Christian colleges: A dying light or a new refraction?

by Mark U. Edwards in the April 21, 1999 issue

As a president of a church-related college, I find much criticism of church-related higher education to be well-intentioned but wistful nostalgia. Critics such as James Burtchaell, whose book *The Dying of the Light* was reviewed in these pages by Ralph C. Wood (February 3-10), have simply not indicated realistically how, in the face of massive changes in society, church and human knowledge, church-related colleges could have maintained their traditional church-relatedness in all its 19th- or early 20th-century glory.

Consider a partial list of developments since just World War II: a broad national decline in denominational loyalty, changes in ethnic identity as hyphenated Americans enter the third and subsequent generations after immigration, the great explosion in the number of competing secular colleges and universities, the professionalization of academic disciplines with concomitant professional formation of faculty members during graduate education, the dramatic rise in the percentage of the population who seek higher education, the sharp trend toward seeing education largely in vocational and economic terms, the rise in government regulation and financing, the great increase in the complexity and cost of higher education, the development of a more litigious society, the legal end of *in loco parentis*, an exponential and accelerating growth in human knowledge, and so on. To put the matter bluntly, the world and the churches have changed substantially over the preceding decades. So why do Burtchaell and George Marsden, to name the two most prominent recent critics of church-related higher education, expect that colleges of the church would not have to change as well? Do the changes that have taken place at church-related colleges constitute the "dying of the light"? Or are we only seeing a different refraction of the light as the prism of society changes?

In *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (1994), Marsden offers an elegiac account of the way in which the effort by liberal Christians to identify Christian ideals with Western civilization may have

served to make many church-related colleges and universities halfway houses on the way toward a secularity that Marsden sees as hostile to Christian influence. In *The Dying of the Light*, Burtchaell surveys 17 church-related colleges and concludes that the liberal accommodation of culture led, in the words of his subtitle, to the "disengagement of colleges and universities from their Christian churches." Both authors stress that at least in the earlier phases the disengagement was unintended, although Burtchaell, the more condescendingly sardonic of the two authors, emphasizes the role of self-deception and presidential hubris.

"Culture Protestantism," to use Karl Barth's term for the liberal accommodation that Marsden and Burtchaell deplore, deserves more charitable treatment. Christian service to the world through higher education does not cease to be Christian when many of those providing and receiving the service are no longer Christians, much less members of the college's founding denomination.

Two types of church-related colleges have dominated the American landscape. They correspond to what H. Richard Niebuhr in his classic midcentury study *Christ and Culture* termed the "Christ transforming culture" model of the Reformed tradition and the "Christ above culture" model of the Catholic tradition. My college, St. Olaf, and other Lutheran colleges and universities represent a third Niebuhr model that has had its own successes, but is less well known on the national scene: "Christ and culture in paradox."

Burtchaell writes out of a Roman Catholic tradition that sees Christ as a supernatural fulfillment of the aspirations of culture, in the same way that grace is seen as perfecting nature and theology as perfecting philosophy. This ideal was generally framed in neo-Thomist terms, with first philosophy and later theology acting as the intellectual glue that united the disparate academic disciplines. All learning pointed, with the assistance of revelation and grace, toward the supernatural source of the world and reason and toward the supernatural end of humanity, which is the contemplation of God. The hierarchy implicit in this vision was historically reflected in the way in which Catholic schools tended to be centrally governed and answerable to church authorities. The great strength of this approach is that it holds out hope of integral, unified knowledge of the world and of God; it is an intellectual vision that has epistemological and political consequences. The particular challenge it faces is whether it can fulfill that hope, even imperfectly, without absolutizing a particular, culturally conditioned view of the world, of right reason and practice, and of God.

In the past several decades Catholic higher education has undergone significant change. In the late 1960s and 1970s Catholic colleges and universities adopted independent lay boards of trustees and put governance issues in the hands of the college itself. At the same time, Catholic professors criticized their institutions for intellectual mediocrity, redefined "academic excellence" in line with the standards of leading graduate schools, and turned (with equivocal success) to theology to provide what Holy Cross historian David O'Brien has termed "the bridge between the older Catholic identity and the newer, more excellent version of Catholic higher education." The 1990 Vatican document *Ex corde ecclesia* reflects a somewhat belated attempt by the Vatican to reassert juridical control over Catholic higher education and (some fear, others hope) to return it to its earlier unifying intellectual moorings. Not surprisingly, *Ex corde ecclesia* is hotly debated by Catholic educators, and Burtchaell's book may be viewed as a salvo fired from the neoconservative camp.

Marsden, who writes out of the Dutch Reformed tradition, offers a slightly different vision. Underlying Marsden's analysis is the conviction that culture, including academic study, is fallen or perverted but capable of transformation through Christian approaches to knowing. Hence Marsden in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (1997), a follow-up to *The Soul of the American University*, argues for a specifically Christian scholarship and contends that Christians may in fact enjoy a certain epistemological privilege over their secular counterparts. Accordingly, he suggests not only that Christians should be allowed to contribute to today's academic debates on an equal footing with, say, Marxists or feminists--a goal most Christian academics would applaud, as would I--but also ventures the more dubious suggestion that a Christian perspective may transform the relativism that bedevils today's scholarship and provide a more dependable foundation for knowing and believing.

