Reconnecting: A college recovers its Christian identity

by Robert Benne in the April 18, 2001 issue

For much of this century, the waning influence of religion in American colleges and universities was viewed as a natural concomitant of modernization, and it was generally seen as a necessary or even a good thing. In recent years, Christian scholars such as George Marsden and James Burtchaell have offered a new interpretation of that history, arguing that the marginalization of religion in higher education has been lamentable and assigning the blame to institutional leaders, not to the inexorable forces of modernization.

Of course, not all Christian colleges have been secularized. Notre Dame, Baylor, Valparaiso, St. Olaf, Wheaton and Calvin are among the schools that have maintained a robust relation to their sponsoring religious heritages.

More typical, however, are the church-related colleges and universities that have experienced significant secularization and that have maintained only a thin connection with their religious heritage. Some of these schools maintain this connection simply as a social ornament—a gentle hypocrisy. Others have made new efforts to reengage their heritage. Roanoke College in Virginia is one such school.

Roanoke is a liberal arts college affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. It is the second oldest Lutheran college in the U.S. Its clergyman founder, David Bittle, was from the beginning committed to a broad, nonconfessional approach to higher education. He regarded Lutheran ethnic or religious isolation as something to be avoided. Many sorts of Christians and non-Christians were invited into the enterprise, though it was clear that Lutherans were responsible for directing it.

Through most of its years the college was recognizably Christian—its intellectual, moral and social life guided by Christian principles. Immersed deeply in enlightened evangelicalism, it was never troubled by serious conflicts over evolution or biblical interpretation. Its Christian humanism was borne by the informal consensus of

southern Lutheran gentlemen, led by impressive and learned clergy presidents. Its Christian character was reinforced by the religious culture of southwestern Virginia, whence many of its students came. Relations with supporting Lutheran bodies were unsteady, however, since the synods were unable or unwilling to provide the financial support the college needed.

In the late 1950s and ’60s, the college was led by lay presidents who did not tend to the earlier Christian consensus, partly because that consensus was more tacit than articulated. During the expansion of the school in the 1960s and the cultural upheavals of that era, administrators, professors and board members were recruited without regard to their religious convictions.

A familiar story unfolded. The statement of purpose no longer claimed that the college was Christian or that intellectual and moral development there took place in a “Christian atmosphere.” Rather, it vaguely stated that the college “honors its Christian heritage and founding by Lutherans.” The two required religion courses were made electives. Chapel attendance was no longer required. Christian moral standards were no longer publicly claimed as guides for conduct; the honor system was abandoned. In the ’70s Roanoke was listed in *Playboy’s* catalog of top party schools.

New faculty were influenced heavily by the Enlightenment bias that religion has no reliable intellectual content. The increasingly large secularist wing of the faculty mounted at least one attempt to disengage the college from the church. Religious practice was marginalized and religious organizations declined. The chaplain focused on crisis intervention among the many students caught up in alcohol and drug abuse. Any sense of common life nearly vanished, and the faculty adopted a kind of social libertarianism—it kept the common educational core as minimal as possible. And the church became increasingly suspicious of the college.

By the early ’80s, the religious factor seemed to be ignored in all facets of the college’s life. The number of Lutherans in the administration and on the faculty was so low that the few who were left appealed to the president for some Lutheran affirmative action. Religion was no longer considered publicly relevant. As a powerful member of the board put it in the midst of a debate about whether the president should be required to be Lutheran, “It is a matter of indifference to the board what the president does on his weekends.”

As the college stood poised on the brink of total disengagement from the church, the president, a midwestern Lutheran used to more robust connections, and the dean, a Presbyterian, quietly but deliberately began to take steps to reverse the process. They raised Lutheran money for an endowed chair in religion and for a center for church and society. I was recruited for that chair, then the only endowed professorship at the college, and to be director of the center. I was asked to find ways to strengthen the Christian character of the college. Several new board members of strong Lutheran conviction were appointed. A young and vigorous new bishop of the Virginia Synod came onto the executive committee of the board. The college provided space for the Virginia Synod headquarters, and the bishop and his staff became a familiar presence on campus. A director of church relations was hired who opened the college to many church functions—youth events, synod assembly, continuing education events and synod council meetings. So successful has she been in recruiting Lutheran donors for the specifically religious activities of the college that the chaplaincy and its staff recently became completely endowed.

Through a combination of providence and design, a significant number of Christian faculty who are willing to be public about their convictions and to integrate their faith with their teaching have been gathered. A second endowed professorship—this time in English—was filled by a Christian intellectual committed to church-related education.

Near the beginning of this process, a majority of the faculty would not have supported the college's reengagement with its Christian heritage. If the issue had been brought to a public vote, the Christian partisans would certainly have been trounced.

Crucially important to winning support for these reforms has been a grass-roots group on "faith and learning" which meets regularly to reflect on the college's religious character and to support efforts to strengthen it. The president and most of his cabinet participate regularly. Now with nearly 40 members, the "faith and learning" organization has given the administration stimulation and support. It has broadened faculty support by making a persuasive case for the viability of the Christian intellectual tradition.

The college has joined both the Lilly Network of Church-related Colleges and Universities and the Rhodes Consultation, and participates vigorously in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America's summer conferences on the calling of the

Lutheran college and in its Lutheran Academy for younger scholars.

