American Catholic Higher Education: An Experience of Interculturism

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A question that has plagued American Catholic colleges and universities for the past thirty years is: “Are these 220 institutions still Catholic?” Many who attempt to answer the question immediately focus on an individual college and its recent history. Yet there needs to be some attempt to generalize about them because these institutions are seen as a distinct sector by American society and by the Catholic community. The meaning of the name we give to institutions and organizations is important since it indicates our understanding of their purpose and activity. The literature that has been produced on this topic falls into two general categories: those who bemoan the secularization of the universities and the loss of their Catholic distinctiveness and those who defend their movement into mainstream higher education in the United States, arguing that without making changes they would not be here today and the church and society would be poorer.¹

¹ The former was clearly articulated by Rev. James Tunstead Burtchaell, C.S.C., in his two articles in First Things: “The Decline and Fall of the Christian College,” 12 (1991): 16-29, and “The Decline and Fall of the Christian College (II),” 13 (1991): 30-8. There have been several subsequent articles in that same publication. Another negative position about the Catholic identity of colleges is held by the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars and can be found in almost every issue of its Newsletter since its founding in 1977. The more positive evaluation is offered in several articles in Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education and is assumed in the several responses to Rome regarding the development of the document on Catholic higher education. The latter can be found in Alice Gallin, O.S.U., ed., American Catholic Higher Education.
This is a story of interaction and ambiguity, arising in part from the role that universities play in the process of inculturation. The ambiguity has arisen from the changed theological understanding of the church itself, a shift already perceptible in the 1950s and given official recognition in the decisions of Vatican Council II. In recent years Pope John Paul II has utilized this newer self-understanding when he has written and spoken on the mission of the church to evangelize cultures, and emphasized the significant role that he sees for the Catholic University in that process. But such a role is not without ambiguity:

A Catholic university, as any university, is immersed in human society; as an extension of its service to the church, and always within its proper competence, it is called on to become an ever more effective instrument of cultural progress for individuals as well as for society...

Further, he notes: “Their mission appears increasingly necessary for the encounter of the church with the development of the sciences and with the cultures of our age.”

The question thus facing the university that knows itself as Catholic is how to carry out this mission in various world cultures without losing its ability to criticize those elements of the culture which contradict the values of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. One way of doing this would be to remain outside the dominant culture, and in fact that was the path followed by the church in the United States in pre-Vatican II days. The opposition to modernity by church authorities in the early twentieth century and the strong attachment to a Catholic culture in the forties and fifties set Catholics in America apart from their neighbors. Whether this separatism is to be praised as safeguarding the faith or denounced as creating a ghetto mentality, the fact remains that Catholics and their universities were regarded by others as a sub-culture. The positive side of the coin was that their various constituencies had no doubt about their identity as Catholic.

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4 *Ibid.*, #9

5 This is well documented in Gleason, *Contending with Modernity*. See also his 1994 Marianist Lecture at the University of Dayton, “What Makes Catholic Identity a Problem?”
Nevertheless, despite that strong sense of identification as ‘‘Catholic,’’ the colleges and universities were at the same time absorbing some of the standards and ideals of their secular counterparts. Certain symbols of the dominant culture within which the church and its institutions in the United States operated—freedom of speech and religion, democratic organization, individualism—were increasingly visible on Catholic campuses as the twentieth century wore on.

These values—often considered to be the positive outcome of the Enlightenment—were treasured by Catholic educators in the United States, but were not universally owned by their counterparts in other countries. This became clear in the discussions at a series of international meetings held under the auspices of the International Federation of Catholic Universities (IFCU) beginning in 1965. Repeated attempts to dialogue with one another and with the Roman Congregation for Catholic Education on the basic question, ‘‘What makes a university Catholic?’’ ultimately came up against divergent understandings of these basic American values and how they influenced the relationship between American culture and Catholic ecclesial mission. Given the secular foundation of cultures (i.e. the basic physical, social, and political realities), how could secularization (understood as the absence of God from human discourse and the irrelevance of Christian ideals in the academy) be avoided? Did the American experience have anything to offer as a solution?

