

Special Section

A Higher Education

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Reviewing the history of once-solidly Christian colleges and universities sliding down the slippery slope to secularism, the author offers a glimmer of light at the end of the tunnel by citing experiences and works of “reformers” or “Re-Christianizers” seeking ways to reverse the process. This article first appeared in the June 2005 issue of Christianity Today (Vol. 49, No. 6). Used by permission of Christianity Today International, Carol Stream, IL 60188.

This past February, when Robert B. Sloan announced he would resign the presidency of Baylor University, the news sent tremors throughout Christian higher education. Sloan has been the lead architect and builder in an ambitious 10-year plan to transform Baylor into a top-tier research university with an “intense faithfulness to the Christian tradition.” This would require more than simply remaining Southern Baptist. It would mean “deepening its distinctive Christian mission.”

Evangelicals, with their network of small, cash-strapped colleges, have long dreamed of a Christian university that could hold its own with Harvard, Yale, Chicago, and Berkeley. To them

it seemed that Sloan just might have the ability to make the dream a reality. But his program drew powerful opposition from many quarters within the Baylor constituency.

Back in September 2003, Sloan had overwhelming support from Baylor’s trustees. But within eight months, his board majority had melted to a single vote, making it pretty obvious that the wind was blowing against him. In resigning, Sloan made it clear that he hopes his move to the post of chancellor will quiet the controversy and allow his program for the university to go forward. But will it? And what does Baylor’s case bode for other Christian colleges and universities, in light of the recent slew of books

that parse out the integration of faith and learning?

Backslidden

Sloan's announcement has given many card-carrying evangelicals an ominous case of *déjà vu*. Our recessive conservative genes have conditioned us to see this phenomenon as the inevitable process of secularization in higher education. In the conservative analysis, Christian colleges and universities are all perched atop a slippery slope. One moment of relaxed vigilance, one twitch or stumble in a secular direction, and down slides the college into the tar pits of apostasy. The only thing left of its former faith would be a stately chapel building, a fossilized artifact of the college's Christian past. The process started with Harvard — once the pride of Puritanism — and has since claimed almost every once-Christian college.

This fear exists for valid reasons. Today, schools connected to certain orthodox denominations — notably Southern Baptists, Missouri Synod Lutherans, and Churches of Christ — do face a real possibility of secularization. This is because these schools have always thought of their religious identity mainly in denominational terms rather than thinking of

themselves more broadly as Christian colleges. The hard truth is that the old denominational identity that has kept their schools Christian is dying.

In the case of the Southern Baptists, their version of Christianity was intertwined with the distinctive cultural features of the South. For many, being Southern Baptist was as much about being Southern as it was about being Baptist. But no more. The integration of the South into national American culture is nearly complete, and American culture will not sustain Christianity in the way Southern culture did.

As Southern distinctiveness dries up, the cultural foundations of Southern Baptist identity are crumbling from beneath the denomination's schools. The result is that all Southern Baptist colleges and universities face a stark choice. They must either build new kinds of Christian foundations for their schools, or watch the Christian character of their schools fall into disrepair.

A similar identity crisis has begun to show up at Missouri Synod Lutheran schools (notably Valparaiso University) and Churches of Christ colleges (like Pepperdine University). Fewer of their students and faculty have ties to the denomination, and

those who do arrive with weaker denominational commitments. For all these schools, the problem is how to prevent their identity crisis from producing secularization.

The Catholic intellectual crisis of the 1960s provides a warning. Catholic students at Harvard reportedly posted signs announcing when and where their next identity crisis would be held. But the problem itself was no joke. When Catholics could no longer give intellectual reasons for being Catholic, Catholic educators lost the ability to say why there should be such a thing as a Catholic college. Unable to answer the question, nearly all of their colleges gradually slipped into secularization.

Joining them at the bottom of the slope were the mainline Protestant colleges. In the 1950s and 1960s, these schools were caught in the same current that secularized Catholic colleges. Study after study showed that the mainline colleges were Christian in name only. By the 1980s scholars quit studying the phenomenon because the colleges had become so secular.

Or so it seemed. Under the scholarly radar, a number of individuals at mainline colleges began to suspect that secularization might not be such a great idea.

