

Suffer the Children

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Faithful and True [Excerpts on the current state of Christian Colleges]

She's bright, homeschooled, and devout. She is definitely college material. So her parents, having read about the relativism and debauchery of the nation's secular universities, send her to a Christian college . . . Her classes, though, are confusing.

In her Introduction to Bible class, her professor explains that the Bible was written by many different authors over many centuries and so cannot be taken literally. The professor in her psych class, who calls herself a feminist, teaches that "homophobia," not homosexuality, is a mental illness. In English, she has to read a modern novel filled with profanity and graphic sex scenes. Her biology class teaches Darwinian evolution and makes fun of "creationists" who believe in Intelligent Design.

When she asks her professors about the disconnect between what is going on in the classroom and the college's professed Christian identity, they tell her, "We are just trying to open your mind. That's what a college education is all about. Yes, we are Christians, but we have to challenge our incoming students' narrow fundamentalism in order to broaden their perspectives and make them well-educated."

This scenario plays out over and over again, to the consternation of many students and their parents. As John Mark Reynolds, a professor and director of the honors program at Biola University, observes, "Many profs view their mission as helping poor, right-wing Christian children outgrow their parents' faith."

But not all professors and Christian colleges are like that. In a time when the postmodernist academy is jettisoning truth, reason, and the Western tradition, Christians . . . have a dramatic opportunity to exert intellectual and cultural leadership.

In "The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches" (1998), Catholic scholar James Burtchaell studies the history of religiously founded schools, documenting how time and again colleges founded in a specific theological tradition shift to generic Christianity, then to being "church-related," then to holding Christian "values" if not belief, until finally they are as secularized as any public university.

Evangelical colleges tend to resist the tide, but not always. In 1988, sociologist James Davison Hunter . . . found that while 56 percent of incoming students scored high on his "religious orthodoxy" index, that number declined to 42 percent when the students were seniors.

Those holding traditional views of the family plummeted from 45 percent to 30 percent for men, and 34 percent to 14 percent for women. "Contemporary Christian higher education," Mr. Hunter concludes, "produces individual Christians who are either less certain of their attachments to the traditions of their faith or altogether disaffected from them."

But that was in 1988. In her book "God on the Quad: How Religious Colleges and the Missionary Generation Are Changing America," Jewish researcher Naomi Schaefer Riley cites Mr. Hunter's research, but reports that recent evidence shows Christian college graduates to be more conservative morally and theologically.

So if contemporary Christian scholarship has found a way to effectively relate faith and learning, why are so many Christian colleges still struggling to keep their identity?

Financial pressures can change the direction of a school. Presidents, who now have to focus on fundraising, must cultivate wealthy donors. "Once an institution becomes dependent upon a donor base that no longer holds Christian conviction as the central defining mark of the school, a process of liberalization or secularization inevitably follows..."

[College President] Logan told of donors who offered gifts of a million dollars plus, if Westminster would change its position on apologetics or give a woman an endowed chair. Not that donor requests are necessarily a bad thing, observed Mr. Logan, but they can have unintended consequences. "Suppose, for example, the Lilly Endowment offered a funding initiative in support of multiculturalism in theological education. It is possible that the conditions set by Lilly would not require subtle alterations in institutional identity. But it is also possible that those conditions would require such alterations. It takes great corporate wisdom to make the right decision and it could take extraordinary courage to do what is right (especially if that meant turning away from a lot of Lilly money)" (Veith, World, 9/10/05).

[TBC: "For the love of money is the root of all evil..." (1 Timothy 6:10).]