

Distinctly Christian Higher Education in Secularizing (and Already Secular) Institutions

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The Problem and Fact of Secularization

A short and partial list of religiously founded schools now non-sectarian or only vaguely religious: Harvard, Yale, Dartmouth, Williams, Bowdoin, Middlebury, and Amherst (Congregationalist / Puritan); William and Mary, Columbia, Pennsylvania, and Charleston (Anglican); Princeton, Davidson, and Hampden-Sydney (Presbyterians); Brown, Chicago, Colgate, Denison, Furman, and Wake Forest (Baptist); Rutgers (Dutch Reformed Church); Dickinson College, Emory, DePauw, Duke, Boston University, Syracuse, Vanderbilt, and Northwestern (Methodist); and Gettysburg and Roanoke (Lutheran)

George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford 1994)

James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges & Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Eerdmans 1998)

The Process of Secularization in Culture

“secularization thesis”: the higher the levels of education, wealth, scientific sophistication, and social mobility of a society, the lower the participation in institutional religion.

“subtraction stories” (Charles Taylor)

external criticisms of theism alone are not sufficient to undermine traditional Christianity and usher in secularism; secularism is at least in part a story of unintended internal subversion

Secularization in Higher Education: Marsden, Burtchaell, and Beyond

key dimensions:

- shift from narrowly focused denominational identity to a broad progressive identity
- increasing power of the German research university model; standard of expert *scientific* knowledge
- disciplinary scholarly societies and the American Association of University Professors (AAUP)
- academic freedom in faculty retention and faculty hiring (movement away from religious tests)
- division of academic function and Christian formation; Christian concerns pushed to periphery
- split between faith and reason
- statements of agreement or mission concordats as revealing disagreement
- other trends:
 - postmodernist critique of rationality
 - pervasive relativism
 - heightened levels of standardization articulated in outcomes-based education

- decreasing levels of basic biblical and theological knowledge among young adults
- “moralistic therapeutic deism”
- attention shift from doctrine and truth to experience and emotion
- fideism

Catholic institutions: delayed secularization?

- “ ‘We hide the word “Catholic” from prospective students,’ said Traci McBee, who helps oversee fundraising efforts at Regis University. ‘We focus on the Jesuit piece rather than the Catholic piece’ ” (Autumn Jones, “The New Brand of Jesuit Universities,” *The Atlantic*, 30 Dec 2014

Steps Available to Respond to Secularization

initiatives:

- find funding resources
- promote mission / identity conversation among faculty, staff, and students
- focus on faculty composition (problem of implementing non-discrimination expectations)
- explore initiatives that demonstrate the complementarity of faith and reason
- curricular reform: with focus on content of Christian intellectual tradition and form of intellectual / spiritual formation
- exploit the flexibility available in general curricular structures to show connections between traditional academic disciplines and historic ties to theism / Christianity, especially where those connections have some contemporary currency; examples:
 - mechanism and teleology in biology
 - the question of ultimate origins in physics
 - the question of the prevalence and limits of naturalism / physicalism in physical and social sciences
 - revisionist view of the role of Christian institutions and culture in history (e.g., Christianity and science)
- a robustly Christian “college within the college”
- co-curricular activities
 - student discussion groups
 - speaker’s clubs (Socratic Club)
 - research institutes (Faith and Reason Institute)
- work with, influence, and mentor the formation of students both intellectually and spiritually
- work to hold institution accountable and responsive to its own mission values
- form and inform colleagues of formational and mission issues
- publicize mission drift to relevant audiences (alums, parents).

In responding to academic secularization it is perhaps most important for Christian faculty, staff, and administrators to act with prudence and wisdom, following the injunction to “be wise as serpents and innocent as doves” (Matthew 10:16 KJV)