Rhodes College in Tennessee has ties to the Presbyterian Church (USA) that reach back a century and a half. However, like most denominational colleges, it gradually secularized after the Second World War. By 1991, many of the faculty were not Christians, and those who were kept their work and religion separate. Hardly anyone thought of Rhodes as a Christian school. Imagine the faculty's awkward embarrassment, then, when newly hired Michael Nelson, a high-powered political scientist lured from Vanderbilt, told a faculty gathering, "I am happy to be at a Christian college finally, for my professional work is thoroughly informed by my faith."

Stephen Haynes remembers the event as if it were yesterday, for it changed his life. Just a year earlier he had been ordained a Presbyterian minister and joined the college's faculty to teach religion courses. Yet even he felt embarrassed. Why was this? As he pondered this question, a grant from the Lilly Endowment enabled him to complete a survey of church-related colleges. He learned that even colleges that claimed to have strong church ties often "had lost a sense of themselves as recognizably Christian."

Soon Haynes began to think the unthinkable. Might the

trends that secularized so many colleges be reversed? Could a formerly Christian college once again become Christian? This led him into contact with other Lilly programs in religion and higher education. He also began to read histories of college secularization. In both places he discovered that educators from all four different traditions — evangelicalism, Catholicism, mainline Protestantism, and “denominational” Protestantism — were starting to converge around a common question: How might Christianity and higher education relate to each other now and in the future?

The Re-Christianizers

In a development no one would have predicted, evangelicalism was in a position to help. Since the 1960s, evangelical educators (who were emerging from fundamentalism) had been talking to their Dutch Reformed cousins (who were emerging from ethnic parochialism) about how Christianity, scholarship, and higher education relate to each other. The Dutch Reformed folks contributed philosophical precision and the habit of respect for learning; the evangelicals contributed a sense of mission and a conviction that any important

principles would apply to all Christian traditions.

Both groups believed to the marrow of their bones that allowing Christian colleges to become just like secular institutions was wrong-headed. A Christian college had to be more than just a good secular college. Christian learning, somehow, had to be different from secular learning. The Dutch get this from Abraham Kuyper (“two kinds of human beings — regenerated and unregenerated — hence two kinds of learning”). Evangelicals get this from the fundamentalist prime directive of separation (“come out from among them and be ye separate”). So much of the discussion turned on the question of just how Christian learning is, and is not, different.

James Patterson’s *Shining Lights: A History of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities* (Baker, 2001) shows how, in the early 1970s, these discussions led evangelical colleges to sponsor workshops for faculty on how to integrate faith with learning. These workshops, in turn, helped lead to the formation of the CCCU. Beginning with 38 member schools in 1976, membership had doubled to 76 schools by 1990. About this time, the books and programs coming

out of CCCU schools about how to do higher education in distinctively Christian ways began to attract attention outside of evangelical circles.

More direct help for church-related colleges experiencing an identity crisis came from the religion division of the Lilly Endowment. Lilly wanted to strengthen mainline Protestantism and, to a lesser extent, the elements of Catholicism friendly to Protestantism. Many of their grants targeted higher education. One of the most significant founded the Lilly Fellows program at Valparaiso. This program created a network of church-related schools of all types — mainline, denominational, Catholic, and evangelical — interested in strengthening their Christian character. Today there are 72 member schools.

Another grant to Stephen Haynes launched the Rhodes Consultation on the Future of the Church-Related College. Its goal, likewise, was to strengthen the Christian character of church-related colleges. Its method was to identify faculty who cared about this task and equip them to promote change through campus-wide projects designed to re-Christianize their schools. So far, faculty from more than

90 different colleges — again, mainline, denominational, Catholic, and evangelical — have participated.

As the reformers in the Lilly networks gathered resources to help them with their task, they began to read evangelical literature on the integration of faith and learning and the nature of Christian education. Nearly every reading list included works from the 1970s by philosophers Arthur Holmes and Nicholas Wolterstorff, through works from the 1990s by historians Mark Noll and George Marsden.

Then reformers started to make their own contributions. The Lilly grants combined with continuing evangelical activities to open a sluice gate of scribbling on faith and learning in higher education, and out have poured dozens of books. Nearly all of them have either Lilly or CCCU fingerprints on them. A third force just starting to generate books is Baylor, which has been deeply influenced by both Lilly programs and evangelicalism.

