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## Review of James Tunstead Burtchaell's The Dying of the light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches

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**James Tunstead Burtchaell**  
*The Dying of the Light: The  
 Disengagement of Colleges and  
 Universities from their Christian  
 Churches*

*Eerdmans 1998 pb 868pp \$30  
 US/£19.99 ISBN 0-8028-4481-2*

The thesis that colleges founded by churches eventually cut the cord and drift into secularity is no longer news in discussions of American higher education. And for that reason, one would hardly expect to enjoy yet another repetition of the thesis, especially one running over 800 pages. But James Burtchaell combines careful scholarship in primary sources such as faculty minutes and institutional histories with unpretentious, witty writing to present a highly readable treatment of the old theme. Many books that follow this thesis focus on the mass exodus of Protestant colleges from their churches in the second half of the 1800s or Catholic colleges in the 1960s (in both cases in the United States). While fully aware of these historical movements, Burtchaell also deals with two colleges facing the challenges of choosing what direction to take now, notably two American colleges: Azusa Pacific and Dordt.

Burtchaell organizes his volume along loose confessional lines. After only a brief preface, he treats in turn the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Catholics and Evangelicals. In each chapter of roughly 100 pages, he

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deals with either two or three colleges in a respective tradition. Readers might suspect that Burtchaell has chosen his examples to suit his thesis – that colleges cut themselves loose from their church roots – but recognising that in the United States more than 1000 such colleges have done so speaks in defence of his choices. His particular choices serve to illustrate that colleges in different traditions leave for different reasons, or in different ways, or while using different language to explain their actions.

Burtchaell offers a sobering conclusion not just for those whose vocation is to pursue biblical and theological scholarship, but for all academics who wish to live and work within Christian faith. Christian academics commonly express great dismay when their founding churches attempt to exercise some measure of control in hiring, curriculum or governance or other central policy concerns. Pointing to such ecclesiastical interference, faculty press for autonomy from the church. For Burtchaell, the irony in these calls for autonomy comes when those very faculty turn to putty in the hands of accrediting boards, government agencies and academic associations. They are only too ready to transfer their identity to various secular bodies, especially if doing so will gain them greater legitimacy within academia (p. 836). Burtchaell will win few friends among faculty with an iconoclastic cant such as this, but his observation ought to lead faculty in church-related colleges and universities to ask themselves whose song it is they are really most interested in singing. The pessimistic tone of Burtchaell's book leads one to conclude, however, that there is little hope of much self-examination taking place. On Burtchaell's account, academics evolved and repeated an accommodationist language which they considered essential to bamboozle their sponsoring churches into thinking they had not really changed their colleges' missions. But by their repeated use of such language, they ultimately beguiled themselves.

In *The Dying of the Light*, blame for the separation of church and college does not fall only on academics; churches have done their share. Whether because of a pragmatic pietism that was willing to

negotiate over the historic central tenets of Christian faith for the sake of civil acceptability, or (on the other hand!) because of an openly hostile stance toward scholarly activity, sponsoring churches must shoulder some of the blame.

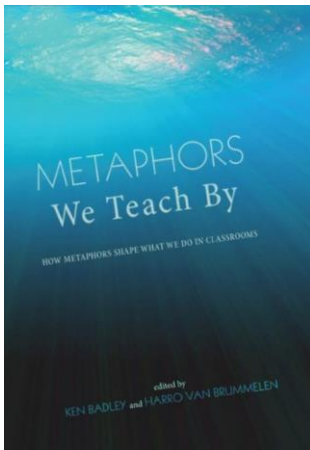
Should you read *The Dying of the Light*? Certainly a few of the college profiles and the concluding chapter warrant reading. But the story Burtchaell tells leaves one sad . . . for the well- and ill-intentioned hypocrisy of some academics, for the many academics and colleges that thought they could reduce the embarrassment of their genesis and, in the end, gave up any distinctive reason to exist at all. If it takes a sad story such as this to induce sober reflection in Christian academics, then Burtchaell's book is well worth the time involved in reading it and (at 868 pages) the paper involved in its production.

