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Religion and American Higher Education

by John B. Hulst
Dean of Students



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Many who are somewhat acquainted with higher education in America today are inclined to suppose that there has been little if any connection between the Christian religion and the colleges and universities of our nation. They recognize that there are those church-related institutions in

which the influence of Christianity is obvious, although even many of these are showing less and less sensitivity to Christian teaching. Other than these exceptions, however, it is felt that both private and state higher education have been generally untouched by the Christian religion.

This is a notion which is frequently expressed or implied by those who wish to defend the cause of Christian higher education. Their argument proceeds somewhat as follows: in a Christian or church-related college the influence of Christianity is clearly seen, but in all other institutions of higher learning—especially those supported and controlled by the state—that influence is completely lacking. This idea, however, is not true. The real situation has not been and is not quite so neat and simple.

Clarence P. Shedd, in his book *The Church Follows Its Students*, states: "Religion is connected indissolubly with the beginnings of American higher education."¹ ("Religion" refers to the Christian religion.) What Shedd writes is true. And it is true not only concerning the beginning, but also the continuation of American higher education to this very day.

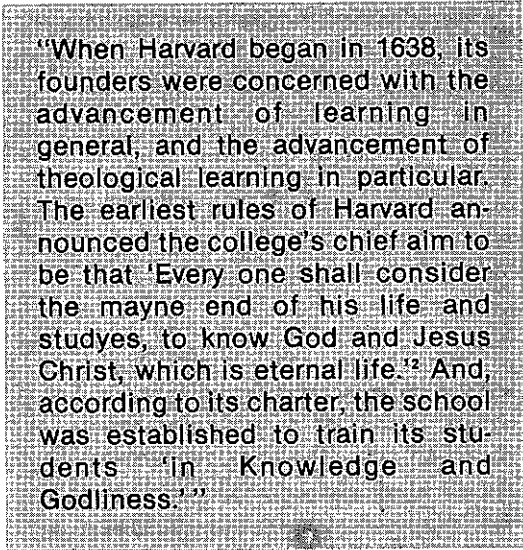
Shedd goes on to describe how the churches from the beginning were the controlling influence in American higher education. The purpose of ecclesiastical involvement was clearly expressed in the charter of Yale College, founded in 1701, which proposed that students be so educated that they might be "fitted for publick employment both in Church and Civil State."

When Harvard began in 1638, its founders were concerned with the advancement of learning in general, and the advancement of theological learning in particular. The earliest rules of Harvard announced as the college's chief aim to be that "Every one shall consider the mayne end of his life and studyes, to know God and Jesus Christ, which is eternal life."² And, according to its charter, the school was established to train its students "in Knowledge and Godliness."

William and Mary, founded in 1693, was concerned "to furnish the church

with a piously educated youth of good letters and manners, and also to propagate Christian faith among the Indians."³ Princeton, founded in 1746, was established as the "direct result of a great religious revival."⁴ The central emphasis of Princeton was its insistence, relative to both faculty and students, upon a deep spiritual commitment to Jesus Christ.

When King's College (later called Columbia) was begun in 1754, there was a bitter fight between the Anglicans and Presbyterians regarding the presidency. The result was a declaration by the trustees that the president had to be an Anglican and reflect in his administration the position of the Anglican Church.



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The College of Rhode Island (later called Brown University) was organized in 1764 by the Baptists to train and elevate the educational level of their clergy—as was true of most of the colleges begun at this time. But the Baptists also had another concern. Other colleges "rendered the life of Baptist students uncomfortable."⁵ Therefore Rhode Island was also begun as a place where Baptist youth could be educated in spiritual comfort and

safety.

Dartmouth was the last of the colleges to be founded during the colonial period (founded in 1769). One of the reasons for its existence was that of Christianizing the Indians. Further, as was the case in most other institutions in this period, the presidency of Dartmouth was a very strong position and its occupant was held responsible for the spiritual direction and character of the school.

In light of the above, Brubacher and Rudy make the following observation:

strate that the role of Christianity was important in founding the colleges of the colonial period. It should also serve to indicate, however [as I pointed out in the editorial of a recent issue of *Pro Rege*, (Vol. VI, No. 3, March, 1978)], that "Christianity was not integrated with the academic enterprise." It was an organized, ecclesiastical Christianity which focused upon evangelism, theological education, the training of pastors, and the spiritual life of faculty and students. But it did not speak to or significantly shape the education, the curriculum, or the courses being taught in these institutions.