In 1989 at their final meeting before John Paul II issued *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the delegates at the Third International Congress of Catholic Universities struggled to clarify for one another the legal and educational systems within which they lived and which would need to be taken into account in any statement on the nature and mission of a Catholic university. The IFCU, having been born from a desire of Pius XII to have Catholic universities serve as liaisons to the United Nations, was very conscious of the cultural differences among its members and sought for ways of promoting unity among them so that together they might articulate a common identity. It was only logical that cultural questions would be of great importance to the members. John XXIII, Paul VI and John Paul II all stressed the need for serious study of the social sciences dealing with questions of diverse cultures and challenged Catholic universities to promote such investigations by scholars on their faculties.  

At the meeting in 1989 it quickly became evident that one of the values which the Americans prized—free debate essential for participative decision-

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making—was not universally shared. Terminology and rhetoric used in preliminary documents and the process designed for the meeting were simply unacceptable. The Americans were joined by some colleagues from other parts of the world who also thought it important to share their own cultural experiences before developing an agenda for the meeting. In the first few days there were many skirmishes between that group and those who had a more canonical approach to the question of Catholic identity. The opportunity was thus provided for an exchange of histories among the different cultural groups. The American experience is one that needs to be understood by all who discuss the issue of secularization.

The American Experience

The American culture in which our Catholic colleges were founded was one dominated by Protestantism. Colleges evolved from private academies and until the twentieth century were not clearly distinguished from them. Unlike the European universities and those in Asia and South America that were modeled on them, colleges in the United States were focused on the student’s moral as well as academic education. Most of them were founded by various Protestant denominations and saw moral education as a top priority. Thus the role of teachers and administrators was to oversee young people in loco parentis. Until the establishment of Johns Hopkins University in 1876 there was no fundamental commitment to research as the primary purpose of American higher education. Among Catholic institutions only the Catholic University of America was founded for that reason (1889). One of the distinctive marks of American higher education would be the effort to combine in one institution advanced research and undergraduate education. That would occur in Catholic institutions only by the mid-twentieth century.

Like their colleagues in other church-related institutions, Catholic faculties paid attention not only to classroom instruction but also to the development of student leadership, the nurturing of student newspapers, common residential life and the mentoring of student government. The socialization of the young man or woman, generally in separate institutions, was an important part of education. But by the middle of the twentieth century many of the Protestant church-related institutions had moved away from their church affiliations, and their growth into modern universities led to a neutrality toward religious values. The question

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7 George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, eds., The Secularization of the Academy (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); George M. Marsden, The Soul of the American University (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). The sub-title of the latter is From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief, which sums up the story in a few words.
naturally arises: Will a similar fate befall Catholic institutions once they achieve status as research universities? And, if so, what difference would it make? 8

Unlike the Protestant-founded colleges, the Catholic colleges owed their existence not to a sponsoring church body or judicature but rather to individual communities of men and women religious. While such communities needed the approval of the local bishop to open a college, the responsibility for governing and funding all but about a dozen of these colleges did not lie with the diocese. The bishop was often so overwhelmed by the numbers of immigrant Catholics who needed churches, elementary schools and other pastoral services that he was only too happy to leave higher education in the hands of the religious. As the increasing complexity of American higher education became apparent after World War II, Catholic colleges and universities developed internal structures of governance that assumed a certain degree of autonomy. The need to refer questions to the authorities of the religious community had often created difficulties in decision-making. So as the events of the sixties pushed everyone toward a more participatory type of governance, the colleges responded by creating faculty senates and independent boards of trustees composed of lay persons as well as members of the sponsoring religious community. 9

The nineteenth century American Catholic experience of lay trusteeism had left a residue of suspicion and mistrust on the part of clerical authorities. 10 But with the new theological understanding of the role of the lay person in the church articulated in the documents of Vatican Council II, such attitudes began to diminish. Higher authorities in religious communities recognized the need for the colleges to adapt to the societal changes in the United States and to update their mode of operating.

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8 Burchaell's work suggests a compelling analogy between Vanderbilt University and a Catholic university. Before accepting the analogy as pre-determining the fate of Catholic colleges, we need to examine the circumstances which led to the gradual erosion of Protestant religious goals in their American colleges. In addition to the work of George Marsden, that of Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian is very helpful in relating the various denominational world views to the colleges founded by the different churches and examining some models in detail so as to suggest how some institutions retained their identity while others gradually lost theirs: Models For Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Survival and Success in the Twenty-First Century (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).


