Rest not in peace: The death and possible rebirth of Christian colleges

by Ralph C. Wood in the February 3, 1999 issue

By James Tunstead Burtchaell, The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches. *(C.S.C. Eerdmans, 880 pp.)*

James Tunstead Burtchaell has written a bear of a book. It's huge, it's hairy and it's angry. It weighs in with 1,730 footnotes, and it roars with the wrath of a theologian who refuses to go gently into the dark night of Christian higher education. Burtchaell's thesis, starkly put, is that Christian colleges and universities have squandered their patrimony. Having once sought to engage the life of the mind with the claims of the gospel, they have sold their rich Christian birthright for thin educational gruel.

Using Christian distinctiveness as the single most important determinant of true health, Burtchaell finds most schools sick unto death. Though other good things may be happening at them, they are failing to fulfill their unique raison d'être: to integrate Christian faith and academic learning.

Father Burtchaell, former provost at Notre Dame, extends the argument made by George Marsden in *The Soul of the American University*, in which Marsden traces the 19th-century liberal Protestant attempt to make education nonsectarian by emphasizing common moral qualities rather than particular Christian doctrines. This effort to build up a great unified American civilization--indeed, to usher in the Christian century whence this journal takes its name--produced a huge unintended irony. The old-line universities where Protestant liberalism was once the established faith became so all-inclusive that they not only lost their Christian identity, they eventually excluded Protestant liberalism. Burtchaell documents, by way of mountainous data, the utter rightness of Marsden's claim.

Burtchaell also supplements Marsden in two important ways. He provides detailed analyses of schools that Marsden does not assess, especially Catholic and southern and African-American institutions. Burtchaell also traces a more recent retreat, even

in smaller schools still ostensibly linked to sponsoring churches, from Christian particularism. He offers detailed analyses of 17 schools chosen from among the major denominations. By means of deft selection, he honors even the distinctive branches within each communion. Congregationalists are thus represented by Dartmouth and Beloit; Presbyterians by Lafayette and Davidson; Methodists by Millsaps and Ohio Wesleyan; Baptists by Wake Forest, Virginia Union and Linville; Lutherans by Gettysburg, St. Olaf and Concordia-River Forest; Roman Catholics by Boston College, New Rochelle and St. Mary's at Riverside; evangelicals by Azusa Pacific and Dordt.

Having previously taught for 26 years at one of these universities (Wake Forest), I am astounded at Burtchaell's mastery of the school's history and character. I would quibble over a point or two--especially when he subjects my own anonymous assertions to scalding critique!--but his analysis remains remarkably accurate. Burtchaell has immense gifts of discernment. Though an outsider to all 17 schools, he has read deeply in their defining documents. Campus visits have enabled him also to assess their ethos. The result is an enormous documentary history of Christian higher education. Burtchaell's work should become, in fact, a standard reference guide not only to the individual schools under scrutiny, but for the denominational ventures in Christian education that they represent.

Despite its massive size and detailed documentation, Burtchaell's book is a delight to read. His prose is laced with racy metaphors. He declares an especially opaque mission statement to be "the prose equivalent of a Dali painting." He worries that one college's droning declaration of purpose will induce comas rather than hives. Both Clarence Darrow and H. L. Mencken could have signed one school's Christian document, he opines. Burtchaell describes Boston College's Mary Daly as "the Patty Hearst of Catholic theology," deism as "the religious equivalent of safe sex," and Freemasonry as deism in drag.

According to Burtchaell, Christian colleges and universities began as cohesive academic communities of confessing Christians gathered for worship and study. The personal piety and the rigorous morality of both their faculties and their students sustained them. They grounded their enterprise in common worship, the reliability of the Christian scriptures, and the truthfulness of Christian doctrine concerning such fundamental matters as human sinfulness and divine redemption. Closely tied to to their sponsoring churches, they were unashamed of their denominational identity. Indeed, it gave them their vigor and distinctiveness.

