JAMES T. BURTCHAELL, C.S.C

James T. Burtchaell, one of the early presidents of the American Academy of Religion and formerly at the University of Notre Dame, is now a full-time researcher and writer in Princeton, New Jersey. He has served widely as an educational consultant and commissioner—for the Danforth Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Fulbright Program, the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Independent Colleges and Universities of Indiana, the Center for Constitutional Studies, the National Institutes of Health, the Institute on Religion and Public Life, and numerous colleges and universities.

DYING OF THE LIGHT

The Story within the Stories

JAMES T. BURTCHAELL, C.S.C.[1]

Until the later nineteenth century it was conventional for colleges in the United States to be identified by association with a Christian church. Their founding faculty, students, funding, piety, morality, and religious study (but not much other study) were braided together into a cord that tethered college to church. Yet we have seen that this church-college relation could be feeble on the brightest of days and in the longer judgment of history the churches may be more harshly judged for continuing to claim colleges than for nagging them.

When we say a college was founded by a church, we speak more analogically than literally. Some of these colleges were founded by the initiative of local communities, like Lafayette. Others were founded by church initiative e.g.,Gettysburg, Virginia Union, New Rochelle, and Ohio Wesleyan. Others, by a combination of church and citizens, like Linfield, or by a group of locals who were both church and citizenry, like Dordt, Millsaps sprang from the wish of a church and the wherewithal of a single benefactor.

Despite these variations of sponsorship and initiative and motivation, the early educators themselves were usually people in ministry. There were always some preachers, priests, pastors, and nuns more disposed or able to teach than to preach. It was a natural work for them. Many who did accept calls to the pastorate traditionally supplemented their income by taking in students. The full-time tutors of the gentry were often in holy orders. Since the older churches and denominations expected some level of literacy in their clergy, and since even the newer anti-intellectual movements turned in that direction after their first polemics were spent, most ministers were equipped to teach at some level. Lawyers and doctors, apothecaries and surveyors, bankers and journalists may have shared the same

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[1] James T. Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1998): 819-851. Used with permission of Copyright Clearance Center

elementary training, yet they were not expected to be schoolmasters. The tutelary function of the teacher was conventionally assumed to be well suited to the Christian minister. Perhaps the recompense for ministry was
poor enough to lessen the risks of a change to the classroom.

It is a commonplace that most of these institutions were begun, as the sponsors of Davidson put it, "for securing the means of Education to young within our bounds of hopeful talents and piety, preparatory to the Gospel ministry" (1845). Dartmouth reckoned that a quarter of its early graduates had followed that path to ministry (1877); Gettysburg, 56 percent (1882); Lafayette, 14 percent (1889); Millsaps counted 36 percent (1902); St. Olaf, 29 percent (1924); Azusa Pacific, 31 percent (1940). The expectation, however, was that prospective parsons would not come in crowds. Therefore the founders counted on young people interested in the law and in medicine and in other skilled professions to come along as well. The common curriculum was intended for them all, as well as for children of that gentry, who would need it to administer their estates with dignity.

Not a single college studied here was opened with the proviso that only students of the affiliate church or denomination were welcome. To the contrary, most legislatures imposed nondiscrimination in the charters they granted. Thus Ohio Wesleyan was 'forever to be conducted on the most liberal principles accessible to all religious denominations and designed for the benefit of our citizens in general." Some sponsors were quite vexed by such unsolicited amendments but in time found them providential, and their promotional literature eventually made large point of saying that they were ready to serve students of any faith New Rochelle said it simply: "Members of all denominations received." Some Protest colleges drew the line at Catholics, Jews, and Unitarians, and encoded this willingness in their positive welcome to "all evangelical Christians." But that because they did not expect to need Catholics or Jews or Unitarians. When they did, they admitted them. When they needed them badly, they welcomed them.

There was another natural linkage between the church and the early college. In the eighteenth century, and in rural areas until the end of the nineteenth century, the territorial and state governments secured their revenues from land sales tolls, fees, poll taxes, monopolies, and fines. Taxation was viewed with ardent hostility by the citizenry, as were all appropriations which might augment it. We have read of several timely state grants to some of these colleges in their infancy but they were usually without an encore. The only social entity which had a regular claim upon household incomes was the church. Therefore, almost all these attempts to open a college (including the begging journey by two priests who dunned the Irish gold miners at Yankee Jim's, Rabbit Creek, and Poker Flat for Saint Mary's) have been addressed to the patronage of sponsoring churches. There was the added likelihood that congregations who were persuaded to send students, especially students with ministry in mind, might also send contributions in the form of scholarships.

Early Protestant colleges initiated their students into the piety and the discipline of a parson's household; the model for the Catholics was that of pupils in conventual schools.