The Future of Christian Higher Education: A Political Economy Analysis[*]

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The challenges confronting today's faith-based schools, while similar to those that their now-secular predecessors faced, have evolved in a new direction. Historically, Christian scholars worried about the dangers of religious schools becoming secular and indistinguishable from state universities. While some Christian colleges and universities today continue a gradual drift towards secularization, others, structured by deeply ingrained norms of "mission," are increasingly tempted to redefine their faith with respect to cultural referents instead of long-standing Christian orthodoxy. When such an approach is taken to its logical extreme these religious schools may become less tolerant of religiously faithful students than is constitutionally possible for state institutions. We use a neo-institutional model of change to explain why and how this occurs, and offer ways that Christian colleges and universities might retain their identity and thrive in the changing higher education landscape.

Introduction

Christian scholars have analyzed the "secularization" of formerly orthodox Christian colleges and universities for many years. There have been multiple case studies of the development of colleges and universities that were previously affiliated with mainline Protestants, Catholics, Lutherans, and Methodists.[1] Throughout these texts, there has been one consistent argument by secularizing institutions that seek to maintain their religious identity and mission: "Our institution is different." The scholarship suggests that this confidence is usually misplaced.

We contend that the challenges confronting today's faith-based schools, while similar to those that their now-secular predecessors faced, have evolved in a new direction. In the first section of this article we briefly examine the existing literature on the topic and prior attempts at identifying threats to the existence or identity of Christian colleges and universities. In the second section we argue that there is a new challenge facing Christian higher education. Historically, Christian scholars worried about the dangers of religious schools becoming secular and indistinguishable from state universities. This essay argues that while some Christian colleges and universities today continue a gradual drift toward secularization, others, structured by deeply ingrained norms of "mission," are taking a different path. Rather than ignoring their religious heritage, some faith-based institutions are increasingly tempted to redefine their faith with respect to cultural referents instead of traditional Christian moral teaching. When such an approach is taken to its logical extreme these religious schools may become less tolerant of religiously faithful students than is constitutionally possible for state institutions. The third section of the essay provides a neo-institutional explanation that seeks to clarify the ways in which colleges lose their traditionally religious student enrollment and find themselves on a path of rapid, unanticipated change. Finally, we discuss some ways that Christian colleges and universities might retain their identity and thrive in the current context of a changing higher education landscape.

Trends in Christian Higher Education That Threaten Identity or Existence

James Tunstead Burtchaell's *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (1998) continues to serve as a core collection of case studies on the evolution of Christian colleges.[2] Burtchaell analyzes changes in colleges in the Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Roman Catholic, and Evangelical traditions from the 1960s through the 1990s. While each denomination has its distinctive story, the narrative arc remains largely similar. The institutional and cultural pressures that faced the seventeen colleges analyzed in Burtchaell's book are remarkably similar to the pressures facing Christian institutions of higher education today.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing these schools is funding. Given their typically poor endowments, most Christian colleges rely on tuition to balance their budgets. Even small drops in enrollment can have serious financial repercussions. The Catholic college experience in the 1970s shows what can happen.[3] Since Catholic colleges had higher tuition than state universities, many Catholic students chose to attend state universities. "One Catholic observer recalls that

in the early 1970s the mortality rate (through closing or merger) was about one a week."[4]

Similarly, today's private colleges, including most Christian colleges, face lower numbers of college students in general, due to increasing costs and declining college-age demographics in many parts of the country. Small Christian institutions are once again suffering from this enrollment crunch.[5]

Burtchaell describes the faith-based colleges he studied moving from a more purely theological or liberal arts education toward an education with an increasing emphasis on professional training and career development. This shift is largely driven by perceptions of what students want. However, as today's religious colleges move away from their theological and liberal arts core, they more directly compete with state schools subsidized by federal and state government, which have already made this shift. Concomitantly, some state governments also subsidize relatively less expensive online programs that center on career-focused majors such as business, education, and health sciences, thereby creating additional low-cost competitors for Christian colleges.[6] To the extent that Christian colleges rely on majors focused on specific career paths rather than emphasizing the value of a distinctly Christian liberal arts education, they will effectively expose themselves to state-subsidized competition, against which they cannot compete strictly on a cost basis.

In the 1960s, court cases in Maryland and Connecticut raised the question as to whether states could provide financial support to schools with a faith-based mission. "The [Catholic college] presidents were fearful that litigation … might disqualify their colleges and universities from receiving federal or state funds for building construction, student aid, and noncategorical grants."[7] Some Catholic colleges preemptively redefined their college missions to avoid losing these funds. Fordham University, for example, redefined its religious identity "in terms of 'auspices,' 'origins,' 'traditions,' 'opportunities,' 'ideas,' 'perspectives,' 'values,' [and] 'a loving and respectful openness.'"[8] It successfully kept its funds, but Albany education officials "quietly expressed surprise that their dissociative measures went well beyond what seemed necessary."[9]

Similar challenges are likely to occur in today's legal and cultural climate if the federal government decides to reinterpret Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation, same-sex practice, or gender identity.[10] Supreme Court precedent suggests that a presidential administration could refuse to give federally subsidized loans to colleges that fail to subscribe to shifting cultural orthodoxies with respect to sexuality and gender. This has happened in the past with respect to racial discrimination, and the legal theory with regard to sexuality would be comparable.