Both Marsden and Burtchaell offer much that is worth pondering. It must be noted, however, that both are seeking to prescribe what a church-related college *should be*. Their whole analysis of decline hangs on a prescriptive or normative understanding of church-relatedness, and that normative understanding resembles suspiciously what the colleges were, or at least claimed to be, sometime earlier in the century, in perhaps some "golden age" of church-relatedness (and, unfortunately, often concomitant ethnic insularity and academic mediocrity). Unless the critics are willing to concede that it is, by their definition, impossible for a church-related college to exist in today's world--and some, unhappy with contemporary society, may be willing to grant such a point--they must be willing to think through what it might mean to be a church-related college in today's world. This the critics of church-related higher education have largely failed to do.

I think that much of the critics' distress about changes in church-related higher education rests ultimately on their epistemological concerns: Christian higher education, the scholarship it produces and the students it graduates should be substantively different from its secular counterpart. I agree about the graduates but disagree about the scholarship. Let me explain by returning to the theme of "Christ and culture in paradox."

Lutherans and like-minded Christians recognize the authority of both Christ and culture, Christian revelation and secular knowledge, but see them as in significant--perhaps humanly unresolvable--tension with each other. The Christian in this world is subject to both, and this dual obedience is never achieved without difficulty and without sin. "More than any great Christian leader before him," Niebuhr observed, "Luther affirmed the life in culture as the sphere in which Christ could and ought to be followed; and more than any other he discerned that the rules to be followed in the cultural life were independent of Christian or church law." This perspective can have profound implications for higher education.

The Lutheran distinction between Christ and culture, or rather, between the two ways in which God rules God's world, is traditionally expressed in the language of the "two realms" or "two governances" of God. From a Lutheran perspective, higher education resides properly within the secular realm where justice is sought and where reason, one of God's greatest gifts to humanity, offers primary guidance. Situated within this realm, church-related higher education is called to employ reason to pursue truth with all the intellectual rigor at its command. There should be in most cases no substantive difference between scholarship by Christians and by non-Christians.

What to make, then, of Marsden's argument (or, alternatively, the neo-Thomist argument) that a Christian perspective should make a difference in scholarly results? Consider Marsden's contention in *Outrageous Idea* that the "doctrine of creation . . . has important implications in the field of epistemology. . . . For one thing if God has created our minds as well as the rest of reality, then it makes sense to believe that God may communicate with us in nature as well as in Scripture, even if as 'through a glass darkly.' In such a theistic framework, we have reason to suppose that God would have created us with some mechanisms for distinguishing truth from error, however darkened our hearts and puny our intellects."

The historian in me recognizes in this argument an echo of a late-medieval debate. The existence of what Marsden calls "some mechanisms for distinguishing truth from error" rested then as now on the scriptural testimony that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God--most fully expressed in the human mind, which was, as it were, able to "think God's thoughts after God." At issue, then, was the relationship between God's "thoughts" and the created world. To put it simply (although the matter is not simple at all): Is the world comprehensible because the world was created by God, who is rational and who created the human mind in the image and likeness of God's own rationality? If so, then human minds, created in the image and likeness of God, should be able to understand the world in which we find ourselves; much of the skepticism of modern society needs then to be rethought by Christians. Further, the relativism in much of academia should also be challenged by a certainty guaranteed by a rational, creator God.

But in the medieval debate an alternative question was posed: Is the world as it is because God simply *chose* to make it as it is? In this case, we cannot assume that just because our minds are like the mind of the world's creator we can understand the world, or, more extreme, that we can deduce how the world *should* work. Rather, we must use our minds to discover the way in which God *chose* to make the world. We are given no epistemological guarantee. Lutherans and others in this tradition are left with (admittedly fallible) reason, experience and experiment--the sharpest tools of the modern academy. In the "Christ and culture in paradox" approach, then, the Christian substance appears in the Christian calling of faculty, staff and students and in the Christian context surrounding the academic enterprise--only rarely in the results of scholarly inquiry itself.

The critics are not likely to be happy with this Lutheran end-run around their concern that the Christian perspective is being "academically marginalized." They will rightly point to the danger that the distinction between "two realms" and the "voluntaristic" understanding of God's activity in creation may simply grease the skids for the slide into secularity. But as Niebuhr noted, Lutheran and other adherents of "Christ and culture in paradox" readily confess that all human action, whether within the secular or the sacred realm, will be tainted with sin and so subject to abuse. This is no reason to despair. As Luther told Melanchthon, "Sin boldly!"

Niebuhr also observed that those calling for a new synthesis of Christ and culture on a neo-Thomist basis had, in fact, more in common than they realized with the accommodating liberal culture-Protestants they deplored. "What is sought here,"

Niebuhr concluded, "is not the synthesis of Christ with present culture [Niebuhr's "Christ above culture" type], but the re-establishment of the philosophy and the institutions of another culture," namely the culture of the 13th century. Niebuhr made a similar point regarding fundamentalists, who sought less to position Christ *against* culture as to restore a Christ *and* culture of the 19th century. Marsden and Burtchaell may be committing a similar fallacy. As Niebuhr put it so well, "The effort to bring Christ and culture, God's work and man's, the temporal and the eternal, law and grace, into one system of thought and practice tends, perhaps inevitably, to the absolutizing of what is relative, the reduction of the infinite to a finite form, and the materialization of the dynamic."

Burtchaell's title, T*he Dying of the Light*, illustrates the tendency toward excessive solemnity that bedevils most discussions about colleges of the church. We need to remember that the faithfulness of the church and of the church's institutions, including colleges, depends ultimately not on what we do for ourselves but what the Holy Spirit does for us. God has shown throughout the centuries, in the Bible stories and in church history, that God can accomplish God's purposes despite all the human weaknesses and foolishness that stand in the way. A sense of humility and, yes, an accompanying sense of humor are not out of place. We need to be able to laugh at our pretensions and shortcomings. And God can be trusted to preserve the colleges of the church in the form and way that God wills.