Then, as denominational identity came to seem confining, these Christian schools began to substitute generic and moralizing language for specific religious purpose. To be a Christian college or university--in this altered view of their mission--was to serve common national ideals rather than particular ecclesial concerns: to uphold general standards of conduct, to observe the Golden Rule, to promote moral maturity and social advancement, to join the common search for knowledge, to create a caring atmosphere. Increasingly vaporous claims about character and citizenship and universal good will replaced distinctively Christian notions of the moral and spiritual life.

Almost without fail, the enemy was defined as dogma. Beloit College President Edward Dwight Eaton presented the academic case in a statement of 1886:

> This Christian education is not adequately given in forms of dogmatic assertion. The growing mind is sensitive and suspicious of mere authority. It dreads wearing a chain. If it submits itself for a time to the constraint of maturer minds, the reaction will be all the more pronounced when it emerges into the world of unbelief that is waiting to claim it. There is sometimes even an exalted feeling, as in the performance of high duty, when one abandons inherited convictions that seem to be invalidated by growth. . . . The hope of accomplishing this lies in cherishing a spirit of fearless investigation, teachers and taught seeking the truth in the love of truth; not paddling in the still water of tradition, but pushing out into the rapids of present thought.

It was the Second Great Awakening, Burtchaell believes, that produced this suspicion of dogma and tradition, making inherited convictions seem inimical to the life of the mind--when they are meant, instead, for its unshackling and redirection. Revivalism, he argues, defeated deism at a terrible price.

Burtchaell contends that without roots in a Christian mentality--without faith seeking understanding, the good of the intellect--Christian piety and morality eventually die, though they may thrive for a while. He says that the two great evangelical gifts--the strangely warmed heart and the ethically straitened conscience--often serve to skew the educational focus toward lesser things than Christian thinking. On many Protestant campuses, charismatic enthusiasm and pietistic moralism still prevail over deeper doctrinal (especially christological) concerns.

Many Roman Catholics, Burtchaell observes, have followed this path of unmediated experientialism in matters ethical and religious. Catholic parents, seeing little need to imbue their sons and daughters with particular Catholic virtues and traditions, send them to formerly Protestant colleges, where they often constitute a plurality, sometimes even a majority. There young Catholics join in ethical endeavors, group fellowships and Bible studies that, even when sponsored by Catholic campus ministries, may have little Christian substance. The result is massive Catholic illiteracy about distinctively Catholic things.

Burtchaell notes that the exigencies of finance and enrollment have also played a role in the transformation of Christian schools. Church-sponsored colleges have found it difficult to compete with larger and less expensive state universities. The demands of career-oriented education, as well as the specialized faculties devoted to autonomous academic disciplines, have served to darken the Christian light. Secular accrediting agencies and funding organizations have also encouraged, even demanded, religious blandness and anonymity.

Conceding that these homogenizing pressures are exceedingly hard to resist, Burtchaell is angered by the *internal* surrender of Christian distinctiveness. He carefully documents how supposedly Christian colleges and universities have become embarrassed about the confessional foundations of their own faith. Not wanting to give offense to the pluralist establishment, they have trimmed and softened and silenced the very claims that give Christian education its unique purchase on the truth.

Burtchaell flags the 1960s as the era that marked the real failure of Christian nerve. Wanting rightly to enhance their academic life, denominational colleges wrongly measured such improvement by nontheological criteria. They came to conceive of excellence in bare academic and professional terms. They undertook a laudable "quest for the best," yet without insisting that Christian colleges achieve their own true excellence as they build up faculties trained in Christian tradition and thus enabled to wrestle with academic questions from a distinctively theological stance.

Professors vigorously dedicated to the Christian purposes of their schools were replaced with academics who agree merely to support--perhaps only to be "familiar" or "comfortable" with--the ecclesial mission of their schools. When such mild requests were not dropped altogether, they were replaced with even milder suggestions that the faculty not oppose the university's purposes, even though

these aims were usually stated in the most gossamer of terms.