Roanoke's current president came from a midwestern Lutheran college with a robust connection to its Lutheran heritage. He is a theologically reflective Lutheran layman who has through the years strengthened his support for our Christian heritage. His public rhetoric has become more boldly Christian. His cabinet of six includes four Lutherans. He has been committed to raising endowments for the particularly religious elements of the college's identity and mission. Working with development personnel and faculty, he is raising endowments for chairs in Lutheran studies, evangelical studies and Christian ethics, as well as for the Center for Religion and Society (the name was changed so as to include the Jewish studies program for which the college received a major ongoing grant).

A high-quality religion department is essential to a church-related college. In the present buyer's market in religion and philosophy, we have been able to recruit some of the best graduates from top graduate schools. Their exemplary record in both teaching and scholarship is one of the school's most potent signals that we are serious about religion. Most of them speak not only about but for the Christian tradition. The number of religion majors has increased from one in 1983 to 40 in 2000. We are again supplying a steady stream of students (four to six per year) to a wide range of seminaries.

Guided by a Lutheran chaplain who is bold in his proclamation of the Word, religious life on campus has grown. The meetings of many study groups, InterVarsity, Lutheran Student Movement, Baptist Student Union and a Catholic Campus Ministry fill the college calendar. Weekly morning chapel has returned as an option, while several other worship services are held in the evenings. The last decade has also brought the development of one of the marks of Lutheran college education—a vigorous choral music program. The college has also adopted a required cocurricular program that emphasizes service to the community. These service opportunities are organized by the chaplain's office.

Despite determined efforts to recruit Lutheran students, the Lutheran composition of the student body remains low—about 8 or 9 percent—mainly because our region is sparsely populated with Lutherans (but Lutheran students seem to make an impact beyond their numbers). Evangelical students drawn from the region provide the strongest religious presence in the student body. Our effort to endow a professorship in evangelical studies is intended both to nourish and recruit more of these students,

as well as to study a major American religious movement.

The presence of the Center for Religion and Society means that major campus public lectures and conferences include the religious perspective among others. The center provides our weekly convocation with a number of Christian speakers each term. It encourages interdisciplinary conversations and courses; and last year a symposium on religion and psychology was held by the two departments. The center is now embarking on a series of hour-long programs on religion and society issues for our local public television station. And, after a 20-year absence from the curriculum, the college has again instituted a required religion and philosophy course, called “Values and the Responsible Life.”

The introduction of this course in the early ’90s prompted the first public showdown between those supporting reengagement and those resisting it. The faculty narrowly voted to allow a “values course” to be developed by the religion and philosophy department. When faculty realized that this course would include the Judeo-Christian tradition as a source of religious and moral values along with other perspectives, many grew suspicious. The course was monitored more closely than any other in the core curriculum. When evaluation of the core curriculum took place in the mid-’90s, a number of faculty protested anonymously that the course was “Sunday school proselytizing” with weak intellectual content.

In response, the college held a summer workshop to prepare faculty outside the religion and philosophy department to teach the class. The word spread that indeed there was intellectual challenge in the course and that the department wasn’t coercing the students to faith, if indeed that were possible. Since that workshop there has been little further carping, and the college touts the importance of the course far and wide.

The momentum toward reconnection led last year to important revisions in the college’s statement of purpose. One of those revisions brought about a second showdown. The new statement not only puts a greater emphasis on spiritual growth and participation in religious and service activities, but spells out what it means to “honor our Christian heritage.” The new version states that the college “honors its Christian heritage and its partnership with the Lutheran church by nurturing a dialogue between faith and reason.”

Anticipating a lively debate on the new wording, the “faith and learning” group arranged for articulate spokespersons from the group to defend the amendment against possible objections. Curiously, the skeptics did not argue against it. The ensuing vote resulted in a tie, which the faculty moderator, a devout Catholic, broke by voting for the proposal. When a later attempt was made to reconsider the change, the faculty defeated it by a comfortable margin.

The “faith and learning” group is now organizing a series of programs about what a dialogue between faith and reason entails. The group’s most recent venture featured a lecture by a distinguished historian of Christian thought on the Christian intellectual tradition. The group’s hope is that more faculty will accept the notion that Christian higher education means an intellectual encounter between the Christian account of life and reality and other perspectives implicit in other fields of learning.

Roanoke College is still a long way from being a robust Christian college. Perhaps a third of the faculty—including many Christians—remains indifferent to the changes that have been made. A smaller group is disturbed by and suspicious of recent developments. Half the department heads still believe that religious considerations ought to be irrelevant in faculty recruitment and hire accordingly. Too many of our students do not participate in religious life. Chapel attendance is low. The college is still bashful about articulating explicitly Christian standards of moral conduct. As on most campuses, parties continue to be one of the main attractions of student life, and only a fraction of the students are awake on Sunday mornings. Piety is not exactly the campus rage.

Even so, the past 15 years have seen a significant reengagement of the college with its Lutheran and Christian heritage. If Roanoke’s story can be duplicated—as I believe it can—colleges that have come close to losing their connection can reverse that process and make important headway in the opposite direction. A determined but patient group of leaders who believe that the Christian account of the world is publicly relevant to all facets of the college’s life and mission can move such a college toward a new relation to its religious heritage. And that new relation may be more intentional, meaningful and fruitful than its earlier one.