



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Journal of Catholic Education

Volume 2 | Issue 4

Article 15

6-1-1999

The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities From Their Christian Churches, by James Tunstead Burtchaell

James Madden
St. Mary's College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/ce>

Recommended Citation

Madden, J. (1999). The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities From Their Christian Churches, by James Tunstead Burtchaell. *Journal of Catholic Education*, 2 (4). <http://dx.doi.org/10.15365/joce.0204152013>

This Book Review is brought to you for free with open access by the School of Education at Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for publication in *Journal of Catholic Education* by the journal's editorial board and has been published on the web by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons at Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information about Digital Commons, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu. To contact the editorial board of *Journal of Catholic Education*, please email JCE@nd.edu.

but ignore the tone of the presentation. The process of secularization is neither as advanced nor as inevitable as he presents it. Given the developments that in the 1980s led up to the promulgation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* in 1990 and the many efforts since on the part of Catholic colleges and universities to clarify and deepen their Catholic identity and mission, a considerably more hopeful picture should have been painted for them by Burtchaell.

REFERENCES

Gleason, P. (1995). *Contending with modernity: Catholic higher education in the twentieth century*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Woodward, K. (1997, August 2). Religion, politics and the media. *America*, p. 12.

James Heft, S.M., is University Professor of Faith and Culture and Chancellor at the University of Dayton.

Reviewed by James Madden

Dylan Thomas's elegy upon his father's death, "Do not go gentle into that good night...rage, rage against the dying of the light," provides the somber title for this epic which purports to chart the divorce of church-related colleges and universities from their founding bodies in the United States. The author pursues his thesis, with the benefit of much primary source material, that the 17 colleges which are the subject of his study have effectively severed their connections with their church. They have sold their birthright, he maintains, and have sought to disguise the betrayal by consistently representing their actions and decisions as making virtue of necessity. They would see themselves as responding rationally and realistically to changing times and circumstances.

Burtchaell accuses higher education of selling out to materialism and suggests that the institutions he describes are but pale simulacra of the originals. Such is his theme, which he pursues relentlessly for a mammoth 868 pages. Fortunately for the reader, however, his preface provides a route map as a way of getting through and it proves invaluable. No one is spared. Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Catholics, and Evangelicals are scrutinized in serial fashion. With grand inquisitorial zeal, fueled by a *saeva indignatio* he pursues his quarry. Evidence for the prosecution is marshaled and with scalpel-like incisiveness the author cuts through the argument and rhetoric of the defense. Clinically he bares the souls of the 17 institutions and the baleful truth is exposed. But what truth?

To this reader at least, the colleges are proven guilty of no more than having changed, altered, adapted, and developed in the interests of survival. The chapter entitled "The Catholics" was of particular interest. Here, Boston

College, the College of New Rochelle, and St. Mary's College, California, are offered as Catholic examples of the disengagement theory. Each in turn is placed under the microscope and invariably found wanting. Burtchaell perceives certain common features in the decline and fall of these Church institutions and attaches blame primarily to the growth of "president power" (p. 606), the pursuit of government funding, and their expansion into vocational education. So successful have they been in accessing government funding, however, and in diversifying their programs, they now serve a much wider clientele than was originally intended and have achieved financial stability and comparative affluence. Desirable outcomes for any post-Conciliar Catholic institution of higher education, one might reasonably assume. Burtchaell comments, "The presidents were able to bring a sense of urgency, an activist style, and entrepreneurial boldness and a capacity for fund-raising that saved each of the three schools from possible bankruptcy" (p. 708). "Hooray for them!" you might say, but not the author. He goes on, "Other results have followed from their rapid initiatives. They have compromised the Catholic character of the three institutions" (p. 708).

The remainder of the chapter is devoted to describing in detail the process of decomposition which attended such change within the three Catholic colleges. While the main *bête noir* in each case appears to have been a president or succession of presidents too eager and compliant in acceptance of government money and too uncritical in espousal of expansionism, other factors also have played a significant part in this sorry saga. Faculty, for example, must shoulder a substantial portion of the blame. Too caught up in the pursuit of their own academic autonomy and professionalism, they showed little appetite for the religious and moral objectives of the institutions they served. Lacking too in these colleges were clear statements of purpose, and in their place were "vague banalities" (p. 833). The author casts a cold eye indeed on these vision/mission statements which speak so easily of perseverance in offering Christian values to students, but never of hiring faculty that could and would do the offering. "While working on the menu they declined to hire a cook," (p. 834) he wryly observes. Since Vatican II changing attitudes among Catholics, lay, clerical, and religious have also played a part in the secularizing of the Catholic colleges and universities. "Many are willing to live by the reforms" he suggests, "but not by the fidelities" (p. 836).