However, these changes became far more radical than anyone had anticipated. Speaking of American universities in the late 60s, Thomas Bender writes: “...the issues of life-style, war, poverty and race converged, making for a volatile compound that produced riots in cities and divided university campuses.”¹¹ At Catholic colleges, points of tension were highlighted when certain radical speakers were invited to campus under the protection of academic freedom and when honorary degrees were given to individuals not approved by ecclesial authorities.¹² American independence was now being asserted by Catholic universities, and the reaction to it by Roman church authorities was an inability to understand how such institutions could still be Catholic. In 1974 they inquired, “Which ones are still Catholic?”¹³

An answer to this question was given in a document published by the college and university department of the National Catholic Educational Association in 1976.¹⁴ The characteristics enunciated in the document “The Catholic University in the Modern World” were affirmed¹⁵ but were then explained within the context of American law and values. In very direct language the position of Catholic colleges and universities in the United States was expounded: “Any indication of interference in the institution’s proper autonomy

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¹² An example of both of these issues can be found at Saint Louis University where an honorary degree given to Hans Kung in 1963 and an invitation to the French philosopher Roger Garudy to speak on campus in 1966 were both strongly protested.
¹³ Gabriel Marie Cardinal Garrone, Secretary of the Congregation for Catholic Education to Msgr. John F. Murphy, Executive Director of the National Catholic Educational Association, College and University Dept., Washington, D.C. (October 1974), Archives of the NCEA.
¹⁴ “Relations of American Catholic Colleges and Universities with the Church,” in Gallin, American Catholic Higher Education, 71-86. This document summarized the history of universities and colleges within America’s pluralistic society and pointed to the parameters drawn by state and university associations for acceptance into the academic community and the way in which these criteria affected the relationship of the Catholic institutions to the church. “Relations” was approved by the Bishops and Presidents’ committee and later included by reference in the National Conference of Catholic Bishops’ letter, Catholic Higher Education and the Pastoral Mission of the Church: Statement of the National Conference of Bishops (1981), in Gallin, American Catholic Higher Education, 135-51.
¹⁵ Gallin, American Catholic Higher Education, 37. The four characteristics deemed to be essential were: 1) a Christian inspiration not only of individuals but of the community as well; 2) a continuing reflection in the light of Christian faith upon the growing treasure of human knowledge; 3) fidelity to the Christian message as it comes to us through the Church; 4) an institutional commitment to the service of Christian thought and education. In Ex corde ecclesiae two interesting additions can be noted: in # 2 there is a final phrase, “to which it seeks to contribute by its own research” and in #4 it reads, “service to the people of God and of the human family in their pilgrimage to the transcendent goal which gives meaning to life.”
by representatives of the official Church would only assist the attempt to deprive church-related institutions of equal treatment before the law with other institutions. Emphasis was given to cooperative relationships among bishops, trustees and college presidents in maintaining the Catholic identity of the institutions in a way that harmonized with American law and custom.

The concept of academic freedom had not originated in the United States but was a European product, especially in Germany. The earliest universities in Europe had been corporations of teachers or, in some cases, of students which hired and paid the instructors. As time went on, the financial responsibility was assumed by the royal patron or the state government. The professors became employees of the state, civil servants of the most respected variety, and the collection of student fees by the professor was eliminated. But the increased dependence on the state called for a declaration guaranteeing "freedom to teach and freedom to learn," first enunciated at Humboldt University in Berlin, and directed against the Prussian state.

Johns Hopkins University, modeled on the German universities, brought this tradition into the American academy and other American universities soon followed suit. From 1915 on, the American Association of University Professors has been the watchdog of academic freedom, drawing up statements defining and describing its implications and censuring institutions found to be violating its guidelines.