In *Bob Jones University v. United States* (1983), the United States Supreme Court famously concluded that the federal government could refuse to give subsidized loans to racially discriminatory colleges. Since the First Amendment protects private discrimination, the Court argued that the federal government was making a spending choice as opposed to a First Amendment speech claim. In other words, a private college would not be prevented from acting in racially discriminatory ways, but the government would no longer provide financial support to its students. Essentially, the Court protected a private college's right to racially discriminate while allowing the federal government's right to withhold federal funds and tax benefits from colleges that did so.

This principle could now be applied to schools that, for religious reasons, use selective criteria or refuse to hire from the LGBTQ+ community. Few Christian colleges or universities could survive without federally subsidized loans, particularly given the low levels of financial support these schools receive from their respective denominations.

While financial pressure from the federal government could at some future point influence the extent to which faith-based colleges and universities adhere to traditional norms of gender and sexuality in their admissions or hiring processes, these schools are already facing a different kind of pressure from their regional accrediting bodies. Azusa Pacific University initially struggled to obtain accreditation, although it eventually "became the first Bible college to achieve regional accreditation without substantially changing its curriculum."[11] Similarly, Gordon College was challenged to change its hiring decisions to maintain accreditation,[12] but it ultimately obtained accreditation without sacrificing its institutional views on sexuality. Other accrediting bodies will inevitably make the same argument against other religious colleges. This is also likely to become an issue for secondary accreditation in specific disciplinary areas.[13]

The penultimate trend threatening Christian higher education is faculty identification with guild rather than college. Increasingly, religious colleges are hiring new faculty whose education occurred primarily in a secular context. A focused graduate education in a secular context does not prepare faculty to consider their discipline through the lens of faith or help them fully appreciate the mission of the Christian institution. "One result of the narrowing of each faculty member's academic interests was an education that might include very little of the history, philosophy, and theology required to give them a disciplined perspective on their own scholarly pursuits."[14]

Burtchaell noted the difficulties Jesuit schools faced in relying on faculty who had not themselves received (or necessarily understood) a Jesuit education.[15] Like the faculty in the Jesuit schools, faculty in many religious colleges are increas-

ingly likely to have studied their own discipline but not necessarily how it fits with the liberal arts or Christian tradition. In short, many of these new faculty are advanced in their disciplines—bringing greater rigor to many schools—but largely ignorant of the theory and practice of a Christian liberal arts education. Since most Christian colleges and universities have high teaching loads and low endowments, faculty are unlikely to have time to engage in broader study or integrative research after being hired.

The final trend threatening Christian higher education is its increasing reliance on administrative staff. As faculty have become increasingly focused on their disciplinary guilds, and as the criteria faculty need to meet to be hired, tenured, and promoted have continued to increase, most aspects of student life and spiritual development have been outsourced to staff members. "One of the social forces that came to distinguish and divide administrators from faculty professionally was the way the latter soon left responsibility for student piety and morality in the hands of the former."[16]

Burtchaell notes that, as the administrators pushed those duties to other administration members (chaplains, secretaries, deans, etc.), many colleges discovered that piety and discipline were not central to their purposes. This trend has only increased, with growing regulatory demands on colleges and universities, along with guild demands on faculty. Student cultural life has a much greater connection to residence life offices than to the faculty or curriculum.

New Challenges for Christian Higher Education

In the previous section, we outlined several trends in higher education that might threaten the existence or continued faith-based identity of Christian colleges and universities. These threats have been noted by other writers and have resulted in the secularization of a number of previously Christian institutions in past decades. These same trends continue to threaten Christian higher education today. But in addition, we see a new threat: that faith-based institutions increasingly shaped by cultural and political forces may eventually redefine their religious identity in secular terms. In the long run, Christian colleges may be forced to choose between using faith-based criteria in their selection processes or accepting federally supported loan and grant resources. Similarly, Christian colleges may eventually face accrediting bodies that refuse to accredit colleges that use faith-based selection decisions.

This is not, however, the current situation. The Supreme Court has consistently protected an association's rights of speech. The Supreme Court, in *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale* (2000), argued that the Boy Scouts could refuse to hire gay troop

leaders as an expression of its associational beliefs.[17] The Court today shows no signs of moving away from this decision. In a notable concurring opinion for *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission* (2012), conservative Justice Samuel Alito and progressive Justice Elena Kagan argued for an expansive conception of religious liberty in light of America's increasing religious diversity.[18]

Nonetheless, explicit legal or accreditation threats to mission are not the only concerns Christian colleges and universities face. They also face implicit pressure from the culture; the mission of the Christian institution is regularly evaluated in the court of public opinion. Consequently, most Christian colleges and universities are attuned to the ways in which those in surrounding communities—faith-based or not—view them.

