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Whither Church-related Higher Education Now? A Review Essay of Six Recent Titles

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In 1998 James Burtchaell pointed to several church-related colleges to provide the Christian higher education observatory with an update to what most call *the secularization thesis*. For decades, those who accept the thesis have argued that, given enough time, church-related colleges leave their founding denominations and their founding principles for the greener grass of some combination of better funding, increased prestige in the eyes of the academy, choice and quality in faculty hiring and more open student recruitment (*The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches*, Eerdmans, 1998). Three years after Burtchaell's hefty volume appeared, Robert Benne responded with *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with their Religious Traditions*, in which he offered examples to show that church-related colleges continue to make their contribution in contemporary higher education, while filled with vibrant faith (Eerdmans, 2001). Since 2001, all discussion of secularization in Christian higher education and its hard-to-name opposite ("keeping the faith"?) has necessarily occurred along a continuum between these two titles. By defining the parameters of this conversation for a decade, Burtchaell and Benne have simplified—and sometimes constrained—the task of all in Christian higher education who would participate in this conversation that never seems to run short of new voices. Six recent contributions to this conversation make for interesting reading, four of them essentially institutional histories and two of them reflections from several steps back from the details of any particular institution's life.

Arie van Deursen's history of the Free University in Amsterdam (founded, 1880) rivals Burtchaell for shelf space and provides far more detail about that one institution than anyone could offer in a survey such as Burtchaell's. Every page of *The Distinctive Character of the Free University* reveals van Duersen's careful attention to factual detail and his extensive reading of original documents (his endnotes run to nearly 60 pages). A vignette about Abraham Kuyper, founder of the Free University, illustrates that care and van Deursen's ability to condense material and make it accessible. He reviews Kuyper's inaugural address in three pages

(pp. 20–22), explains his idea of sphere sovereignty—which will not be repeated here—and then outlines some implications of that speech for the university’s future operations. While one might not expect an institutional history to provide a workable summary of a philosophy, this one does. Van Deursen’s attempt to summarize Herman Dooyeweerd’s philosophy does not work quite as well (pp. 169–171), perhaps bearing out Dooyeweerd’s own warning that his philosophy was complicated. Van Deursen summarizes clearly Dooyeweerd’s argument about the essentially religious commitments buried in the foundations of scholarship but omits to explain Dooyeweerd’s understanding of how the academic disciplines connect to each other because of the character of God’s world.

In his telling a story that perfectly illustrates Burtchaell’s thesis, van Deursen never papers over the controversies surrounding hiring, firing, mission, faculty jealousies, or government involvement. In 125 years, the Free University moved from one where scholarship could be done in only one way (Christian Reformed), to one where imams now train and where “Christian commitment . . . is not a condition for employment” (p. 448), a shift that would look more dramatic were it to happen in a single year. Anyone interested in Christian higher education will find this book interesting, despite its length; those of a neoCalvinist persuasion will certainly find it illuminating. Had van Deursen excised more material, he might have rendered his work more accessible without harming his overall purpose. Still, he succeeds at telling the story of the Free University in a way that will draw in outsiders to that story.

The philosophical and formal connections between the Free and the Institute for Christian Studies (ICS) in Toronto (opened, 1967) lead next to Bob VanderVennen’s telling of the ICS story. VanderVennen, a long-time supporter and senior staff member of the ICS, consistently tells his story with more nouns and verbs than adjectives and adverbs, resulting in a book that pulls the reader along with its precision. As did van Deursen, VanderVennen demonstrates on each successive page that he has done his archival homework, although, to be fair, he served the ICS in one capacity or another for much of its history—a feat that van Deursen, a retired history professor at the Free University, could not have accomplished.

Throughout its history, the ICS has generated controversy. VanderVennen never shrinks from this aspect of the story he wants to tell. At some points, he notes the propensity that some faculty

had to say the wrong thing—or at least the half-baked thing—in public. He recounts print battles between the Institute and various Christian Reformed bodies and individuals outside, tensions between the faculty and the Association that supported the Institute, and even dissension among those who worked inside the Institute. Over several decades, these differences ranged from who could join the ICS Association, to how to raise money, to how to read Scripture regarding homosexuality, to what service ICS should provide to Christian school educators. In his treatment of these and many other controversial issues, VanderVennen seems always to write with respect, rarely making judgments about the wisdom or folly of those whose actions he describes. In the only factual error I found (and cannot resist noting), VanderVennen had me serving as acting president during a mid-1990s sabbatical leave taken by then president Harry Fernhout, who now serves as president at The King's University College in Edmonton, Alberta.

One might suspect that books like van Deursen's history of the Free University or VanderVennen's history of ICS would contain too much of interest to insiders and too little to grab the attention of outsiders. Such suspicions would be wrong; both these authors succeed at weaving specific details into a story from which their readers can draw general conclusions. Interestingly, the ICS story does not seem to fit Burtchaell's thesis. With the retirement of some of its earliest faculty, the Institute's tendency to feed and feed on controversy may in fact wane, leaving the Christian higher education pessimists—a category name supplied by Schuman, one of the authors treated here—in need of another account than that provided by Burtchaell.

Next is *Nature and Revelation*, Jeanne Halgren Kilde's well-documented and sympathetic telling of the history of Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota (founded, 1885). Early in her history, Kilde notes the risk taken by every writer of a college history—that only insiders will find it of interest. She also notes that such histories, with their typically narrow purpose of making alumni feel good about sending money, tend to follow a formula that has the college moving inexorably toward success. Heeding her own warnings, Kilde succeeds—as did both van Deursen and VanderVennen—at offering a specific story with global interest. Macalester insiders will love her careful attention to detail, and members of the Christian higher education observatory will love

her thoughtful and consistently contextualized contribution to the conversation about institutional secularization.

