

## RESPONSE TO JAMES HEFT, S.M., JEFFREY GROS, FSC, AND JAMES MADDEN

*James Tunstead Burtchaell, C.S.C.*

These three reviews are both diverse and complementary, and rather than reply to the full array of their observations, I shall respond to what I consider their most important challenge.

James Madden, an Englishman concluding his visit to our Catholic educational establishment, puts it most modestly. Commenting upon only the Catholic chapter in my book (3 of my 17 case studies), he is not persuaded by my finding that shifts of personnel, policy, and practice in the past half century have gone far to enervate the Catholic character of our colleges and universities. My "tone of unrelieved despondency" is at odds with his impression: The "current healthy situation in so many Catholic universities across the United States suggests that overall the quality of the piloting has been pretty skillful.... The colleges are proven guilty of no more than having changed, altered, adapted, and developed in the interests of survival."

Brother Jeffrey Gros would also prefer a more appreciative study: "to document the struggle entailed, successfully, to maintain and promote Christian identity in an academic and ecclesiastical culture not always adept or even receptive to Christian higher education."

Father Heft, however, puts their shared grievance more sharply and therefore more helpfully. As one of the few reviewers anywhere who credibly claims to have read the entire study before reviewing it, he faults me for basic dishonesty. "The process of secularization is neither as advanced nor as inevitable as he presents it.... Burtchaell has chosen to study only those [institutions] that demonstrate his thesis...[and] been selective in the information he has highlighted, leaving aside whatever would complicate or undermine his thesis."

For a theologian who works historically, dishonesty is the rough equivalent of Murder One. It corresponds to embezzlement for an administrator, adultery for a spouse, treason for a military officer. Such an accusation concentrates the mind wonderfully. So let me reply as best I can.

My book is not a selective chronicle of defections, in either purpose or outcome. The two case studies of evangelical institutions offer evidence and my appraisal that they are threatened by infidelity, but the outcome has yet to be seen. The story lines of Concordia and Saint Olaf seem to be similarly unresolved, though the gravitational pulls toward secularization are forceful and will require a more deliberate resistance than their leaderships propose.

Leaving aside the Catholics for the moment, the evidence makes it reasonably clear that the remaining colleges and universities studied do not wish to be considered linked to their founding denominations by anything more than historical reminiscence (and, in several instances, token subsidy). Some resent or even forbid inclusion on denominational lists.

My curiosity and inquiry in those case studies was not to prove that the colleges and universities studied were no longer in any efficacious way Congregational or Presbyterian or Baptist or whatever. I had expected to find more diversity. But in most instances the clean conclusion from the evidence was that their religious associations had been effectively ended. Not that the associations had ever been that dynamic. The adhesions between churches and colleges in their early days comprised some financial support, churchpersons on boards, clergy or members of religious orders as the main source of teachers, and the denominational youth as the primary target population for enrollment. This overlap of personnel provided the motive and character for worship on campuses and to some degree the expected student decorum. It had, however, little play in the intellectual pursuits of the campuses.

With the passage of time and the shift of circumstance, as Christian college finances eventually became stable and then comfortable, and student enrollment and faculty recruitment diversified, the original attachments no longer tied church to college as previously. The colleges no longer expected significant subsidy, or elected communicants or clergy to their boards, or recruited clergy or communicants to teach, or counted the church as a significant source of students. At this comfortable juncture the college sensibilities understandably treated the church more perfunctorily, yet politely. In the quiet further growth of intellectual aspirations that then ensued, however—an aspect of education to which the churches had never contributed very much—something further changed. Church claims upon college loyalties began to elicit increasingly hostile responses, ranging from annoyance to chagrin to rebuff. The educators finally told church authorities their bidding was no longer welcome. Some insisted that the college name be removed from the church rolls. The old partnership had dissolved. These partings of the ways had Lutheran and Methodist and other variants, but what fascinated me in the evidence were the dynamics typical of them all.

In most of my reports it did not occur to me to offer evidence and argument that the breach had taken place. That was a reality so open to view that there seemed no need to persuade, only to recount. My finding that most colleges and universities begun under mainline Protestant auspices had emerged from that relation and become fully and determinedly secular was, for some readers, an unwelcome admission, but not really a controvertible one.