A more distinctly American claim was that of institutional autonomy. This was a concept not articulated in European universities since they were totally dependent on the state for funding, and members of faculties were considered civil servants with accountability to a central Ministry of Education. Since both students and faculties tended to move from one university to another, a concept of autonomy for the particular institution would have had little meaning, although by tradition universities had certain exemptions from local ordinances and some privileges that marked them as special institutions. In the United States, on the other hand, the churches founded and governed the early colleges and asserted their jurisdiction over them as far back as colonial

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17 It is important to recall that in 1966 the decision in the *Horace Mann* case had ruled that two Catholic colleges in Maryland were ineligible for government funds because they were "pervasively sectarian," and that in New York State in 1968 the grants to private higher education known as "Bundy" money could be given only to those colleges that were not under the control of a church. See Charles W. Wilson's essay in this volume; it can also be found in *Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education* 18.1 (1997): 3-67.
times, claiming independence from the state. The state, for its part, saw the colleges as preparing men to be good citizens as well as faithful members of the church, and so was content to leave the task of education to them; thus autonomy was experienced before being defined.

How was this task of education to be accomplished? In practice, it was approached through a classical curriculum rooted in the tradition of European culture and the Christian religion. Closely monitored by church guardians—who came to be known as trustees—the teachers were not subject to direct state control but rather to church officials. When Catholic colleges were founded, they tended to follow the same pattern of governance, only with accountability to the religious community rather than to church officials.

With the Morrill Act in 1862 came a new model of higher education in the United States. By that act the land grant colleges came into existence, constituting a nucleus for what would become a system of public or state-sponsored post-secondary education. From that time forward American higher education has been a wonderfully diverse, sometimes contentious, mixture of private and public universities or, to use other terms, independent and state or community colleges. Pluralism of ownership and control has led to divergent understandings of academic freedom and institutional autonomy. But without a "system" of higher education or a national ministry of education, the colleges and universities have been free to develop in a variety of forms according to the needs of people seeking education and the educational philosophy of the founders. Standards and criteria for measuring achievement became the task of regional and specialized accrediting associations, voluntary in membership but powerful in impact on the institutions.

Nevertheless, today the state has tremendous influence on the way that private institutions operate. This point was well articulated by William M. Shea in his address to the annual meeting of the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities in 1987:

In fact, American Catholic higher education is already public. It is chartered by the state; its existence is entrusted to boards which are not ecclesiastical in makeup; for most of this century it has sought and found accreditation from public bodies; it uses no religious test for admission and, in many cases, for hiring; it is the recipient of large amounts of public money; its course requirements in theology are taught according to American academic criteria and not under ecclesiastical supervision; its campus ministers are ministers and not proselytizers; and even when it clearly affirms its Catholic heritage, it does not impose it even upon its Catholic students.

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18 This was upheld in the decision in the case of the Trustees of Dartmouth College v. Woodward, 17 US (4 Wheat) 518 (1819).
He concluded, "The colleges have been redefining their Catholicism," and we might add, precisely as American.

The concern that Americans have about mission statements is something difficult to explain to our European and Asian colleagues. However, the diversity among the 3200 colleges and universities in the United States suggests that higher education serves many purposes, thus requiring institutional statements about "mission." The church-related colleges, among them the Catholic ones, see their distinctiveness as essential to the purposes for which they were founded and funded. Nevertheless, their claim to institutional autonomy, while historically aimed at prohibiting state interference, has in many cases been made in relation to the church or community that sponsors them. In 1967 a public statement was issued by leaders of Catholic universities claiming both academic freedom and institutional autonomy as essential characteristics of any university. This "Land O'Lakes" document became central to the debate over the next thirty years between Catholic universities and church authorities in Rome, and in a footnote in the Apostolic Constitution, *Ex corde ecclesiae*, issued in 1990, the "American" definition of these terms was included:

Institutional autonomy means that the governance of an academic institution is and remains internal to the institution; academic freedom is the guarantee given to those involved in teaching and research that, within their specific specialized branch of knowledge and according to the methods proper to that specific area, they may search for the truth wherever analysis and evidence lead them, and may teach and publish the results of this search, keeping in mind the cited criteria, that is, safeguarding the rights of the individual and of society within the confines of the truth and the common good.