Burtchaell is especially apt at skewering the fatty moral vocabulary that has emerged as colleges seek to define their moral purpose. "Tolerance," "openness," "sensitivity," "whole persons," "quality of life" and "values" all get their much-deserved deflation. The Aryan Nation, Burtchaell observes, has values. He also lets the air out of a phrase like "Judeo-Christian." It is "a friendly term," he points out, "because it has no existing membership."

"All truth is of God" remains, among Protestants, the favorite unguent to grease a multitude of academic sins--and to poison our ability to ask whether there are greater and lesser truths, whether there is a single incarnate Truth ordering all other truths, and thus whether there are counterfeits to be identified and opposed. "Finding God in everything" is the Catholic chestnut of choice. Jesuit educators are especially fond of quoting Gerard Manley Hopkins's poetic claim that "the world is charged with the grandeur of God."

Nowhere is the scholastic abdication among Christians made more evident than in the triumph of the generic word "religion." Colleges once built on the conviction that God in Christ is reconciling the world unto himself now regard religion largely as a human phenomenon. The study of religion has become primarily a study of ourselves, Burtchaell argues, rather than an inquiry into the self-identification that God has made in Israel and Jesus Christ. We teach and we are taught to approach religion as outsiders, as supposedly neutral observers, rather than as adherents and "professors" in the old sense--namely, as people who believe in the Word made flesh, and who thus believe that Logos and learning are deeply linked. Burtchaell likens the rise of religious studies to the teaching of English by way of comparative linguistics. The result is folly and fragmentation and academic travesty. Religions whose campus adherents number no more than a few dozen are given almost the same attention as the faith professed by the great preponderance of students. Even in officially Christian schools, few seem to care that the large Christian majority remains largely illiterate about Christian traditions.

Of course, a more positive reading might be made of secularization than the one Burtchaell gives. Thirty years ago, William Clebsch argued--in a book titled *From Sacred to Profane America*--that nothing less than the success of American religion is responsible for its decline. Clebsch showed that by the end of the 17th century most Christians agreed with the deists and other non-Christians that the genius of

the American project lay in "religious diversity unconstrained by central government (and implicitly also by the states)." Nearly everyone assumed, of course, that the nation would consist almost entirely of Christians, together with a few Jews and still fewer nonbelievers, yet all of these "others" would be sympathetic to Christian mores.

The nation's Constitution took a drastic further step: it also protected "the right to be nonreligious or even antireligious." People cannot be made to profess--and to underwrite with official government endorsement--a faith that they don't believe.

It could also be said that Beloit's President Eaton was right to fear that a mind formed by dogmatic assertion rather than fearless investigation is a ripe candidate for unbelief. It will not suffice merely to repeat the Baltimore or Heidelberg catechisms--not even to master the *Summa Theologiae* or the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*--as sufficient answers to all academic questions. Our Protestant forebears who spoke pejoratively of narrow creeds and confining doctrines knew all too well that dogmas can lead to ossified dogmatism. "Doctrines divide, ethics unite" was a slogan that, with good cause, had found wide acceptance already at the American founding.

If dogmas shut off rigorous thought in favor of rote propositions, then even Christian learning must seek another basis. On this score, however, the academic cupboard has often been bare because Christians have failed to fill it. Christian thinkers have not always generated Christian kinds of knowledge that would inform the various academic disciplines and thus challenge dominant cultural assumptions.

I would also suggest that diversity in academic life need not always lead to flaccidity and fatuity. I happily confess, for example, that a Roman Catholic teacher whom I encountered at a state university widened and deepened my Southern Baptist faith by means of his theologically informed reading of Emerson, Thoreau, Hawthorne, Twain, Melville and Milton. He also introduced me to the great Catholic novelists Greene and Waugh, Bernanos and Mauriac, O'Connor and Percy.