This has led to a new and different type of threat, in which the institution's mission is redefined in faith-based language to comport with cultural or political ideologies that hold sway in a given context. In an extreme situation, these institutions could become places that are openly antagonistic to their founding traditional religious beliefs. Because they continue to identify as faith-based institutions, they could actually discriminate against those who they were initially established to serve: orthodox Christian students. This path is not possible for state universities, which are not allowed to discriminate based on religion.

To consider one potential path to this outcome, consider the example of how race and gender are constructed and understood using a postmodern critical theory approach, and how such an approach might be applied in an academic setting. Broadly, Critical Theory (CT) analyzes and critiques social institutions and constructs through the lens of social power dynamics. This perspective is fairly critical of epistemological approaches that rely on assumptions of objective truth, and instead assumes that power is the underlying force shaping historical narratives, structures, and institutional actions. Critical Theory would prefer prioritizing the experience and voice of those who are not embedded in institutional power structures, to fully understand the world. In the domain of race, for example, CT would assume that color-blind theories of equality are necessarily racist because they fail to acknowledge the racism that is systemic throughout society, and an understanding of racism can only occur by listening to the narratives of those who have been oppressed by it. Similarly, an understanding of sexism cannot be achieved without hearing the stories of those whose gender or sexuality has resulted in oppression. Various categories of marginalization (e.g., race, sex, LGBTQ+ identity, disability status, etc.) can be combined with one another to create intersectionalities of oppression. To understand these various

intersectionalities requires an understanding of the particular experiences of each oppressed person.

Through the lens of CT, experience becomes the primary epistemological approach to knowing, and storytelling becomes a vital way to combat entrenched systems of oppression. "Narratives provide a language to bridge the gaps in imagination and conception that give rise to" different conceptions of justice.[19] At an extreme, a CT perspective can find itself at odds with systems that value procedural rights—for procedural rights are designed to protect the accused but may do less to protect the rights of the victim or the community at large where others may be victimized in the future.

Indeed, in a situation of "he said, she said" with no additional evidence, a system predicated on "innocent until proven guilty" will favor the accused. In contrast, the current emphasis on "social justice" in many college and university settings, which emerges from a CT philosophy, may be an effort to shift away from a procedural rights approach that protects an accused who may be guilty, and toward a system in which the benefit to the community trumps the individual's rights. While the potential error in the first approach is that a guilty person may be exonerated and a victim disbelieved, the potential error in the second is that a "victim" and the community are protected at the expense of an innocent person. A social justice approach may in fact provide relief to those who have traditionally and historically been marginalized, but it may do so at the expense of individuals who had previously been protected by a strong norm of procedural rights. An approach in which stories are elevated as a primary way of knowing will work in opposition to procedural rights.

One can see how Christian colleges could be intrigued by CT and social justice. These institutions have a historic mission to serve those on the margins of society. Also, their faith missions are not limited to Enlightenment epistemologies. That is, CT could easily be viewed as consistent with, and eventually as a replacement for, the traditionally orthodox theology undergirding the religious institution.

Critical Theory can become institutionally dangerous when its epistemological assumptions prohibit alternative epistemologies or ways of understanding the world. For example, many CT proponents argue that the experience of the oppressed provides truer "knowledge" than traditional ways of knowing, including both social scientific methods and orthodox theology, both of which may be viewed as perpetuating systemic oppression. When this viewpoint is taken to an extreme, all disciplines are required to be reinterpreted in light of this new wisdom, and opposition becomes heretical. Speech is evaluated for its consistency with the new orthodoxy, and perspectives that are counter to what

one might know through the narratives of the marginalized and oppressed are deemed dangerous, and worthy of sanction. Critical Theory as a philosophical approach then can become a remarkably easy substitute for traditional theology.

The US court system has generally frustrated CT activists by striking down hate speech codes for violating students' free speech rights. However, these rulings apply only to state universities that are constitutionally required to be content-neutral in their administrative policies. Because state universities are an arm of the government, speech codes directly violate the First Amendment. However, private colleges have an associational right to restrict individual rights, as long as those restrictions are made clear to incoming students as part of their mission.[20] How might this happen?

Faced with pressures from the government, accreditors, or the culture at large, many religious colleges may choose to change their rules on sexuality and gender. For many this will be difficult in light of their historic Christian understandings, and so their traditional interpretations of faith must be redefined to comport with accepted cultural and political dogma. Such redefined faith commitments would likely include justice for marginalized groups and care for each person as a unique reflection of the *imago Dei*; these commitments are consistent with a Christian commitment to justice.

However, when such commitments are prioritized over any other Christian virtue or value, when the definition of marginalized groups expands to include all of those who perceive themselves to be oppressed, when any judgment of behaviors that are contrary to traditional and orthodox Christian morality are viewed as a personal attack on the person engaging in the behavior, and when opposition to any particular perspective or viewpoint is understood to be an expression of cruelty to the person who holds the view, then the newly redefined faith commitment of that faith-based institution might mark as modern heretics those who hold to traditional Christian views. Critical Theory as a philosophical approach then becomes a remarkably simple substitute for traditional theology.[21] Paradoxically, these faith-based institutions would legally be allowed to silence the voices of those who may at one time have been the institution's primary constituency in ways that state universities could not.

