

Civic mission on campus

reviewed by [James W. Lewis](#) in the [May 19, 1999](#) issue

Princeton in the Nation's Service: Religious Ideals and Educational Practice, 1868-1928.

By P. C. Kemeny. Oxford University Press, 353 pp.

Beginning in the 17th century and extending through the 19th, establishing colleges was a primary Protestant strategy. Even groups like the Methodists and Baptists, which initially downplayed the importance of higher education, soon joined the founding frenzy. Many of these schools were denominational institutions. Others, like Princeton, were officially independent but strongly reflected denominational roots. Both types of school regarded religion as an integral partner of higher education.

Today's conversation on the relationship between religion and higher education involves both Protestants and Catholics and includes recent books by George Marsden, James Burtchaell, Mark Schwehn, Douglas Sloan and Conrad Cherry. That conversation largely rests on two convictions: that religious commitment often adds a distinctive and valuable dimension to an institution of higher education, so that it makes a difference if a school is identifiably Catholic or Baptist or Lutheran; and that that difference has dwindled in recent decades.

P. C. Kemeny's distinctive contribution is to show how that loss gradually came about even within an institution that aspired to national influence. But the loss of the religious dimension did not imply secularization. At Princeton, for example, many of the major steps toward what some call secularism were taken by the thoroughly religious Woodrow Wilson. Moreover, they were taken both on behalf of Princeton's "civic mission" to educate national leaders and in response to changing notions of what Christianity should be in the modern world. Princeton chose accommodation, not capitulation, at least until the mid-20th century.

Kemeny's argument focuses on the presidencies of James McCosh (1868-1888), Francis Patton (1888-1902), Wilson (1902-1910) and John Hibben (1912-1932). Under McCosh, evangelical Protestantism of a Presbyterian sort characterized Princeton. McCosh employed tests of theological orthodoxy in hiring faculty and

required students to take Bible and ethics courses and to attend worship. But his insistence that Princeton's civic mission was to form leaders for the nation also led him to seek financial assistance beyond its Presbyterian constituency, to encourage the professionalization of the faculty, and to increase the size of the student body. Over time, these developments shifted the balance between the university's evangelical Protestantism and its civic mission.

Patton, a theological conservative and an indifferent leader, unsuccessfully defended evangelicalism's dominance at Princeton. His refusal to hire historian Frederick Jackson Turner, a Unitarian, so angered some that

he was urged to resign by a faculty/trustee group that included Wilson, who succeeded him.

Wilson, later governor of New Jersey and president of the United States, emphasized Princeton's "civic mission" to train leaders for a nation rapidly becoming more ethnically diverse. Although he considered 19th-century evangelical Presbyterianism to be woefully inadequate for that task, he insisted that modern liberal Protestantism could be an important ally. Consequently, Wilson "blended Protestantism and democracy into a civic religion" that constituted a vestigial, if altered, Protestant establishment at Princeton.

This establishment persisted, with some difficulty, during Hibben's presidency. He attempted to cope with Princeton's growing diversity by centralizing religious activities under a dean of the chapel. But in the '60s Princeton went the way of most other major universities in disestablishing Protestantism in favor of religious pluralism.

While this book answers some questions, it generates others. First, how much territory did universities of various kinds concede in the process of accommodation? Was the price of adaptation too high? There is no single story of religion and higher education in the U.S. The experience at national universities like Princeton was not necessarily the same as that at regional, denominationally related colleges. Nor, for that matter, is the history of all denominational schools the same. The story of religion and higher education is more like a complex novel with a multitude of characters and subplots than a simple short story about the inevitability of secularization.

Second, was Protestant liberalism up to the task Wilson set for it? Wilson was persuaded that it could support Princeton's civic mission, and perhaps it did. But was Protestant liberalism adequate religiously? What, for example, did it offer in place of the rich ecology of religious practices that had nourished evangelical Protestants for decades? What was the distinctively religious "piety," if any, that liberal Protestantism brought to Princeton?

Liberal Protestants at Princeton and elsewhere were right to conclude that fundamentalist Protestantism represented an intellectual position radically at odds with the new scholarship that was reshaping the future of higher education. They knew that battles over evolution and higher criticism had to be waged vigorously if Protestantism were to remain intellectually viable in the modern university. But by fighting fundamentalism on these intellectual grounds, liberal Protestants were trying to preserve religion's role in the university, not to undermine it.

Liberals were wrong, however, in neglecting another side of the Protestant religious heritage. In their well-intentioned haste to defend Protestantism intellectually, they apparently forgot that Christian faith is as much about passion and piety as about intellect and theology. They also forgot that transmitting the faith in its fullness from one generation to the next required as much attention as fighting fundamentalism.

Kemeny's brief account of the demise of mainstream Protestant campus ministries in the 1960s suggests as much. He notes that "evangelical para-church organizations, such as Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship and Campus Crusade for Christ, began to grow on many campuses, [while] denominational ministries lost contact with most students," and he explores the reasons for this. One wonders whether these parachurch organizations, though weak on the intellectual front, thrived precisely because they successfully retained elements of an evangelical piety that resonated even with a new generation of students.

Kemeny's story brackets the beginning of the current century. As we enter a new one, we may well wonder what to do now. At today's Princeton, the relationship of religion to higher education is not a hot issue—or at least it's a different sort of issue. As with most nonsectarian, "public" institutions, religious pluralism has long been the accepted norm there.

But these institutions are not the only story. What about schools either affiliated with a denomination (such as Valparaiso University) or with unusually strong historical

ties to one (such as Baylor University)? Campus ministries and worship may remain more formative at such schools. But Kemeny's book should remind them that their religious affiliation, formal or implicit, requires constant attention in the face of competing demands on the institution and its leadership. Educational developments often arise independent of the college's religious life, and other institutional commitments sometimes compete with religious ones. Yet both have consequences, intended and unintended, for the religious life of students and faculty.

Kemeny's book also warns us of the price to be paid if we equate the religious life with the so-called life of the mind. Though Christianity is a serious intellectual matter, it's also a way of living one's life, immersed in a rich complex of symbols, practices and rituals. On the college campus the latter may be Christianity's most important contribution and its greatest opportunity.