"On the other hand the states began to take over some of the existing colleges and also to establish new institutions. The purpose of the states in doing so was to work for the promotion of the ideal democratic society. In the process, however, both the state institutions and many which remained private became increasingly anti-clerical and secular."

The role of organized Christianity was important in the founding of eight of the nine pre-Revolutionary colleges. Only the College of Philadelphia was not at first specifically under church control, and it soon came under the dominance of Anglicans. In addition, the purpose of training students for Christian ministry is specified in all the colonial college charters with the single exception, again, of the College of Philadelphia.⁶

The preceding brief description of the early history of American higher education should suffice to demon-

I proposed in the same editorial that the lack of integration of Christianity with the academic enterprise "may have been one of the primary reasons" why these colleges eventually turned away from their Christian origins. Response to the editorial has suggested that this may have been "too purely intellectual an explanation" and that there is "perhaps another and different reason for the change." I would certainly agree that there are other reasons for these colleges turning from Christian origins, and that my explanation would have been too purely intellectual if it had been given as the only explanation. But it was presented as

“one of the primary reasons,” and I believe this explanation still holds true.

According to Frederick Rudolph, in *The American College and University*, this turning away from Christianity began to develop shortly after the Revolutionary War.⁷ The post-war period witnessed an increased state involvement in higher education. And with this involvement there was a growing opposition to the Christian religion, with naturalism replacing supernaturalism.

Actually there was a dual development in higher education at this time. On the one hand there was the establishment of many denominational colleges. These institutions were known for compulsory prayers and worship services. They were also characterized by a revivalistic emphasis. But again education as such was left untouched by the Christian religion.

On the other hand the states began to take over some of the existing colleges and also to establish new institutions. The purpose of the states in doing so was to work for the promotion of the ideal democratic society. In the process, however, both the state institutions and many which remained private became increasingly anti-clerical and secular.

But this again does not mean that American higher education remained untouched by Christianity. It is in the context of the situation just described that there developed a variety of student Christian movements. The story of these movements is told by Robert H. Eads in *The Campus Ministry*, a book edited by George L. Earnshaw.⁸ Eads introduces us to this period and to the student movements with this paragraph:

On the one hand, with the American Revolution over, materialistic and atheistic philosophies were popular and intemperance was com-

monplace; conventional moral standards were held lightly. On the other hand religious revivals during this same period brought new religious societies in Harvard, Brown, Dartmouth, Bowdoin, Middlebury, Andover, and other schools. Unlike the secret religious societies of the past, the new groups functioned openly. Although most of them were devotional in nature at first, they soon broadened their concerns to include missionary zeal and social questions.⁹

One memorable event from this period was the Haystack Prayer Meeting near the campus of Williams College in 1806. A group of college students took refuge under a haystack during a torrential rain. Waiting for the storm to pass they prayerfully resolved to undertake a worldwide mission movement. “The movement thus begun led also rather directly to the formation a few years later of the student Y.M.C.A. and Y.W.C.A., and much later to the Student Volunteer Movement.”¹⁰

By the year 1850 there was an identifiable student Christian movement in American colleges and universities. These groups tended to fall into four categories: development of devotional life, theological debating, mission study and correspondence, and study and action on ethical or social issues.

In 1886 the First Intercollegiate Student Conference was held in Northfield, Massachusetts. The leader of the month-long conference was Dwight L. Moody. During the conference, long periods of time were devoted to meditation and conversation around biblical themes. Out of these meetings came the “Mount Hermon Hundred”—one hundred young men who volunteered for overseas missionary

service. These volunteers, in turn, spearheaded other missionary deputations. As a result of the Northfield meeting the conference pattern also became an established procedure in the student movement.