I confess also that it would have been intellectually impoverishing to have missed the counterwitness of my atheist teachers. They challenged what was sentimental and naïve in my provincial and small-minded religiosity. They convinced me that any faith worthy of my (or their) embrace would have to face up to Camus and Beckett and Sartre, to Frost and Hemingway and O'Neill. Religiously pluralistic education, in

this rather unexceptional case, invigorated my own training in Christianity.

Yet I would also argue that the intellectual diversity I encountered did not entail--as it often does now--a fly-catching openness to anything and everything. The purpose of an open mind, said Chesterton, is the same as that of an open mouth: to shut it on something solid. The pluralistic openness of the 1950s and early '60s sought to close itself on solid moral and educational purposes. What we have now is not true pluralism but a multiculturalism that admits no common core or center. The academic realm has fissiparated into the postmodernist tribalism of rival ethnicities, alternative gender groups and nameless other clamant causes. The elite research universities are splintering into ever more isolated divisions. At the same time, they are being made to question the modernist enterprise that served to marginalize religion by making it strictly a private matter.

Christian colleges could offer an edifying alternative to errors of both the modernist and postmodernist sort. It will happen, if at all, only when we acknowledge the complexity of the task. Toward such an end, I offer four concentric definitions of Christian scholarship that could perhaps help to rekindle the dying light of Christian schools. They are not mutually exclusive but rather overlapping categories.

First, there is Christian scholarship that seeks to employ uniquely Christian warrants for evidence and methods of research. Scripture proofs, citations from the creeds and liturgies, and appeals to supernatural phenomena serve as the prime requisites. This idea of Christian education is to be resisted when it insists that there is a distinctively Christian chemistry or mathematics or even history. As W. H. Auden once observed, Christian poetry would be akin to Christian carpentry. Scholarship, like poetry and carpentry, must be measured by its own inherent excellences. The requirements of rigor and clarity and precision are universal rather than parochial; they belong to what Richard Neuhaus has taught us to call the open public square, where common intellectual protocols obtain.

Yet, lest we be too critical of the Bible college mentality, we should note that the Bible colleges are not alone in inhabiting a scholarly ghetto. A strictly behaviorist psychology, for example, might be rigorous and clear and precise, yet exclude any analysis of human action that does not adhere to the strict terms of operant conditioning. According to a psychology of this sort, the behavior of Francis of Assisi is merely aberrant. The rigid exclusion of teleology and design from much of modern physics and biology is yet another instance of a premature closing of the academic

square. In the humanities, an ideologized neo-Marxist scholarship often silences scholarly pluralism.

Hence the need for a second kind of approach to Christian scholarship--one that is wider, prompted by a Christian vision of reality that embraces common intellectual standards. The indefinite article is crucial. There is no single Christian worldview but rather a cluster of cognate theologies which are sufficiently coherent to prompt serious scholarship. Here Burtchaell is especially instructive in calling for church-sponsored universities to retain their prickly particularity--for Baptist schools to remain distinctively Baptist; Catholic, Catholic. He insists that Christian scholarship should derive its identity from the churches' own confessional life, not from middle-class mores or national ideals or secular prosperity.

Christian scholarship of this second sort finds its life in the intellectual love of God. Christian faith issuing in Christian mind: such is the integrative wisdom that Burtchaell proposes as a way of redeeming the terrible fragmentation of human knowledge in our time. This will arise only when Christian campuses are populated with professors and students and administrators committed to the proposition that there is no such thing as freestanding truth. Christian intellectual foundation consists in the Truth who was made flesh and dwelt among us. The crucified and risen and returning Lord gives rise to manifold other Christian convictions that the continuous community of orthodox faith has sustained for two millennia. We need a new version of what happened in the early Christian centuries. As Robert Wilken points out, the church's thinkers gave intellectual vitality to Christian faith by meeting the Hellenistic world on its own intellectual terms and showing how Christian faith answered its deepest questions, thus converting not only the simple and unlettered but also many cultured and learned citizens of the ancient world.