Possum Crossing

Recent books by evangelicals continue to favor a “worldview” approach to integrating faith and learning. As Clifford Williams defines it in his short introduction

for students, *The Life of the Mind* (Baker, 2002), a worldview is “a set of concepts that assembles everything else we believe into a coherent whole.” These concepts include presuppositions that shape the direction of our thinking in all areas. An important history of this concept is David Naugle’s *Worldview* (Eerdmans, 2002).

One powerful benefit of thinking in terms of worldview is that it makes us alert to others’ presuppositions. For instance, liberal theologians seldom talk about their assumptions, but analyzing their theologies in worldview terms reveals that their God only works through natural processes — no miracles allowed.

Another benefit of worldview thinking is that it suggests Christianity has implications for all areas of life and thought. In this way worldview thinking is a powerful antidote to the claim, frequently made by secularists like Stephen Jay Gould, that religion and learning have no connection with each other.

It is both a virtue and a shortcoming that worldview books focus on the big picture. Harry Lee Poe’s *Christianity in the Academy: Teaching at the Intersection of Faith and Learning* (Baker, 2004)

and V. James Mannoia’s *Christian Liberal Arts* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2000) both have useful reflections on the theoretical nature of Christian higher education. But neither has a high opinion of knowledge pursued within the academic disciplines.

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When reading such books, trying to spot support for traditional research in psychology, physics, or any other discipline is like watching for Possum Crossing, Montana, when you’re barreling down the interstate at 100 miles per hour. Blink and you’ll miss it. I think there are two reasons for this. The first is our belief that a Christian worldview integrates all types of truth into a coherent whole. From this point of view, the disciplines “fragment” knowledge into unrelated parts, so they aren’t much help to the project of integrating knowledge into a unified framework. The second reason is that, though we want badly for Christian scholarship to look different from secular scholarship, much of it in fact looks the same, especially in the

hard sciences. Biological research done by a Christian looks pretty much the same as biological research done by a non-Christian. Even in fields like history and literature, the basic research and the core documents and data will be the same for the Christian.

Christians from outside evangelicalism are less apt to employ worldview thinking. They're more likely to talk about the possibilities of Postmodernism. This is because Postmodernism is a full-scale assault on the Enlightenment dogma that the only true knowledge is rational, scientific, and objective, a dogma that has often been used as a club against Christianity. One book coming out of the Rhodes Consultation — Michael Budde and John Wright's *Conflicting Allegiances: The Church-Based University in a Liberal Democratic Society* (Brazos-Baker, 2004) — assumes that Postmodernism has created room for multiple perspectives. From that starting point, these essays urge Christian educators to think like Tertullian ("What is Athens to Jerusalem?") and declare independence from the secular academy.

Haynes' book — *Professing in the Postmodern Academy: Faculty and the Future of Church-Related Colleges* (Baylor, 2002) — also

sees opportunity in Postmodernism. But Haynes and his contributors are more interested in redemption than revolution. They try to think through how Christian faculty, if properly prepared and networked, might transform their schools from within.

Absolute Necessities

Postmodernism wasn't the first intellectual movement to charge Enlightenment rationalism with hubris. Two centuries ago, romanticism also insisted that passion, imagination, and intuition are legitimate routes to knowledge. One of the most influential voices in the faith-and-learning discussion, the Methodist-turned-Quaker Parker J. Palmer, is less a Postmodernist than a Neo-romantic. Palmer's evocative writings — the best-known may be *The Courage to Teach: Exploring the Inner Landscape of a Teacher's Life* (Jossey-Bass, 1998) — guide us into holistic, personalized ways of knowing that extend beyond logic and rationality. Palmer has inspired others to write in a Neo-romantic mode, most recently Richard Hughes in *How Christian Faith Can Sustain the Life of the Mind* (Eerdmans, 2001) and Chris Anderson in *Teaching as Believing: Faith in the University* (Baylor, 2004).

Following a Postmodern line of thought is Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen's *Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation* (Oxford, 2004). The Jacobsens and six of their Messiah College colleagues argue that the evangelical attachment to worldview thinking and its fellow traveler, Reformed theology, have kept evangelicals too combative and too triumphalistic in their orientation to the rest of the academic world. They argue that worldview thinking has lost much of its former power because of a "shift in the academy away from grand-scale theorizing about the nature of the world toward the analysis of smaller aspects of the world examined eclectically."