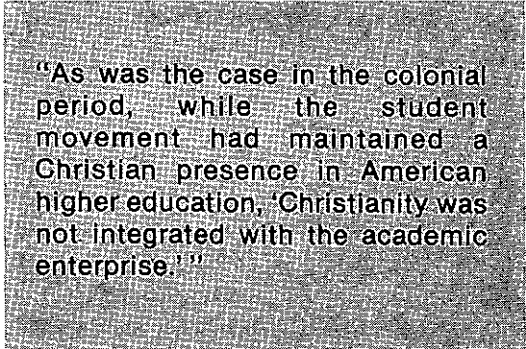
The World's Student Christian Federation was begun in 1895, under the leadership of John R. Mott, traveling secretary for the Y.M.C.A. From the beginning the Federation placed a strong emphasis upon Bible study and evangelism. It called upon students to be sensitive to social issues and, by its Day of Prayer for Students, endeavored to unite students throughout the world. According to its constitution, the purposes of W.S.C.F. among its members were:

1. To call them to faith in God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—according to the Scriptures, and to discipleship within the life and mission of the Church;
2. To help them to grow in the Christian life through prayer, study of the Bible, and participation in the worship and witness of the Church;
3. To help them to witness to Jesus Christ in the academic community;
4. To bring them into fellowship with one another in mutual service, and to support efforts to serve all students in their needs;
5. To help them to strive for peace and justice in and among the nations;
6. To help them work for the manifestation of the unity of the Church;
7. To help them to be servants and messengers of God's Kingdom in all the world.¹¹

Toward the end of his brief history of the student Christian movements, Eads makes this observation:

There has been no description of the work of the Inter- varsity Christian Fellowship because of its own decision

not to participate in the "mainstream" of the S.C.M.'s; however, it should be noted that on many campuses in the United States and in other parts of the world it has entered into conversations and occasional cooperative participation.¹²



"As was the case in the colonial period, while the student movement had maintained a Christian presence in American higher education, 'Christianity was not integrated with the academic enterprise.'"

What I would like to observe at this juncture is similar to the comments made at the end of the first section. As was the case in the colonial period, while the student movement had maintained a Christian presence in American higher education, "Christianity was not integrated with the academic enterprise." This has been true not only of what Eads calls "the mainstream of the S.C.M.'s," but also of the "conservative evangelical" groups such as the Inter- varsity Christian Fellowship. In the foreword of *Campus Christian Witness*, C. Stacey Woods asks, "What are the aims of an Inter- varsity Chapter?" The answer he gives is as follows:

The objective for the individual Christian student is that he may mature in his Christian faith so that he will live a total Christian life in the

university and endeavor to lead friends to personal faith in Christ as Lord and Savior. The objective for the chapter is to maintain a united witness to Jesus Christ as Lord in such a way that, as one generation of students succeeds another every two or four years, each group of students will have the vision and ambition to evangelize the students of their generation. By Bible study and prayer the members increase their devotion to the Lord Jesus Christ, their understanding of and obedience to the Word of God and the sincerity with which they unreservedly seek God's will for their lives.¹³

This answer is confirmed by the "purpose" section of the Chapter Constitution:

Article III. Purpose.

Section 1. The purpose of this organization is:

- (1) To witness to the Lord Jesus Christ as God Incarnate and to seek to lead others to a personal faith in Him as Savior and Lord.
- (2) To deepen and strengthen the spiritual life of members by the study of the Bible and by prayer.
- (3) To present the call of God to the foreign mission field and so to help all students discover God's role for them, at home or abroad, in world evangelization.¹⁴

It is not my purpose, in making this

observation, to direct negative criticism toward organizations such as Inter-University Christian Fellowship. It is simply my concern, at this point, to make clear that the focus of the student movement has been upon the spiritual life of the student and evangelistic outreach. Further, while there has been some concern for the social implications of the gospel, there has not been an explicit, clearly articulated attempt to set forth a Christian perspective on learning or to show how Christianity relates to and forms academic activity.

The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 resulted in the establishment of land grant colleges, the expansion of universities, and the placement of instruction in agriculture and engineering on a par with traditional liberal arts. At the same time there was a growth in enrollments. Many of the new students were Christian students, who would have gone to church-related colleges but were attracted to the state institutions because of expanded curriculum offerings and economic advantages.