Christian universities facing traditional institutional pressures might easily see redefining their faith statements as an ideal solution. By changing their associational mission to fit contemporary political and cultural expectations, Christian colleges could see themselves as avoiding the legal and cultural dangers discussed earlier, and still acting within the social mission of the institution. Furthermore, they could see themselves as increasing their potential student population, thereby ensuring long-term economic viability. What are the ways this might happen?

A Political Economy Framework of Change

We suggest that a political economy framework can provide a useful understanding of the process of institutional change in Christian colleges and universities, particularly in light of their unique, mission-driven norms. Our approach will conceptualize universities as institutions. We assume that colleges and universities are "building blocks of social order: they represent socially sanctioned, that is, collectively enforced expectations with respect to the behavior of specific categories of actors or to the performance of certain activities. Typically they involve mutually related rights and obligations for actors distinguishing between appropriate and inappropriate, right and wrong, possible and impossible actions, and thereby organizing behavior into predictable and reliable patterns."[22]

The university, in this sense, serves as a governing institution for its members—setting out expectations for behavior with a particular set of incentives and sanctions that it can enforce. At the same time, assuming that administrators act rationally based on the need to balance budgets and "keep the doors open," the primary feedback mechanism supporting institutional continuity is student enrollment numbers—with many Christian universities relying on a historic local or regional base of churches and Christian secondary schools serving as a pipeline to matriculation.

The literature on the political economy of institutional change has burgeoned in recent years. Kathleen Ann Thelen and Wolfgang Streeck make institutional development a central theme by looking systematically at periodic political realignments and negotiation in a way that invites comparative analysis over long periods spanning many decades.[23] Consistent with Avner Greif and David Laitin's call to move beyond models of change that "draw too sharp a line between stability and innovation, but understand that many key sources of change are endogenous,"[24] this approach can be useful in understanding change in Christian higher education, in which no single critical juncture can be identified as the moment when an institution "flipped" from orthodoxy toward either a secular or "politicized mission" approach. That is, it is a gradual transformation that ultimately results in a new order within the institution.

Five Types of Institutional Transformation

Thelen and Streeck identify five types of institutional transformation: displacement, layering, drift, conversion, and exhaustion (see fig. 1). Organizations going through change may experience one or more of these types of change over a relatively long period of time. We will use these types to discuss the ways in which

Christian colleges and universities might experience change; ultimately, we will use this model to discuss how university leaders might intentionally approach change in their institutions.

	Displacement	Layering	Drift	Conversion	Exhaustion
Definition	Slowly rising salience of subordinate to dominant institutions	New elements attached to existing institutions gradually change their status and structure	Neglect of institutional maintenance in spite of external change, resulting in slippage	Redeployment of old institutions to new purposes; new purposes attached to old structures	Gradual breakdown of institutions over time
Mechanism	Defection	Differential Growth	Deliberate Neglect	Redirection; Reinterpretation	Depletion
Elaboration	Institutional incoherence opens space for deviant behavior	Compromise between old and new slowly turning into defeat of the old	Rules remaining unchanged in face of new external conditions	Gaps between rules and enforcement due to limits to design, ambiguity of rules, and so forth	Decreasing returns as generalization changes cost-benefit relations; overextension

**Figure 1. Streeck and Thelen's Five Types
of Gradual Transformation**[25]

Displacement

Streeck and Thelen focus on whether the fringe ("progressive" reformers) and the core can coexist and whether sufficient defectors from the core to the fringe can displace the former. As illustrated by Burtchaell, layering through the establishment of new programs, institutes, codes of conduct, and course curriculum is one potential model; however, other types of change (conversion, drift, and replacement) are also valuable in highlighting how Christian colleges are likely to evolve over time. Institutional conversion is particularly relevant.

Layering

As Streeck and Thelen point out, institutions may be subject to increasing returns and lock-in effects—in other words, institutions *can* remain remarkably consistent over time despite existing in the midst of rapid social change. However, this does not necessarily preclude institutional change, as reformers can work around those elements of an institution that have become "unchangeable."[26] Such reform is referred to as "layering." Streeck and Thelen argue that this process of layering can set in motion path-altering dynamics through differential growth.

For Streeck and Thelen, layering involves "active sponsorship of amendments, additions, or revisions to an existing set of institutions. The actual mechanism for change is differential growth; the introduction of new elements setting in motion dynamics through which they, over time, actively crowd out or supplant by default the old system [in this case, Christian orthodoxy] as the domain of the latter shrinks relative to the former."[27] In Christian higher education, this could include revising student codes of conduct and faculty handbooks and gradually adding students from a secular background to the campus.

While the revision might appear to be relatively minor on the surface, it can play havoc with existing institutional feedback mechanisms—for example, student enrollment numbers. As the historic student base begins to look for the exits (or simply decides not to apply), support for the Christian university's traditional mission declines. This is then exacerbated by recognition that enrollment numbers are declining and that the school needs to more strongly appeal to a "new base"—a base that is not committed to Christian orthodoxy—thereby incentivizing further changes to appeal to a secular student population to stem the collapse in application numbers and the financial threat to the school's viability.