But most of the new books by evangelicals see Postmodernism as a danger. This is because radical versions of Postmodernism argue that there is no absolute truth. There is only each individual's, or each group's, perspective on the truth; and all perspectives are equally valid. A well-thought-out and articulated critique of this perspective is in Duane Litfin's *Conceiving the Christian College* (Eerdmans, 2004). Litfin, president of Wheaton College, reminds us that Christianity depends on absolute truth claims — for example, that Jesus was God

incarnate. Any short-term gain in getting a hearing for Christianity on the grounds that it's a valid perspective may be offset by permitting other belief systems to claim they are just as valid.

Litfin's book is more than just a warning against Postmodernism. It's an intelligent, fair-minded, and well-written argument that evangelical colleges like Wheaton shouldn't change because of increasing contact with mainline, denominational, and Catholic colleges. Ironically, however, evangelical colleges like Wheaton have become excellent institutions because they make use of mainline, denominational, and Catholic resources.

The Sticking Point

Every faith-and-learning book I've mentioned has virtues, but none in such abundance as Nicholas Wolterstorff's *Educating for Shalom: Essays on Christian Higher Education* (Eerdmans, 2004). Wolterstorff left the farm to attend Calvin College, then studied philosophy at Harvard, then taught at Calvin and later Yale. Unlike most worldview writers, Wolterstorff appreciates the Postmodern moment, but in a more precise and limited way. While many, like the Jacobsens, argue that Postmodernism has

dealt death to grand narratives in general, Wolterstorff argues that it undercuts three particular grand narratives: Modernity is making us happier by making us more free. Modernity is unfolding the meaning of human existence. Modernity's technological progress

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will lead to human progress. Clearing away these falsehoods, Wolterstorff points out, opens up space for them to be replaced by the true grand narrative of Christianity.

The question of just how Christian learning is, and is not, to be different from secular learning has sometimes been the tar baby of the whole discussion; no matter how you approach it, you always get stuck. That's why Wolterstorff's approach needs a broader hearing. He argues that Christian learning's primary obligation is to be faithful to the Christian vision, which he sums up in the Hebrew word *shalom*. First and foremost, Christian scholars and educators are called to faithfulness. Sometimes faithful scholarship looks like secular scholarship, and sometimes it does not, but the question of difference is secondary.

But one aspect of Wolterstorff's view will be troubling to most evangelicals, and I suspect this is why at this point even he pulls his punch. Every Christian scholar agrees that Christian truth may demand that we adjust our scholarly beliefs.

But Wolterstorff argues that — sometimes — the discovery of truth through scholarship will demand we adjust beliefs that we think are Christian. This is implicit in the work of Arthur Holmes ("all truth is God's truth"), and it's demonstrably true in historical perspective.

For instance, nearly all English-speaking Christians between 1658 and the early 1800s thought the Bible taught that the Earth is only about 6,000 years old. When geology taught us that the Earth is a good deal older, many evangelicals adjusted their ideas. But even though Wolterstorff knows our interpretation of the Bible can be informed by scholarship, he sometimes seems a bit reluctant to dwell on it. Perhaps it is more freight than the evangelical train can carry: Admit that "Christian" beliefs might be subject to change, and down the slippery slope we go.

The Faculty Factor

When it comes to the Christianization of church-related colleges, the books I've been discussing are just the foam on the latté. Attempts to push formerly Christian colleges up the slippery slope are far more widespread than most people realize. The CCCU has added 28 members since 1990, nearly half of which are Southern Baptist schools. Union University in Tennessee is a high-profile example of the way several Southern Baptist colleges have redefined their religious identity by drawing on evangelical ideas and building connections to evangelical institutions.

And despite the fact that CCCU members are required to hire only Christians as faculty and administrators, even a few mainline colleges have joined the CCCU. One of them is Waynesburg College, a Presbyterian Church (USA) school in the coal country of Pennsylvania. Waynesburg's transformation from a nominally church-related school to a self-described Christian college has been led by Timothy Thyreen, president since 1989. Waynesburg's trustees supported this shift partly out of Christian conviction, partly as a way to strengthen character education, and partly as a marketing tactic.

