As we shall see, he does not address the issues raised by the implementation of *Ex Corde* when he writes about his three Catholic institutions—a very curious omission.

Before turning to an overall evaluation of the book, we should note two intriguing explanations Burtchaell offers for the gradual secularization of Protestant colleges. First, he points to the consequences of their desiring to be “nonsectarian,” that is, to downplay what seemed to be pointless squabbles about matters of doctrine that were thought to be largely irrelevant. Being nonsectarian shifted the emphasis from doctrine to morality, and then to manners, and eventually, led the colleges to blend into a secularizing culture. In the case of the Methodists, the slide was from “Methodist to evangelical, to Christian, to religious, to wholesome, to the ‘goals of the college’ which by then were stated in intangible terms” (p. 830).

A second similar vehicle of secularization was pietism. According to Burtchaell, “the Pietists propounded the primacy of spirit over letter, commitment over institutions, affect over intellect, laity over clergy, invisible church over visible, and they looked to the earliest Christian communities for their models” (p. 839). The pietist expressed simply “the point of it all” to people who had not studied the “all.” Given the power of the Enlightenment in its more Scottish forms in the United States, pietism gradually turned into rationalism which produced Deism, “the religious equivalent of safe sex” (p. 842). Eventually, these colleges became indifferent to the real issues of a revealed religion.

What they needed was precisely what they lacked: learned and articulate believers who were not only open to all truth, but possessed of advantages in approaching all truth: graced masters of insights, an interpretative community, and an authentic tradition. The great need was not to equalize all truths, but to order them. (p. 844)

Burtchaell presents the deleterious consequences of these two ideas, nonsectarianism and pietism, as though secularization was inevitable. They greased the slippery slope by opening the way for the colleges studied to affirm their purpose in highly diffuse statements. Senator Eugene McCarthy once spoke of a Potomac River kind of religion, since in Washington it seemed that only two kinds of religion are tolerated: strong beliefs vaguely expressed and vague beliefs strongly asserted (Woodward, 1997).

Are Catholic colleges and universities undergoing since Vatican II the same process of secularization that it took Protestant colleges over 100 years to accomplish? Burtchaell argues yes. I believe that the answer to that important question is not easily given. On the one hand, it can be argued that unlike

mainline Protestant colleges, Catholic colleges and universities have never been fully at home in American culture. Some have argued that anti-Catholicism remains the anti-Semitism of the intellectually elite in this country. Catholic colleges and universities also draw upon a religious tradition that affirms a principle of authority which clarifies and promulgates binding doctrinal positions (the Church's opposition to abortion keeps Catholics aware that they are Catholics in a pro-abortion culture, and its opposition to the ordination of women forces Catholics to ask whether equal dignity between men and women necessarily means identity in roles). And even though the vast majority of Catholic colleges were never dependent like Protestant colleges upon the Church for financial support, the religious communities that founded them insured a link to the larger Church which was more than monetary. And finally, the Catholic intellectual tradition provides a highly developed and sophisticated basis for a distinctively religious academic identity. Given these factors, some observers such as Gallin and O'Brien seem relatively confident that Catholic colleges and universities will be able to resist secularization.

But on the other hand, the Second Vatican Council made it possible for Catholics to feel much more at home in modern America through its decrees on ecumenism and religious freedom, and especially through the openness to all that is good in modern culture expressed in its treatment of the Church in the modern world. While there is prejudice among the academic elite against Catholic intellectuals, it is not as widespread as it once was. Many of the Church's social justice teachings, including the escalating official opposition to the death penalty and critiques of free-market capitalism, are welcomed by liberal secular academics. Few religious communities, now much smaller in number, exert strong influence on their campuses. And finally, not that many Catholic faculty know the Catholic intellectual tradition. Given these factors, some observers fear that Catholic colleges and universities are going down (Gleason, 1995), or have already gone down (Burtchaell), the same road to secularization already trod by Protestant colleges and universities:

The Catholic establishment...fended off both Modernism and Americanism until the destabilizing 1960s, when lay autonomy, an embarrassment about scholarly mediocrity, and the drive for recognition by the then secular American academy and the acceptance of its liberal dogma abruptly destroyed the Catholic self-assuredness of an intellectual advantage. (p. ix)

In a number of cases, yes, weakened, but "destroyed"? I believe that by overstating his case Burtchaell makes his argument less persuasive.

First, there is the matter of the entire tone of the book. I have already described it as a polemic. Philosopher Nagel wrote about "the view from nowhere," a position of assumed objectivity. Burtchaell not only seems to assume that he has such objectivity, he assumes besides an almost omniscient

posture with regard to the real meaning of the events that he describes, despite his single disclaimer on the second-last page of his book, where he claims to have understood these histories only partially. His gift as a writer carries with it a vice that mars the entire study—a certain condescension towards the written statements of the people he studies, especially the presidents. Moreover, he does not sufficiently take into account in his narrative the impact of the times, especially the revolutionary times of the 1960s. Having himself lived through the late 60s and served as a provost in the 70s, he had to have known the tremendous pressures academic leaders felt coming at them from nearly every side, especially Catholic leaders who had to deal not only with Vietnam, the power of rock and roll, and the advent of drugs like every other college, but also with interpreting a Church Council that closed just as the war began to escalate. And just at that very difficult time, the threat of the loss of government money made it all the more difficult for presidents to steer their institutions on an even course through waters more turbulent than at any other point in the century. And though Burtchaell likes to focus on the role of the president—he refers to the “imperial presidents”—most presidents I know feel they have more responsibility than they do authority, that multiple layers of consultation lie between them and any imperial fantasies they might entertain. In the midst of extremely turbulent times, Burtchaell accuses most presidents and Church leaders of colossal “failures of nerve.”