Drift

Institutional drift is understood as the neglect of institutional maintenance resulting in slippage in institutional practice on the ground. In other words, external conditions matter, and institutions must "keep up" with these changes.[28] Institutional displacement derives from the increased salience of subordinate institutions due to institutional coherence or the active cultivation of a new "logic of action" in an extant institutional setting.[29]

In this sense, institutions that adhere to traditional understandings of gender and sexuality find themselves confronted by a world that has shifted far from Christian orthodoxy. Having not confronted this reality nor built the requisite internal structures to maintain their traditional standards, "slippage" occurs, and the institution finds itself in an exceedingly difficult position. All incentives for the administrator encourage secularization, and absent a sanctioning body—for example, a board of trustees majority from an orthodox Christian denomination—the institution abandons any pretense of orthodoxy.

Conversion

Institutional conversion occurs when institutions are directed to new goals, functions, or purposes. For Streeck and Thelen, political contestation driving change through conversion is made possible by "gaps that exist by design or emerge over time between institutionalized rules and their local enactment."[30]

In Christian higher education, we see this in codes of conduct and other guidelines for student life that exist on paper but generally go unenforced or are actively ignored by administrators who want to avoid any perception that their institution is "out of sync" with prevailing mores and the attitudes of the surrounding culture. The university's mission (as expressed in mission statements and so forth) in this case is redeployed in the service of new goals, such as, in the example discussed in the previous section, those professed by critical theory—in which "social justice" and "intersectionality" serve as an all-encompassing mission, ultimately crowding out orthodoxy.

Four sources of such gaps are highlighted by Streeck and Thelen: (1) the cognitive limits of institution builders, (2) unintended consequences of actions, (3) ambiguities in the rules that define institutionalized behavior, and (4) the redeployment of rules by marginalized actors. The cognitive limits of institution builders and the concomitant unintended consequences they note are illustrated by a mission ostensibly designed for promoting orthodoxy but taken up as a tool or focal point for promoting a secular political agenda. Ambiguities in the rules that define institutionalized behavior provide space for political contestation over the interpretation of said rules, which can be seen through the lack of enforcement of codes of conduct. Finally, the redeployment of rules by marginalized actors is depicted through reframing the college's mission as "social justice" and requiring all faculty to demonstrate their allegiance thereto.

Exhaustion

This may be the most obvious category of social change. The leaders of Christian colleges can easily fall prey to Elijah's complaint: "I alone am left."[31] Concerns regarding institutional exhaustion of Christian colleges are not new. George Marsden described the evangelical academic community of the 1950s: "Evangelical academia, if noticed at all, seemed from the prevailing liberal humanist perspective the vestiges of a lost civilization."[32] The then-widespread confidence in an increasing secularization was apparently confirmed by the struggles of the evangelical academy. From this perspective, Christian higher education no longer serves a unique need and will eventually exhaust its capital base.

Now What?

In the first two sections, we reviewed the historic challenges associated with colleges and universities maintaining their Christian identity over time, and we raised the possibility of a new threat to the Christian institution of higher education—namely, the pressure to redefine its identity to comport with social changes in the larger culture and baptizing such changes in Christian language. We now turn to ways that Christian colleges and universities might retain their orthodox faith-based identities while competing in a rapidly changing landscape of higher education. We believe that successful Christian institutions of higher education will: (1) focus on their theological or faith mission, (2) integrate the liberal arts throughout the curriculum, and (3) reinforce ideals of free speech and academic freedom across campus.

Emphasis on the Christian Mission

Staying true to their historic theological commitments might be the only viable niche available to many Christian schools in the United States today.[33] As the number of traditional college-age students declines, many schools are looking to expand their student demographic beyond the Christian communities from which they have traditionally drawn students. However, such an approach often weakens the institution's Christian identity as its leaders downplay the school's faith-based commitments and requirements so as to attract non-Christian students and as the number of non-Christian students in the institution begins to rise. In the previous section, we discussed this process as one of "layering."

Slowly, the ethos of the institution begins to change, and once this change occurs it is hard to reverse. At some point, the Christian college or university becomes nearly indistinguishable from its secular counterparts, resulting in a more intensely competitive landscape for the now nominally Christian college. In an effort to increase the number of prospective students it might attract, the college has unintentionally increased the number of institutions with which it must now compete.

The alternative is to focus clearly and explicitly on the school's faith-based identity. Colleges should not try to be all things to all people. In contradistinction, colleges should develop both the spiritual and intellectual lives of students from a particular faith tradition. This approach is simply more likely to retain a core group of prospective students who will consider that institution to be an attractive college option. While the potential pool of students may be smaller, the specific niche that the Christian college fills is more likely to attract such students.

Integrating Liberal Arts

A second area that is important for Christian colleges and universities to emphasize is that of the liberal arts, with particular focus on developing students' analytical, critical thinking, and communication skills. It is important that this liberal arts emphasis reflects the wisdom of the Christian intellectual tradition and that it is rooted in objective morality with an emphasis on the true, the good, and the beautiful. The alternative is an education that is liberal in name only, and with the potential to do more harm than good.[34] This liberal arts emphasis is important for the private religious institution for two primary reasons.