Scholarship prompted by such Christian vision--though adhering to what George Marsden calls "methodological atheism" concerning the public warrants for evidence--is a prime requisite for the rebirth of Christian learning. It prevails most often at schools that require confessional commitments from both their faculties and students. These confessional requirements produce communities energized by a fructifying Christian desire to "take all things captive to Christ." Evangelical colleges like Wheaton and Calvin, as well as Catholic universities like Dallas and Franciscan, are examples.

A third kind of Christian scholarship takes Christian things as its central subject matter. Huge intellectual effort is required to master the body of art and worship and devotion and thought that two millennia of Christian history have built up. Without Christian studies, Christian culture itself soon vanishes, not only as historical memory but also as current practice. The church will surely die and the world will surely be impoverished if Christian colleges fail to provide a nurturing matrix for the preservation and promotion of Christian tradition.

Burtchaell indicates the character of this third idea of Christian scholarship when he observes that without rigorous training in Christian tradition, fine-sounding phrases such as "all property is God's," or "we are all brothers and sisters," or "it is all summed up in love" become nearly irresistible. Such seductive simplicities deaden thought about the hard consequences of economic freedom, about the true bases for human community, about the many perplexities of love.

Scholarship devoted to Christian subjects is usually, but not always, undertaken by confessing Christians. To my mind, a Jewish scholar at the University of Chicago has written the best single study of the greatest Christian devotional poet, George Herbert. Richard Strier so finely enhances our understanding of this great 17th-century Christian poet that I would welcome him to the faculty of my Baptist university--as I suspect James Burtchaell would gladly add him to the Catholic faculties where he has taught.

A fourth notion of Christian education is defined by the communities a school serves and the graduates it produces. It is not only the curriculum that matters but also the ceremonial and ethical life of the university--its gathered worship, its parietal demands, its administrative practices, its faculty ethos.

The task of moral and intellectual formation need not be narrowly construed. Christian education ought to make students self-critical citizens of the world as well as self-critical confessors of the faith. For both efforts, we need Muslims and Hindus and Jews, indeed atheists and skeptics and other nonbelievers, in our midst. We will not, however, serve our non-Christian constituents by abandoning our distinctive Christian purposes for the sake of a tepid tolerance. Rather, we should welcome non-Christians into our company as academic sparring partners.

If non-Christians encounter an intellectually serious kind of Christianity at our colleges, they will become more intellectually serious about their own beliefs. The

reverse is also true. Christians engaging in serious intellectual exchange with non-Christian faculty and students will become more thoughtful and less complacent in their own convictions. Such intellectual engagements are centered upon dialogue and debate. Persuasion remains the only acceptable means of intellectual exchange. It appeals to universal warrants for evidence and argument, even as it opens up the real possibility of conversion. Coercion, by contrast, is ruled out of academic court on both Christian and intellectual grounds.

Christian formation need not be centered on confessional claims alone. Our common academic endeavors would also require a common set of questions that faculty and students are willing to engage. How, for example, might Christian tradition--in its rich historical variousness--offer a framework for an academically rigorous set of core requirements that avoids the twin dangers of inflexible dogmatism and spongy relativism? What would constitute distinctively Christian responses to such matters as historical causality and representation, the role of design and accident in the evolutionary process, the question of personal freedom and social determinism, the unrecognized ethical assumptions underlying scientific research, the possibility of nonadversarial adjudication of legal conflicts, an altruistic conception of capitalism and international politics, not to mention the deadly allurements presented by ordinary life in a hedonistic democracy?

Such questions Burtchaell does not ask. Even so, we stand hugely indebted to his burly book. It will disturb the false peace that often lulls Christian colleges and universities into a living death. But it could also inspire hope. For almost in spite of himself, Burtchaell hints and nods and sometimes squints his way forward toward the light that might yet burn in Christian colleges and universities.