What proved fascinating and worthy of scrutiny, however, was the evidence about the process whereby the break typically and paradoxically became final just at the moment when the colleges and universities had the

resources within their sight and grasp that might have permitted them, for the first time, to offer an education that would allow Christian insights, sensibilities, and queries to play a significant role in the intellectual interchange between senior and junior scholars within their shared communion of faith and scholarship. How was it that the first hopeful foretaste of a long-retarded mutual success so swiftly soured the desire to accomplish it?

It was in pursuing that question that I discovered a phenomenon common to virtually all these case studies. At the most critical season of their change, when the old ties were still formally in place but becoming perfunctory and awkward, the colleges and universities were moving to the edge of their churches' gravity fields and feeling the rival pull of the secular academy. That academy itself had moved from an originally casual familiarity with religious belief and expression to an increasingly cautionary fear that Christianity was intellectually disreputable. As the academics on the originally Christian campuses I studied began to draw away from their churches toward the secular academy, they generated a remarkably uniform sort of nervous, self-assuring rhetoric which repetitiously affirmed solidarity with the community of faith while simultaneously disowning any sense of that faith's scholarly worth. After reading hundreds and then thousands of pages of this strangely self-assuring discourse, I do confess that its dishonesty became both tedious and fascinating.

After I had completed all the 12 mainline Protestant case studies, I set to work on the three Catholic institutions. As their histories emerged and proved significantly parallel to those of the Protestant experience, and led toward the same default though at a later date, it became clear that among Catholics the estrangement of their colleges and universities from their church was not an accepted fact. It was a highly unwelcome one, anxiously denied.

Yet the Catholic stories do walk along the path of the mainline Protestant stories, which is why it is so important for Catholics to read those earlier stories and be instructed by them. We Catholics are more to blame than our predecessors in infidelity, for their stories allow us no claim to innocent ignorance. So one can hardly avoid being vexed at Catholic academics who read these older stories of colleges and universities which had so clearly lost the faith before we were even much tempted to do so, and will not notice how clearly we tread on their heels. How can we read through this repetitive record of so many communal losses of faith enabled by disingenuous rhetoric and not recognize there the characteristic patterns of disaffection and alienated outcome into which we Catholics have been drawn? The multiple and manifest parallels between our present defecting and these older others, which I have randomly chosen and fairly reported, would seem to me to require that attention must be paid. The Catholic educators, however, suffer from attention deficit disorder.

My reviewers question my attention to the anaesthetic rhetoric of the defecting educators and some of their ecclesial co-dependents. They have complained of the “withering criticism,” “condescension,” “*saeva indignatio*,” “nonscientific, sarcastic dismissal,” and worse, which I have visited upon the egregious trustee statements, presidential blather, and vision and mission statements that distracted all these academics from what they were doing long enough for it to be completed without their looking it in the face. Educators and ecclesiastics have often shared this mischievous inclination to smarmy, self-assuring rhetoric. We can hardly read the earlier stories, then reflect honestly upon our own, and end with observations that “The process of secularization is neither as advanced nor as inevitable as [Burtchaell finds] it” (Heft). “What if there is the odd bit of turbulence to be endured?” (Madden). “[Someone should] demonstrate the positive contribution of Christian higher education to ecclesial renewal” (Gros).

Those who speak for the many institutions that have been claiming the Catholic name with increasing equivocation now say (indeed, with bewildering prolixity) that they do not—repeated: *do not!*—wish to forgo a vital connection with the Catholic Church. But they revealingly refuse to be answerable in any serious way to the Church for the fidelity of their “Catholic” educational endeavors. Word and deed do not concur. It is the old story. A sad story, I think.

As for the charge of dishonest choice and treatment of institutional stories: As I carefully explained at the outset of my book, I studied only institutions with which I had no prior familiarity, and I chose them by denomination and demography. I began with some hunches but did not originally have a “thesis” to defend. As the data accumulated the hunches were revised considerably. The story lines which emerged surprised me by their congruence. They are what generated the thesis. The final chapter could never have been written before the others were completed.

The reviewers believe, as do I, that the controversy attending the apostolic constitution *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* brings to light much of what is at stake in this matter. I thought that struggle too undeveloped then to include in my book. In July my understanding of it was simultaneously published in two periodicals, the *Journal of College and University Law*, and *Crisis*, under the title, “The Heartburn of the Church.”

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