The fracturing of the Church-college relationship was inevitable, he argues, in circumstances where Church was replaced as financial patron by alumni institutions, philanthropists, and government; where Church was displaced as primary authority by regional accrediting associations and government; where the study of faith was academically marginalized and where study of religion was degraded into "reductive banalities for promotional use" (p. 837); where ambitious presidents encouraged their colleges to follow the example of major academic pacesetters which were inevitably state or

independent universities; and finally, where faculty transferred their primary loyalty from their college to their disciplines with a consequent growth of antagonism toward any competing norms of professional excellence relating to the Church.

The subject matter of this book is fascinating and the author's approach is provocative and disturbing. We owe him a debt of gratitude for the clarity of his exposition, the directness and immediacy of his style, the rapier-like quality of his insight, and not the least for the challenge he lays down. His chapters on individual churches will doubtless give rise to some denominational soul searching, and should occasion lively debate, but they serve a second very useful purpose in providing a window into the history and traditions of a variety of Christian communities in their pursuit of education for their people. We are brought face to face with so much that we hold in common—goals, beliefs, expectations, frustrations, fears—and a painful realization of how little we actually know about our brothers and sisters in faith and their struggles. The case is strongly made, albeit obliquely and coincidentally, for a great deal more comparative education and sharing of our stories among the churches.

Magisterial in tone and panoramic in scope, the book is demanding, challenging, stimulating, and irritating. It sparkles and glitters. It is consistently brilliant and erudite, clever and penetrating. It is also on occasion overweening, condescending, and redolent of a hubris that the author condemns in others. Ultimately the book disappoints because it lacks in equilibrium. Overall, the tone is one of unrelieved despondency, and the judgments meted out on those who struggled to navigate their institutions through the choppy waters of history are harsh. Hindsight, of course, is the prerogative of the historian, but those actually caught up in the events of history are frequently flying by the seat of their pants and do what they can according to their flights. And what if there is the odd bit of turbulence to be endured? The current healthy situation in so many Catholic universities across the United States suggests that overall the quality of the piloting has been pretty skillful. The ship is still in the air and flying with confidence, but the author is entitled to be critical and to take issue with the decisions of the past if he believes in his fundamental premise. His judgments, however, would perhaps have been tempered had he read more deeply into Thomas's poem and construed the actions of those whom he criticizes as those of "wise men," "good men," "grave men," or even "wild men" (and women!) struggling to make sense of change and refusing obstinately to allow their institutions to slide gently into oblivion like so many others. Burtchaell's disengagement theory does not allow for such interpretation. The judgments and decisions of the college leaders amount only to ignominious acquiescence and vacillating conformity; a sell-out of enormous magnitude with not even a whimper of complaint or a modicum of resistance. The author claims to have looked in vain for evidence of

rage in defense of the colleges.

On the contrary, there is much passion in these pages, the passion of men and women of conviction and ability, charged with the unenviable task of keeping the vision alive while responding to the demands of change in both Church and civil society. The values of the Gospel remain constant but the manner of heralding them must take account of the realities in which we find ourselves. The success of these chancellors, presidents, elders, trustees, and orders and the rightness of their choices in many cases can be measured—at least from the Catholic perspective—by the enduring presence of so many undeniably Catholic centers of learning and research across the United States. Catholicism is graced by the witness they give and the ministry they perform. Burtchaell acknowledges that it is a melancholy tale which he tells. This is understating it. It is a chronicle of alleged equivocation, concealment, and deceit; of failure to keep faith and betrayal of principle; of greed and acquisitiveness; of pride and of prejudice in power-hungry administrators and self-serving academics; a sorry tale of innocence and a fall from grace. “Most of the colleges examined no longer have a serious, valued or functioning relationship with their Christian sponsors of the past,” (p. xi) he writes.

The estrangement between churches and colleges was effected by men and women who said and apparently thought that they wanted them to be partners in both the life of the spirit and the life of the mind, but they concealed from themselves and from some of their constituencies the process of alienation as it was under way. There is considerable self-deception in these narratives. (p. xi)

He concludes,

The failures of the past so clearly patterned, so foolishly ignored, and so lethally repeated emerge pretty clearly from these stories. Anyone who requires further imagination to recognize and remedy them is not up to the task of trying again, and better. (p. 851)

These are serious allegations that most certainly must be answered. The gauntlet has been thrown down and the challenge needs to be accepted. Integrity is both the cause and the prize.

Dr. James Madden is an educational management consultant at Saint Mary's College, Twickenham, U.K.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Gros, FSC

Catholic colleges and universities served the dioceses and their bishops in the wake of Vatican II as a principal source for the transmission of the

Copyright of *Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice* is the property of Catholic Education: A Journal of Inquiry & Practice and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.