*Ken Badley*

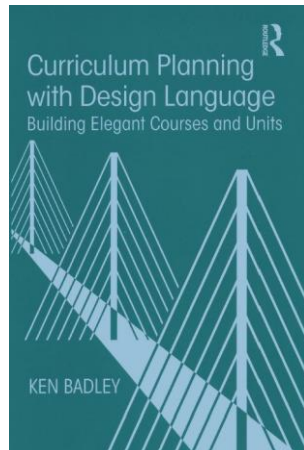
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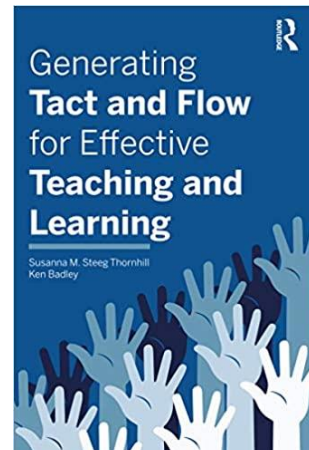
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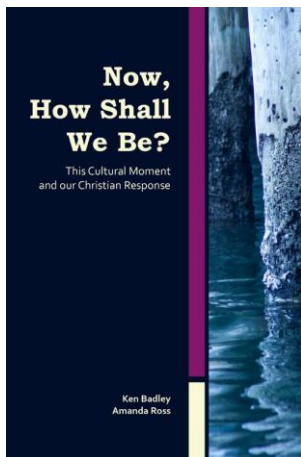
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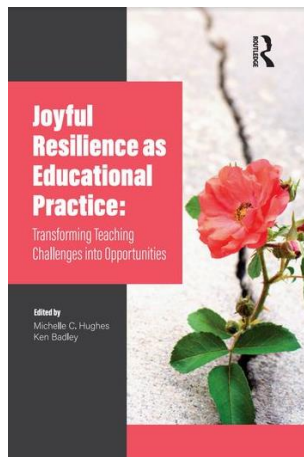
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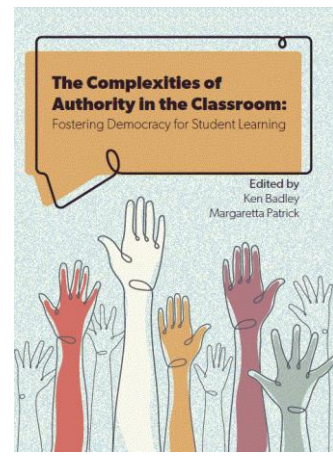
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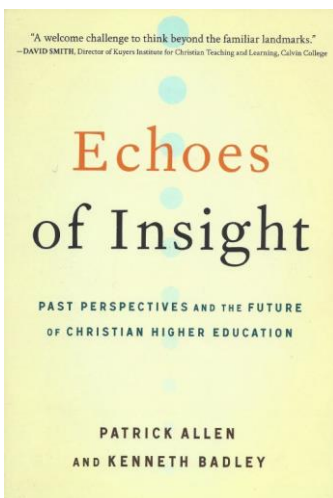


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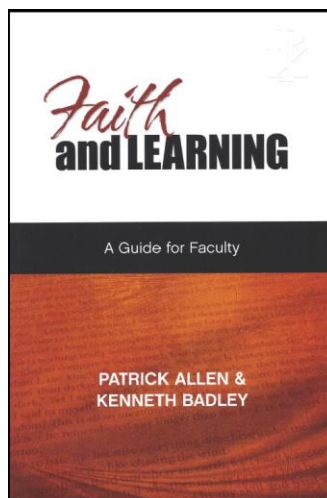


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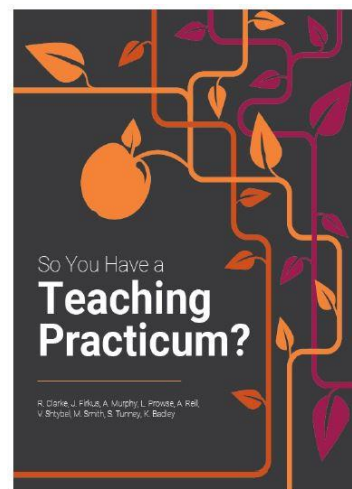


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