To sum up, the impact of the American experience (as distinct from the European) on Catholic higher education can be seen in the commitment to an education that focuses on the student, on the conviction that advanced research and undergraduate education are complementary and can coexist, that voluntary associations can set standards for academic excellence, and that institutional autonomy and academic freedom are basic to higher education. The Catholic colleges and universities adapted to the criteria proposed by American academic associations. Does that mean that they are now no longer Catholic? Does it mean that they are simply imitators of secular universities? Have they no longer any distinctive mission within American society?

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Students of the process of inculturation tell us that it consists of two stages: The first is the effort to enter into and understand the culture into which one is moving; the second is to bring about an interaction between that culture and one’s own so that the values of both can be promoted.  

How then would we describe the American culture to which Catholic higher education has increasingly related?

In the introduction to his book, Religion and Twentieth Century American Intellectual Life, Michael J. Lacey writes: “Until the last third of the nineteenth century, the life of the mind in the United States was largely dominated by the concerns and controversies, innovations and accommodations, of the Protestant clergy.” This monopoly by clerical scholars was due, no doubt, to the church-relatedness of the early colleges, but it was broken in the late nineteenth century by scientists and philosophers committed to the values of the Enlightenment. In the twentieth century many of these colleges developed into universities, and by the 1930s, according to Henry May, they prescribed to a naturalist perspective which,

...was a progressive, democratic outlook on history, based in part on a set of assumptions of Enlightenment vintage, 'lodged in the unconscious where assumptions are hardest to dislodge,' that while reason and democracy were advancing, religion was necessarily in decline.

Thomas Bender brings this evolution up to date. He writes: “It is too easy to overlook how deeply encompassing Christian academic culture was before 1945.... After 1945, American intellectual culture, academic and literary, would be de-Christianized.” He claims that even the religious movements that were growing were anti-intellectual, and that the events of the 1960s and 1970s led to culture wars and, in the end, to post-modern deconstructionism. The universities themselves did little or nothing to stop this movement. George Marsden and others have described the loss of the university’s “soul.” It is the

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24 Ibid., 3.

25 Bender, 11.

26 See Marsden and Longfield, The Secularization of the Academy; Marsden, The Soul of the American University.
fear of a similar fate for Catholic universities that inspires Burtchaell's pessimism:

If our account of alienation as a repeating process is reliable, then the American Catholic institutions of higher education are nearing the end of a process of formal detachment from accountability to their church, and instead of exerting themselves to oblige that church to be a more credible patron of higher learning, they are qualifying for acceptance by and on the terms of the secular academic culture, and are likely soon to hand over their institutions unencumbered by any compromising accountability to the church.27

However, George Marsden cautions us about identifying the word secularization with its negative connotations. I agree with him and add that it is also important for us to agree that "secular" is not simply nor always the opposite of "sacred": In a Christian sacramental view of reality, the secular has a legitimate role and one that is congruent with and not opposed to faith or religion. John Crosby has presented this point of view in his article in First Things28 where he makes the case for a productive relationship between Athens and Jerusalem and not a fundamental conflict between then.

Some critics use the word "secularization" to describe the loss of control by the church over the general campus climate, covering everything from the choice of honorary degree recipients to the granting of parietal visitation in the residence halls. The secularity of American culture is sometimes a scapegoat for the lack of coherence in disciplines like philosophy and theology whereas the real culprit may be a loss of nerve on the part of administrators and faculty who lack confidence in their ability to present clear and compelling argument for their own faith and values.29

Because the 700 currently identified church-related institutions are becoming less visibly related to their churches and more akin to secular universities and colleges there is a need for leaders who will give direction and not just let the institutions drift. We can, no doubt, learn from those universities that were founded by church communities and later opted to sever that relationship. Was it necessary for them to do that in order to become recognized

27 Burtchaell, II: 38.
29 A particularly helpful critique of the state of philosophical studies is found in Jude P. Dougherty, Desmond Fitzgerald, Thomas Langan, and Kenneth Schmitz, "The Secularization of Western Culture and the Catholic College and University," Current Issues in Catholic Higher Education 2.1 (Summer 1981): 7-23. An interesting observation made by the authors is that "...it is less secularization the college has to fear than its own failure to think through both the positive potential of the new civilization and the question of what Christianity has to offer." Fifteen years later this comment is still worth pondering.
as American universities? If so, is such a step still necessary for those in the last decade of the twentieth century who wish to attain status within the secular academy?