The religiously diverse faculty has had some uneasy moments during the transition, but these were minimized by Thyreen's ability to raise money and help faculty improve their programs. It's hard to say no to a president who has just built you a new, state-of-the-art digital media production facility.

Like Waynesburg, many of the schools that are re-Christianizing have had presidents leading them in that direction. This of course was the Baylor approach, which illustrates the risks of a top-down strategy. Some of Robert Sloan's opponents — using the same arguments that have justified secularization a hundred times before — made it clear they want Baylor to have a Baptist past rather than a Christian future. But Sloan faced opposition on other counts. Many resist transforming Baylor into a research university, preferring Baylor's old identity as a teaching institution. Sloan's desire to move quickly and decisively interfered, at times, with traditional faculty prerogatives. Some opposition was stirred to life by developments over which Sloan had no control, such as the basketball team's 2003 murder scandal.

Baylor's eagerness to draw upon evangelical resources has had a mixed effect. On the positive

side, evangelical thinking about faith and learning helped Baylor get quickly up to speed on the crucial issues. A large number of evangelicals joined the faculty, and this brought to Baylor some superb scholars who had thought long and hard about Christianity and education. But it also made some Southerners on the faculty feel like they were being inundated by Yankee evangelical carpetbaggers. They feared that the newcomers would undermine Baylor's academic freedom.

On the negative side, Baylor's eclectic approach to gathering faith-and-learning resources meant they sometimes failed to screen out the culturally militant elements of evangelicalism. In a head-shaking blunder, Sloan's team put William Dembski, point man for the Intelligent Design movement, in charge of a new science and religion center. It's hard to imagine any step that would have been more effective in convincing skeptical faculty that Sloan was turning Baylor over to the fundamentalists.

Make no mistake, Dembski is an accomplished scholar and sharp intellect who has earned, and deserves, a hearing. But like every other evangelical culture warrior, he sees much of higher education in particular, and American

culture in general, as apostate. His mission is "to engage the culture and reclaim it for Christ," as he declared after leaving Baylor. This is the vision that drives the leaders of the conservative forces in the Southern Baptist Convention.

No surprise, then, that Dembski left Baylor last September for Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. There, president R. Albert Mohler Jr. has set him up as director of a new Center for Science and Theology. The center, as Mohler put it, represents "our commitment to be very serious about the task of the Christian worldview."

Baylor's future is not at all certain. But whatever happens there, many church-related colleges, both denominational and mainline, will continue to enlarge their Christian character. This was part of the reason Wake Forest, a university with a Southern Baptist heritage, recently hired evangelical historian Nathan O. Hatch as its 13th president. Hatch was attractive because of his experience as provost at Notre Dame and because he embodies the ideal of the teacher-scholar.

But he was also hired because many at Wake Forest do not want it to secularize any further; they want to strengthen key elements of the school's faith character. As

the student member of the search committee said, speaking for the students, Hatch “identif[ies] with our religious heritage and feel[s] strongly about it — as strongly as we do.”

One of the most controversial elements of presidential Christianization is always faculty hiring. Presidents typically try to hire Christian professors; skeptical faculty typically resist. Hatch is respectful of faculty prerogatives and keen on academic excellence, so he is unlikely to be heavy-handed in hiring matters. His challenge will be to help Wake Forest clarify those elements of its religious heritage that it wants to retain and strengthen and to attract the kind of faculty who can contribute to that task. The nature of the problem does make Stephen Haynes’s approach intriguing. It may turn out that empowering Christian faculty to be leavening agents at their schools is as important as hiring the right president. In either case, the strength of a college’s Christian character ultimately depends more on the faculty than any other factor.

And it’s not enough for key faculty to be Christians. That’s why, despite Haynes’ excellent work on the Rhodes Consultation and Michael Nelson’s forthright

testimony of faith when he first came to Rhodes, nothing was more important in strengthening their college’s Christian character than what they did on April 24, 2001. That’s the day they stood together in their academic robes on the platform at the Rhodes Awards Convocation. Haynes received the college’s award as the outstanding teacher of the year, and Nelson received the award as the outstanding research scholar of the year.

For if Christian professors aren’t good teachers, good scholars, and good colleagues, then there won’t be any good reasons for having Christian colleges. It’s that simple.

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