The "Y" found it increasingly difficult to reach the vast number of students alone. At the same time the rise of Christian liberalism in theology, plus the growth of social action and mission, often made the students critical of the churches from which they had come. The churches, in turn, feared that the best students were not being recruited at college for Kingdom tasks as the churches saw them. The religious welfare of students had been virtually "handed over to the Y's," but now, to meet what was considered to be a numerical and spiritual need, the denominations began to set up their own "student

foundations" and employed university pastors on many campuses.¹⁵

The denominational boards of higher education usually chose highly trained pastors to work on the campuses and, through these pastors, encouraged the students to become active in the churches. The college/university pastor's work usually included counseling, recruiting students for service for the church, organizing groups for Bible and mission study or social action, leading in worship, and providing for social and recreational activity.

fear that student initiative would be overshadowed and lost. Many of these tensions and much of this opposition continues to this day.

The reason for church involvement in the life of college and university students has always been clearly understood:

. . . without the direct aggressive church influence a large proportion of the students in state schools drift away from the practice of their religion if they do not give it up altogether.¹⁶

"Denominational colleges have opposed the church campus program fearing the loss of financial support. Representatives of the student movement have frowned upon church involvement for fear that student initiative would be overshadowed and lost. Many of these tensions and much of this opposition continues to this day."

From the beginning there was some tension between the churches and the student organizations. It was the desire of the churches to be a conserving influence among the students, while the student groups tried to move out into society. The work of the churches has often been subject to criticism. There has been criticism from the universities because the work is seen as creating sectarian rivalries. Denominational colleges have opposed the church campus program fearing the loss of financial support. Representatives of the student movement have frowned upon church involvement for

While each church or denomination has had its own peculiar emphasis, all seemed agreed on the following objectives:

1. To provide for the nurture of the spiritual life and faith of students. . . .
2. To develop loyalty to the church of the student's choice by encouraging participation in the membership and activities of a normal church during undergraduate life.
3. To train and conserve for the church of the future its

potential lay and ministerial leadership¹⁷

Thus the churches have followed their students to the various campuses inquiring as to

. . . how best to keep alive the faith of the students enrolled in schools and colleges which by law and tradition are restrained from making adequate provision for religious worship and instruction; and how, while making them efficient in their vocations, to keep them from becoming materialists whose only object of worship is success.¹⁸

But again we must point out that, as in the case of the colonial period and the student movements, so also the focus of the work of the churches has been upon the spiritual life of the students, loyalty to ecclesiastical organizations, and evangelistic outreach. As we have made clear before, this focus, while it concerns obviously important matters, does not lead students to an awareness of the relationship between his or her confession as a Christian and the academic activity in which he or she is engaged.

In light of the above I would like to make the following concluding observations:

1. The Christian religion has been related to and involved in the history and development of American higher education.

2. The relationship of Christianity and American higher education has been primarily dualistic, with Christianity generally being limited to the "spiritual life" of the student and secularism constituting the formative spirit of academic activity.

3. Those who support a type of Christian higher education which is concerned only with the "spiritual life"

of students and does not reflect a Christian perspective on learning are really supporting that which already exists on most college and university campuses.

4. The challenge of the state campus to churches which acknowledge the universal kingship of Jesus Christ is that these churches point students to the necessary and essential relationship between Christianity and learning.

5. For those who believe that Christianity must be integrated with learning, and for those who seek a consistently Christian education, the only option is a college which takes seriously its responsibility to perform its educational task according to the demands of the Christian faith.

Notes

1. C. P. Shedd, *The Church Follows its Students*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1938, p. 1.
2. John Brubacher and Willis Rudy, *Higher Education in Transition*. New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1958, p. 8.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
4. Thomas J. Wertenbaker, *Princeton 1746-1896*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1946, p. 3.
5. Walter C. Bronson, *The History of Brown University, 1764-1914*. Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University, 1914, pp. 4-5.
6. Brubacher and Rudy, p. 8.
7. Frederick Rudolph, *The American College and University*. New York: Random House, 1962, pp. 23-43.
8. George L. Earnshaw, editor, *The Campus Ministry*. Valley Forge: The Judson Press, 1964, pp. 65-80.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 66.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
13. Charles E. Hummel, *Campus Christian Witness*. Chicago: Inter-varsity Press, 1958, p. 9.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 217.
15. Earnshaw, pp. 70-71.
16. Shedd, p. 14.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 27-28.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 85.