A Comparison

In studying the process by which colleges have moved away from their traditional mode of church-relatedness I perceive five similarities between the Protestant-founded and Catholic-founded colleges, and five differences. Let me begin with my understanding of the processes by which church-related colleges and universities have struggled to keep a balance between their religious roots and their membership in American secular society, and then offer a critique of their decisions. It may be that more is going on here than a simple shift from the city of God to the city of man and we may need to analyze more closely the concept of inculturation as a possible explanation for what has happened. I will deal with mainline colleges and universities and not with those who present themselves unambiguously as alternatives to secular higher education.

Similarities:

1. Both mainline Protestant and Roman Catholic colleges announced their founding purposes in terms of moral development of youth, preparation of leaders for their church, and commitment to a classical liberal arts curriculum as the foundation of all good education.

2. Since the colleges were linked to the churches, they changed as the churches themselves changed. In our own times we have seen the effect that the changed self-understanding of the Roman Catholic church, as it was articulated by the second Vatican Council, has had on Catholic institutions. In the midst of our many debates with church authorities about the Catholicity of our colleges, one president remarked: "When the bishops tell us what it means to be Catholic today, we'll tell them what it means to be a Catholic university." Another example can be found in the Lutheran community. In the past decade there has been a merger of two churches—the Lutheran Church in America and the American Lutheran Church—into the new Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. Since Lutheran colleges are related in a variety of ways to church synods and/or to local congregations, the status of their current relationship to

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30 I think here of Steubenville University or Christendom College, and of those faith-related institutions that work together as the Christian College Coalition. See Mary Jo Weaver, "Introduction: Who Are the Conservative Catholics?", Mary Jo Weaver and R. Scott Appleby, eds., Being Right: Conservative Catholics in America (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995).
the church is only slowly evolving. At its best, the relationship of church and college is a dynamic one, requiring constant reflection and dialogue.

3. The leadership in the colleges that consciously made changes in the church-relatedness of their structures were men and women who were strongly committed to their churches. The Protestant ministers and the Catholic priests and sisters who presided over the colleges did not intend to undercut the mission or minimize the importance of their religious traditions. They made changes in curriculum and residential life which they thought necessary to equip the students for life in a secular society. They widened the spectrum of religious preference among faculty, administrators, and trustees in order to enhance the education being given in their colleges and universities as well as to meet government non-discrimination laws. While they themselves remained role models in their commitment to common worship and Christian behavior, times changed and new leadership emerged. Where careful selection of leaders for these colleges has not occurred, there are now unintended consequences to be dealt with if these colleges wish to remain identified with particular religious traditions.

4. The American principle of separation of church and state has affected both Protestant and Catholic colleges. The former group emerged from communities that were themselves Protestant, and so the colleges were seen as one more institution within society working for the common good. In this spirit they were admired and supported by public funds as well as by the churches, and in some ways were accountable to both authorities. James Smylie has written of them: “These colleges may not be labeled easily as state colleges, church colleges, or private colleges, since the commonwealth, the church, and private persons played a part in sponsoring and supporting them.”31 The Catholic colleges were founded as an alternative system of higher education, and were not an outgrowth of the civic community. The principle of separation of church and state, as it was gradually interpreted by the courts, affected many of their decisions once they tried to enter the mainstream of American higher education.

5. There has been a continuing struggle between an affirmation of pluralism as a social value and a commitment on the part of a college or university to a single faith community. How open to the value systems of others outside the faith community can an institution be without losing its own identity? This has been indeed a constant question for all church-related institutions, whether Protestant or Catholic.

Differences:

I want to suggest five differences in the way the Catholic and Protestant institutions have moved to a less visibly religious character.