Kilde succeeds in *Nature and Revelation* in part because she persistently treats specific events and trends at Macalester within national and global contexts. Kilde situates topics such as mission statements, faculty hiring, fiscal crises, student recruitment and curriculum revision with the larger contexts of issues such as the evolution-creation controversy, wars, shifts left and right in society, politics and church, and the counterculture. Inevitably, readers will find themselves thinking about how the institutions to which they are personally connected responded to the same controversies, trends and events, but they will also find themselves reflecting on Macalester College's particular response.

Kilde's success derives also from her ability to recount difficult chapters of the college's story with a kind of blunt respect, a quality that marked VanderVennen's history of the Institute for Christian Studies. *Nature and Revelation*, while doing nothing to conceal Macalester's clear shift away from its Christian origins, appears as a calm and reasoned telling of a story that happens to fit Burtchaell's claims.

The last of the institutional histories treated here is Charles Rice's critique of recent changes at Notre Dame University in Notre Dame, Indiana (founded, 1842), culminating in Notre Dame's inviting Barack Obama—an openly pro-abortion president—to speak at commencement in the spring of 2009. Rice's volume is not an institutional history *per sé*. Rather, he starts with one watershed event and focuses on tracing what he sees as Notre Dame's sustained attempt to distance itself from the Roman Catholic church, explaining how compromises in small increments add up to big changes and, notably, how administrators attempt to paper over those compromises in their communication with their supporting constituencies. On Rice's account, that long path began in July, 1967, when a number of Roman Catholic educators met at Land O'Lakes, Wisconsin to envision possible futures for the Catholic university. From that meeting on, and desiring to be known as a great Catholic university, Notre Dame levered itself away from ecclesiastical authority. In its journey from Land O'Lakes to Obama's speech, Notre Dame lost its claim to being Catholic and—still according to Rice—did not achieve the greatness it desired. Despite a few unneeded excursions and a consistent, albeit subtle, aggrieved tone, Rice's

book makes for interesting reading, especially when he treats how administrators explain shifts away from an institution's historic foundations. Many Christian institutions covet recognition from the academic powers. Rice would point to Notre Dame as evidence that such recognition is priced too high.

Leadership in Christian Higher Education deals mainly with Anglican higher education and mainly in England. It offers a variety of perspectives and vignettes, some involving specific colleges and universities, to sketch out what some see as an inevitable and possibly welcome transition and others might see as a full-blown Burtchaellian crisis. Of the six titles I have reviewed here, this title alone appears as an edited collection of essays from various authors on several continents. Unfortunately, a surplus of grammar errors early in the book leaves the impression that the book was not actually edited, a feeling confirmed as the reader searches for some common threads to unite the various essays. Still, those with an interest in Anglican education or a burning interest in Christian higher education generally will find these more personal and often very sobering reflections illuminating, and libraries with collections on Christian higher education will want to order this title.

Finally, I end this review essay where I started, with both the last-published title in my survey and the title closest to the hopeful end of the Burtchaell-Benne continuum—Samuel Schuman's, *Seeing the Light: Religious Colleges in Twenty-First-Century America*. Schuman notes on his opening page that his title echoes Burtchaell for good reason: that he believes “that the light still shines brightly” (p. 1). Somewhat as Benne did before him, Schuman reports on his visits to a dozen Christian colleges and universities. In this review, I confess to giving in to some combination of narcissism and suspicion—starting with the chapter about the university where I teach: George Fox University, a Quaker institution in Oregon. On his visits to campus, Schuman heard and saw what I would expect him to hear and see; we presented our best institutional self to him. Why would we do otherwise? But his upbeat chapter helped me stand back and see some of our strengths through different eyes. And as I read his records of campus visits to other places, I found myself agreeing with him; the light is still shining in Christian higher education. Understandably, other readers of *Seeing the Light* who teach in an institution Schuman visited may find themselves approaching his book in the way I did. And they may find—as will

all Schuman's readers—the same delights I did when they read about the places where they do not teach.

Readers will find Schuman's accessible writing a gift throughout, but two chapters especially could justify the purchase of Schuman's book. Schuman's final chapter, "What Can We Learn?" provides his readers with a genuine treat. Schuman does believe that the light is still shining, and all but the most jaded should find hope in his conclusions. In that chapter, he describes in some detail the great variety he discovered within Christian higher education—in the United States. He notes that secular higher educators could learn some lessons from Christian colleges. But he also registers his concern that some Christian educators are prone to epistemological triumphalism while others, or perhaps the same ones, complain about persecution. Almost as an addendum, Schuman offers an "Essay on Sources," an extended survey of recent books on Christian higher education. Anyone new to Christian higher education would benefit by reading this valuable essay. And those familiar with the territory will find his bibliographic review to be fair and synthetic.

What direction is church-related higher education headed? In one sense, the answer to that question depends on which book one reads. But in another sense, the direction church-related higher education takes depends on the decisions taken by thousands of admissions officers, board members and chairs, search committees, deans, presidents, chancellors, student affairs staff, department heads, and individual faculty who carry out their day-to-day work in alignment with or at variance with their respective institutions' mission statements. Some of the explanatory power of the secularization thesis lies in the incontrovertible fact that, historically, all the parties I just named have proven fallible—in case we forgot what theology teaches us. In light of such fallibility, we can give thanks that the direction church-related higher education ultimately takes also depends on God's providence. While this clause does not get all the named parties off the historical hook, it might give hope that authors in the Benne-Schuman tradition will never run out of examples.