First, as more state-funded community colleges, technical schools, and universities seek to prepare job-ready students, Christian institutions will struggle to effectively compete with subsidized programs. Furthermore, private industry is also contributing to the development and support of professional and technical programs in colleges and universities. However, most secular companies subsidizing such programs are reluctant to contribute organizational funds toward programs housed in explicitly faith-based institutions. Ultimately, offering such programs will become too costly for the Christian college or university that is reliant on tuition income. Students who are attracted to technical or professional education will typically find such programs to be less expensive and often higher quality in state- or business-subsidized universities.

A liberal arts education provides benefits to the Christian college or university beyond its cost-effectiveness, however. The second reason this emphasis is important for Christian higher education is that such an education is more likely to give graduates a long-term career trajectory that surpasses that of someone who has simply received specialized technical training. Even in the world of high-tech and data analytics, there are clear advantages that accrue to those with a broad liberal arts background.[35]

Some argue that a major in the liberal arts is less attractive to students from poor families or first-generation college students. That is, these students may be more likely to pursue majors that are "practical" and that can be immediately parlayed into an income after graduation. The Christian college or university's response to such students must be threefold. First, the college must continue to communicate the long-term value of the liberal arts. Examples of how and why a liberal arts background can lead to success—particularly for first-generation students—are key.[36] Second, Christian institutions must help students develop the job-search skills that may have been assumed among previous generations of college students. Emphasis on career planning, networking, interviewing, and internships must become part of a Christian liberal arts education. Third,

Christian liberal arts institutions do not have to limit their major offerings to the arts and sciences. They can and perhaps should provide opportunities for professional and technical skill development, but with some caveats: Such programs should have a significant foundation of and integration with the liberal arts. The multidisciplinary perspective a business, nursing, or computer science major gains from studying philosophy, English, physics, and international relations pays dividends in ways that most people do not initially recognize or expect.[37] Christian institutions in particular should be creative in thinking about how such integration could occur. Christian education leaders typically assume that theological commitments are interwoven with other curricular content. Might they not also expect that history would inform medicine, the arts would inform accounting, and social science would inform computer science?

Upholding Free Speech

In recent years, the general value that our culture has placed on free expression appears to be declining. On college campuses there is increasingly a tension between free speech rights and perceptions that some speech is "unsafe" or threatening to those who are marginalized.[38] While free speech advocates fifty years ago tended to be politically left of center, today's advocates are more likely to be conservative.

Increasingly, on college campuses the right to free speech is subjugated to other community values. Paradoxically, one of these values is "diversity," yet the outcome of this value in the context of free speech is less diversity in perspectives allowed in the public sphere. The evidence in various domains shows that singularity of viewpoints tends to result in flawed decision-making and poor long-term outcomes for organizations.[39] That is, dissent is often a functional process resulting in positive organizational outcomes. Our current cultural shift away from the diversity of opinions that free speech engenders may be hazardous to organizational health.

To thrive in the future, Christian colleges and universities should emphasize the importance of free speech and academic freedom in the context of the institution's faith commitments.[40] Obviously, the right to free speech is never without limitation. Yelling "fire" in a crowded theater is not protected, nor are explicit threats against another person. Today's debate is over how to understand such limitations.

Because Christian institutions historically have had to define their theological positions, they have practice at defining boundaries and simultaneously holding diverse perspectives in tension. William Ringenberg writes that academic freedom

is particularly important and valuable for the Christian college because it reflects the Christian values of seeking truth and living in community and, ultimately, because it reinforces a commitment to the virtues of honesty, humility, and love.[41]

When diverse ideas are shared in a community that is predicated on a commitment to God's truth, and that values the *imago Dei* of each individual, there will still be conflict. But this conflict is less likely to be experienced as relationship conflict (disagreements that result from a negative view of the other) than as a disagreement of ideas (referred to in conflict literature as conceptual or task-based conflict).[42] The latter type of conflict can be good for organizational outcomes, whereas the former is nearly always destructive.

Considering the process of institutional change discussed in the previous section, one of the best ways to avoid unintentional shift away from an institution's mission is to encourage the participation of numerous voices providing a variety of perspectives. As long as the individuals holding to different perspectives are not denigrated for their views, the perspectives themselves can be evaluated in light of each other. It is in such an "iron sharpens iron" context that truth can be pursued.

Christianity from its beginning has been a culture-forming religion. At the same time, Christianity has adapted and interacted with non-Christian ways of thought.[43] Christians have always struggled between applying traditional orthodox doctrine in new situations and simply denying orthodox belief. Today's Christian college leaders face a new twist on this challenge, for they must navigate these adaptations along with increasing market competition, cultural disdain, and political antagonism. Secular academics continue to view Christian colleges as evincing the late stages of institutional exhaustion. As Christian academics, we instead believe that these challenges create an opportunity for a more vibrant Christian academy and hope that this analysis can contribute to that end.

