
You Can't Tell a School by Its Name

BY ROBERT C. SPROUL

Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Temple—what do these schools have in common? They all began firmly committed to evangelical Christianity and are now secular in scope and viewpoint. These are but a few of the multitudes of colleges and universities that have made the gradual

transition from decisively Christian to nominally church-related to secular. This pattern is repeated so often that it seems inevitable. Why? What causes the loss of identity in so many Christian institutions?

To answer this question thoroughly would take knowledge and analytical skill far greater than mine. What fol-

lows is a survey of some possible contributing factors to such a decline. I have separated them into three groups: practical, emotional, and philosophical.

Practical Factors

First and most obvious is the *pressure of finances*. What the students pay usually provides only a part of the

needed capital. With the search for endowments, bequests, and public funding comes the danger of controls. The authentic "gift" is rare. Often the larger the gift, the stronger the attached strings. Leaders of a Christian institution may feel forced to compromise its position to meet the demands of payrolls and other pressing expenses.

Second are *accreditation pressures*. If Christian institutions are to compete with secular schools, they need to be approved by state and other accrediting agencies. Although in theory these agencies are neutral about the world view presented by an institution, subtle pressures are often brought to bear on evangelical institutions to broaden their perspectives.

Third among the practical pressures is *the problem of faculty recruitment*. Nothing shapes the direction of our academic institution so much as the faculty. I once spoke with a college president who was about to retire. He had taken a small Christian college with a minor budget and meager facilities and built it into a major institution. Yet he said to me with tears, "I have given all my energy to buildings and funding. I've neglected the area of faculty recruitment. Our faculty no

What causes so many colleges and universities that begin as Christian institutions to lose their identity?

longer has a strong Christian commitment, and it is my fault." The institution he built is now secularized.

Often the paper credentials become more important in hiring than the philosophical and theological perspectives of the one who holds them. The Ph.D. from Harvard carries more weight than a Th.D. from a Christian seminary. And such points as "Can this person communicate? Is he or she skilled in teaching?" are often neglected.

I've seen schools where the theology department has five professors, four of whom are soundly committed to Christianity but are very weak communicators. Their classrooms are dull and stuffy. The fifth professor has wandered

far afield from classical Christianity but is dynamic, spontaneous, warm, and exciting in the classroom. Who influences students the most? We could argue that students should not be influenced by such extraneous factors as personal charisma, but it would be naive to do so. If Christian institutions are to endure they must have teachers who are both sound and skilled in communication.

Then, fourth, there is *the question of church supervision*. It is a glaring fact of history that where church-related schools have been under close church supervision, their endurance has been greater. This may be *post hoc ergo propter hoc* thinking, but I doubt it. When the school is not answerable to the church, the tendency is for the curriculum to become broader and broader until it no longer represents the church.

The climate of higher education in America is highly unfavorable to church controls. Colleges and seminaries want to lead the church, not serve it. In the past, the seminary and Christian college were seen as servants of the church, filling a highly specialized need for research and training. There was to be a spirit of reciprocity and

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mutual dependence between church and school. But this concept collides with prevailing notions in secular education. It therefore becomes more difficult, though more necessary, for the school to submit to the church.

Emotional Factors

First among what for lack of a better word I am calling "emotional" factors is the *shibboleth of academic freedom*. If research is to be vital and the pursuit of knowledge is to have integrity, a certain amount of academic freedom must be given to professors. But this freedom cannot extend to the point of *autonomy* if the purposes of a confessional institution are to be served. Yet it now seems to be considered an inalienable right of professors to teach whatever they want. All too often, the banner of academic freedom has been used as a cloak for perjury. Seminary professors sign statements of faith and then proceed to undermine them in the name of academic freedom. When an institution seeks to censor or remove a professor guilty of such perjury, the professor is seen as an injured victim and the institution as a menacing, intolerant tyrant. Sometimes an institution would rather tolerate the professor's subversion of its standards than be exposed to public ridicule for "tyranny." The tenure system and faculty unions make this problem all the more acute.

A second "emotional" factor is the problem of *competition*. Every school wants to be regarded as academically excellent. In our culture, secular institutions determine academic trends, and this poses grave problems for the Christian institution. For example, secularists have strong prejudices against Christian beliefs. A question of biblical authority may be met by a response that "no one with any intellectual integrity still believes in the Bible." The Christian institution may soften its view of Scripture to earn the credibility of the secular world.

Closely related to this is *the problem of intimidation*. The ridicule of the

secularist can be hard on the Christian ego. The insecure Christian scholar or institution is most vulnerable at the point of scholarly reputation. Where courage fails, Christian institutions falter.

The problem of intimidation is rarely discussed among Christian educators. Perhaps we don't want to admit our vulnerability. But it is a reality that we dare not overlook. There is a constant need for mutual support among Christian scholars. We need the encouragement of one another.

Philosophical Factors

The first point in this category is *the demise of natural theology as a cohesive force*. Kant's assault on natural theology and the possibility of establishing crucial theological truths on the basis of theoretical thought created a crisis for Christian higher education. Theology, the queen of the sciences, was rudely dethroned. Where Kant was accepted, theology no longer could serve as an integrating intellectual force. The mixed articles of Aquinas could no longer serve as common ground for the pursuit of truth. The university became a multiversity with "religion" subsumed under a larger department of anthropology or sociology. Schools that desired to keep theology in a preeminent position often degenerated into citadels of irrelevant obscurantism. Others sought a compromise with the Kantian framework and slowly capitulated to it. A few institutions sought to develop a Christian intellectual methodology by which they could maintain their Christian world view in a highly intellectual environment. Fideistic philosophies developed by which theology could be defended on grounds other than natural reason. Westminster Seminary is the most notable and successful school of this type. Another response was to launch a coun-

terattack against Kant and continue the Christian model along the lines of Aquinas. This was partially successful in some Roman Catholic institutions.

A second philosophical factor was *the rise of the phenomenological approach to education*. This grew out of the demise of natural theology. If metaphysics was no longer an intellectual option, then it became the task of education to focus learning on the realm of the phenomenological. Countless Christian educators adopted this method, quite unaware of its philosophical roots or importance. Even in Roman Catholic institutions the competition became keen between the neo-Thomists and the advocates of phenomenology.

I witnessed the subtle intrusion of the phenomenological approach into a Christian college a few years ago. I was invited to address the faculty on "The Uniqueness of Christian Education." As I walked to the lecture hall I noticed a sign on an office door: "Religion Dept." Before the lecture I asked the faculty if the "religion department" had always been called that. A professor replied that until four years ago its name was "department of biblical and theological studies." I asked why the name had been changed. No one knew. The teachers seemed perplexed by my line of questioning. In this Christian college, the change of a core academic department from a classical description to one of phenomenological parlance had gone virtually unnoticed.

These are some of the possible causes of the death of Christian colleges and universities. An awareness of them should help us be more vigilant in our present structures and in the ones we plan for the future. There are no guarantees for the endurance of Christian schools, but there are safeguards. We must take seriously our attrition rate in scholarship. The Christian faith has a vital contribution to make to the enterprise of learning. □

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