Burtchaell also measures carefully throughout his study the percentage of board positions and presidencies held by members of the clergy, the number of religious who are on the faculty, and the percentage of the student body who are from the Church that founded the college. One gets the impression that things began to go wrong when lay people replaced ministers and religious. In other words, the process of laicization led to secularization.

But surely, the reality is more complex. For most of these originally Church-related colleges and universities, the changes brought about both benefits and problems. While with hindsight it would be possible to be clearer about what to avoid in the process of professionalization (e.g., faculty becoming more attached to their disciplines than to the purposes of the college), one result of that process was a higher quality of education for both faculty and students. And although the donation of money by alums and government provided a degree of self-sufficiency and autonomy that led many Protestant colleges which originally depended financially on the church not only to sever ties with the church but to secularize, it need not have done so, and in a number of instances, not written about by Burtchaell, did not do so.

Even without familiarity with most of the stories, one has the feeling that Burtchaell has been selective in the information he has highlighted, leaving aside whatever would complicate or undermine his thesis. For example, referring again to Wenzlau, the president of Ohio Wesleyan College,

Burtchaell mentions an address Wenzlau gave at the annual trustees dinner at which he enumerated ten recommended values, and then quotes only two of the ten points, two which he proceeds to ridicule as “anoxic”; what the other eight values were, we do not know, nor does Burtchaell’s footnote tell us. It is precisely at points like these—and there are unfortunately many—that Burtchaell’s tone most undermines substance. Or again, he criticizes the Jesuits at Boston College for writing mission statements that would not distinguish them from Unitarians, but does so by focusing on those parts of their statement that build on general emphases—legitimate emphases—that would necessarily be true for any university, Catholic or not, and by leaving out of view the more specific affirmations of faith, which are explicit, for example, in many of the statements of Boston College’s Fr. Michael Buckley, a person Burtchaell caricatures as the “grey eminence” who “seems handicapped by his inclination to the theoretical” (p. 624).

When such condescending observations are repeated page after page, one begins to worry not only about the selectivity of Burtchaell’s research, but also about his ability to deal with his complex subject with sufficient objectivity. No doubt the historical records of most of the colleges and universities of this country are filled with moments of glory and shame, excellence and mediocrity. Presenting both with balance, a sympathetic feel for the institution and yet a capacity for critical evaluation is no small achievement. In this elegantly written polemic, Burtchaell seems to lack that balance.

Catholic colleges and universities in the United States differ greatly in size and mission, a fact Burtchaell should have taken into consideration when he criticized the College of New Rochelle and the specific mission of the Ursulines for “abandoning” their liberal arts focus and creating a range of professional programs for adult part-time students. The founding mission actually calls them to educate in innovative ways those who otherwise would have no access to education. One gets the impression that Burtchaell would be happiest if all Catholic colleges would limit themselves to the teaching of a robust and extensive liberal arts program, with theology at its center, and simply drop professional education.

What I find most surprising in his treatment of the Catholics is that there is no mention at all of the very important process going on over the past 30 years in Catholic colleges and universities—a process that the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) and the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities (ACCU) have been an integral part of. That process alone, which witnessed in 1990 the promulgation of the pope’s apostolic constitution on Catholic colleges and universities, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, has had a great deal to do with intensifying the efforts of Catholic colleges and universities to clarify and sharpen their mission and identity.

Burtchaell has written an important but flawed study. Leaders of Catholic colleges and universities should take careful note of the trends he documents

but ignore the tone of the presentation. The process of secularization is neither as advanced nor as inevitable as he presents it. Given the developments that in the 1980s led up to the promulgation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in 1990 and the many efforts since on the part of Catholic colleges and universities to clarify and deepen their Catholic identity and mission, a considerably more hopeful picture should have been painted for them by Burtchaell.

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Reviewed by James Madden

Dylan Thomas's elegy upon his father's death, "Do not go gentle into that good night...rage, rage against the dying of the light," provides the somber title for this epic which purports to chart the divorce of church-related colleges and universities from their founding bodies in the United States. The author pursues his thesis, with the benefit of much primary source material, that the 17 colleges which are the subject of his study have effectively severed their connections with their church. They have sold their birthright, he maintains, and have sought to disguise the betrayal by consistently representing their actions and decisions as making virtue of necessity. They would see themselves as responding rationally and realistically to changing times and circumstances.

Burtchaell accuses higher education of selling out to materialism and suggests that the institutions he describes are but pale simulacra of the originals. Such is his theme, which he pursues relentlessly for a mammoth 868 pages. Fortunately for the reader, however, his preface provides a route map as a way of getting through and it proves invaluable. No one is spared. Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Catholics, and Evangelicals are scrutinized in serial fashion. With grand inquisitorial zeal, fueled by a *saeva indignatio* he pursues his quarry. Evidence for the prosecution is marshaled and with scalpel-like incisiveness the author cuts through the argument and rhetoric of the defense. Clinically he bares the souls of the 17 institutions and the baleful truth is exposed. But what truth?

To this reader at least, the colleges are proven guilty of no more than having changed, altered, adapted, and developed in the interests of survival. The chapter entitled "The Catholics" was of particular interest. Here, Boston

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