Notes

*   Previous iterations of this work were presented at the Values and Capitalism Faculty Retreat in San Diego, California (January 2018).

1.   The classics in this scholarship remain James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges & Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Press, 1998); George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, ed., *The Secularization of the Academy* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press: 1992); and George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Christian scholars have continued to examine the issue, as seen in Perry L. Glanzer, Nathan Alleman, and Todd C. Ream, *Restoring the Soul of the University: Unifying Christian Higher Education in a Fragmented Age* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017). Given the issues currently facing today's Christian colleges, this essay will substantially rely on Burtchaell's book, which describes colleges facing similar challenges. Marsden has long been interested in why the post-1950s evangelical college world was so weak. See George M. Marsden, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," in *Faith and Rationality: Reason and Belief in God*, ed. Alvin Plantiga and Nichols Wolterstorff (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 219–64.

2.   Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light.*

3.   Rick Seltzer, "Days of Reckoning," *Inside Higher Ed*, November 13, 2017, https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/11/13/spate-recent-college-closures-has-some-seeing-long-predicted-consolidation-taking.

4.   Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light,* 562.

5.   Jon Marcus, "College Enrollment Has Plummeted, and Private Universities Are Scrambling," *Business Insider*, June 29, 2017, http://www.businessinsider.com/private-colleges-worried-over-plummeting-college-enrollment-2017-6.

6.   Western Governors University is but one example of this educational model. Western Governors University, "How We Do It," https://www.wgu.edu/tuition_financial_aid/tuition#.

7.   Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light,* 589.

8.   Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light,* 601.

9.   Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light,* 601.

10.   President Barack Obama's Equal Opportunity Employment Commission began making this case in 2015. Emma Green, "Trump's Battle over LGBT Discrimination Is Just Beginning," *Atlantic*, July 28, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/07/title-vii/535182/.

11. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light,* 758.

12. David French, "Gordon College Keeps Its Faith and Its Accreditation," *National Review*, May 1, 2015, http://www.nationalreview.com/article/417788/gordon-college -keeps-its-faith-and-its-accreditation-david-french.

13. For example, the American Psychological Association's requirements for graduate school accreditation include nondiscrimination based on gender identity when hiring for faculty positions. See American Psychological Association, *Guidelines and Principles for Accreditation of Programs in Professional Psychology (G&P)*, 2006, https://www.apa.org/ed/accreditation/about/policies/guiding-principles.pdf.

14. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light,* 836.

15. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light,* 628.

16. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light,* 821.

17. *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale*, 530 US 640 (2000), https://www.law.cornell.edu/ supct/html/99-699.ZS.html.

18. *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission*, 483 US 327, 336 (2012), https://www.law.cornell.edu/ supremecourt/text/10-553#writing-10-553_CONCUR_5. Marc Stern discusses the issues in conversing with those who see religious exemptions for gender issues as simply a first step toward undermining racial civil rights. Marc D. Stern, "Same-Sex Marriage and the Churches," in *Same-Sex Marriage and Religious Liberty: Emerging Conflicts*, ed. Douglas Laycock, Anthony Picarello Jr., and Robin Wilson (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 28, 29.

19. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction* (New York, New York University Press: 2012), 52. See also Richard Dalgado and Jean Stefancic, ed., *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge* (Philadelpha: Temple University Press, 1999). The movement has largely split into different groups, each writing about its distinct form of oppression. Regardless, the initial essays show the template that the different gender and racial groups use when discussing their oppressive experiences. For counterarguments, see Charles R. Kesler, "The Old New Left and the New New Left," *Claremont Review of Books* 17, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 31–37, http://www.claremont.org/download_pdf.php?file_name=7575Kesler.pdf; Douglas Litowitz, "Some Critical Thoughts on Critical Race Theory," *Notre Dame Law Review* 72, no. 2 (1997), http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi ?article=1844&context=ndlr; and Dan Subotnik, "What's Wrong with Critical Race Theory?: Reopening the Case for Middle Class Values," *Cornell Journal of Law and Public Policy* 683 (1998), http://digitalcommons.tourolaw.edu/cgi/ viewcontent.cgi?article=1186&context=scholarlyworks. Jonathan Haidt has argued that focusing on racial differences can be counterproductive when seeking racial

reconciliation. For a popular overview, see Jonathan Haidt, "Hard Truths About Race on Campus," *Wall Street Journal*, May 6, 2016, https://www.wsj.com/articles/hard-truths-about-race-on-campus-1462544543?mg=prod/accounts-wsj.

20. Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, "State of the Law: Speech Codes," https://www.thefire.org/in-court/state-of-the-law-speech-codes/; Brett A. Sokolow, Daniel Kast, and Timothy J. Dunn, "The Intersection of Free Speech and Harassment Rules," *Human Rights Magazine* 38, no. 4 (Fall 2011), https://www.americanbar.org/publications/human_rights_magazine_home/human_rights_vol38_2011/fall2011/the_intersection_of_free_speech_and_harassment_rules.html.

21. This can easily be portrayed as a Christian university's speaking "prophetically." It is fascinating how nicely these prophetic statements match both the content and interest of the *New York Times'* editorial pages. One might suspect that those editorial pages effectively play the same role that the magisterium plays in Roman Catholic theology: providing guidance as to correct thinking. The Christian colleges simply add some baptismal water, and the mainstream progressive thought is now a prophetic utterance. Of course, the concern that churches would exchange theology for politics is not inherently new. "A pessimist might suggest that Protestant theology has simply collapsed into a series of 'modernisms,' defined as Christian glossing for convictions rooted substantially in some other contemporary absolutism." Mark Noll, "Introduction to Modern Protestantism," in *The Teachings of Modern Christianity on Law, Politics, & Human Nature*, ed. John Witte Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 277–78. An institution's fear of being viewed as fundamentalist can easily lead to that institution exchanging traditional fundamentalism with progressive fundamentalism.

22. Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Ann Thelen, *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 31.

23. Streeck and Thelen, *Beyond Continuity*.

24. Avner Greif and David Laitin, "A Theory of Endogenous Institutional Change," *American Political Science Review* 98 (2004): 633–52.

25. Wolfgang Streeck and Kathleen Ann Thelen, *Beyond Continuity: Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), Table 1.1, 31.

26. Streeck and Thelen, *Beyond Continuity*, 22.

27. Streeck and Thelen, *Beyond Continuity*, 24.

28. Streeck and Thelen, *Beyond Continuity*, 24.

29. Streeck and Thelen, *Beyond Continuity*, 21.

30. Streeck and Thelen, *Beyond Continuity*, 26.

31. 1 Kings 19:10 NASB.

32. Marsden, "The Collapse of American Evangelical Academia," 219.

33. Burtchaell argues that Christian universities often mistakenly replace theological doctrine with moral platitudes. He particularly stresses the dangers that come when universities rely on devotional piety to maintain their Christian identity. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light*, 838–46. As this point suggests, one necessary though not sufficient aspect of maintaining Christian mission is ensuring that the theology department remains committed to the doctrinal creeds of the denominational heritage or sponsoring ecclesial body. There are various ways to achieve this, such as the signing of creedal statements or mandating approval of theology professors by church authorities. Obviously such measures must be sincerely and consistently enforced in order to serve their purpose.

34. For a further discussion of the importance of the liberal arts see Russell Kirk, "The Conservative Purposes of a Liberal Education," *The Imaginative Conservative*, March 12, 2012; Richard John Neuhaus, "A University of a Particular Kind," *First Things*, April 2007; Patrick Deneen, "Liberalism Against Liberal Arts," chap. 5 in *Why Liberalism Failed* (Yale University Press, 2018).

35. J. M. Olejarz, "Liberal Arts in the Data Age," *Harvard Business Review*, July/August 2017, https://hbr.org/2017/07/liberal-arts-in-the-data-age.

36. George Anders, "The Unexpected Value of the Liberal Arts," *Atlantic*, August 1, 2017, https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2017/08/the-unexpected-value -of-the-liberal-arts/535482/.

37. George Anders, "That 'Useless' Liberal Arts Degree Has Become Tech's Hottest Ticket," *Forbes*, August 17, 2015, https://www.forbes.com/sites/georgeanders/2015 /07/29/liberal-arts-degree-tech/#29497c51745d.

38. See, for example, Aaron Hanlon, "What Stunts Like Milo Yiannopolis's 'Free Speech Week' Cost," *New York Times*, September 24, 2017, https://www.nytimes. com/2017/09/24/opinion/milo-yiannopoulos-free-speech-week-berkeley.html; Joan Biskupic, "ACLU Takes Heat for Its Free-Speech Defense of White Supremacist Group," CNN, August 17, 2017, http://www.cnn.com/2017/08/16/politics/aclu-free-speech-white-supremacy/index.html.

39. Miriam Solomon, "Groupthink Versus the Wisdom of Crowds: The Social Epistemology of Deliberation and Dissent," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 44, no. S1 (March 2006), http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.2041-6962.2006.tb00028 .x/abstract.

40. We use the term *academic freedom* here to refer to "the *institutional* freedom to carve out a niche—to have a common approach to truth-seeking," as opposed to a more broadly construed notion of academic freedom that often connotes an unfettered individual right of a faculty member to promote any viewpoint without institutional sanction. Elesha Coffman, "The Good (and Bad) News About Christian Higher Education," *Christianity Today*, August 22, 2016, http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2016/september/good-news-and-bad-about-christian-higher-education.html.

41. William C. Ringenberg, *The Christian College and the Meaning of Academic Freedom: Truth-Seeking in Community* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

42. Carsten K. W. De Dreu and Laurie R. Weingart, "Task Versus Relationship Conflict, Team Performance, and Team Member Satisfaction: A Meta-Analysis," *Journal of Applied Psychology* 88, no. 4 (2003): 741–49, http://web.mit.edu/curhan/www/docs/Articles/15341_Readings/Negotiation_and_Conflict_Management/De_Dreu_Weingart_Task-conflict_Meta-analysis.pdf.

43. Robert Louis Wilken, *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).