1. The move away from a clear relationship with a church occurred at different points in time. For the mainline Protestant colleges the process occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries whereas the comparable question for Catholic colleges arose only after the 1950s. As Marsden and others make clear, the original American colleges were Protestant in origin, in curriculum, and in models of community moral behavior, and were sponsored by a civic community that was itself Protestant. Hence he suggests that we might more properly think of the secularization of those institutions as a disestablishment of religion, a process that the civic community had gone through early in the nineteenth century but which only slowly penetrated the social structures of American life. To this observation we can add that this political and social development coincided with an epistemological revolution which produced a new faith, that is, a faith in the scientific method as the only valid path to truth. In that environment a self-conscious denominational education appeared to be an anachronism. To the leaders of American higher education at the time it seemed wise to separate the intellectual goals of the university from the spiritual and moral development that had previously been so important in church-related education.

Unlike those founded by Protestants, the Catholic colleges began not as an integral part of early American society but as an alternative system of higher education, needed because Catholic teachers and students were not usually welcomed in the major institutions and also because the bishops understandably feared for the sons and daughters of the immigrants whose home-country culture had been more supportive of their faith. The task of the Catholic colleges until the mid-twentieth century was quite self-consciously to serve the Catholic population, even though many specified that students of every faith or no faith were welcome to enroll. As late as the 1950s the Catholic colleges saw their mission as one of fortifying Catholic culture, magnifying and developing the tradition which was their heritage. There was a commitment to the importance of studying the doctrines of the Catholic faith and to upholding the standards of Christian moral behavior among both faculty and students. There was also a clear Catholic tradition which linked the love of learning and the desire for God, a tradition that justified universities as places where learning for its own sake was appreciated. The founding of the Catholic University of America in 1889 as

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a graduate school gave a clear signal from the hierarchy that advanced research and graduate education were endeavors worthy of extensive commitment. This gave a signal that the task of Catholic higher education was similar, in some respects, to the purposes of what had become secular universities, and that in the twentieth century Catholics would have a place of their own where research could be carried on under Catholic auspices. I suggest that timing was very important, and the ways in which Protestant and Catholic colleges adapted to American secular education are tied in to particular moments in history, diverse social contexts, and substantially different reasons.

2. Secondly, there is a difference in the way that the colleges related to the parent churches. The history of the Protestant institutions, for the most part, is one of a direct relationship with the parent church, whether the local congregation or some kind of judicatory. They were most often seen as primary places for the formation of ministers and other church leaders. They received funding from their church, and their administrators and trustees were often accountable to the church elders or conventions. On the Catholic side, however, there was a different kind of church-relatedness. Here, the founders were, with few exceptions, members of distinct religious communities within the Catholic church—Society of Jesus, Congregation of the Holy Cross, Sisters of Mercy, Religious of the Sacred Heart, etc.—and a community of the sponsoring religious order lived on the campus and provided a core religious presence that touched every aspect of college life. Although there were lay persons on faculties and in lower level administration, the link to the church was the religious community, and the institution was regarded as Catholic precisely because it was an apostolic work of a particular order or society which had canonical status within the church.

The primary responsibility for the overarching role of religion on campus and in the classroom rested with the religious community that ran the college. Prior to Vatican II, the effectiveness of their presence was seldom questioned, although in the late '50s there began to be voices challenging the appropriateness of such clear religious presence in an academic environment. If Catholic colleges and universities wanted to be in the mainstream of American higher education, was it not urgent to move out of a Catholic ghetto and embrace the secular standards of professional organizations and associations? Were the religious habit and the Roman collar not obstacles to true fellowship with colleagues? Lay faculty at many Catholic colleges began questioning the competence of some

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34 See C. Joseph Nuesse, *The Catholic University of America: A Centennial History* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990). The impact of this university on the development of Catholic higher education in this country should not be overlooked. Until after World War II it was the only true university among Catholic institutions, although several Jesuit colleges were well on the way to university stature.
Trying Times

religious who were assigned to administer or teach in the college. By the late 1950s academic freedom was the buzz word, and participation of lay persons in the governance structures at all levels began to be advocated. Since the relation of the college to the church was through the religious community the question which was now addressed by the presidents at their annual meetings in the 1960s and 1970s became, “If the community does not retain control, how will the colleges still be Catholic?”35 By the mid-sixties a struggle for control of these institutions between the administrators of the colleges and the superiors of the religious communities was developing, and only by great political skill and sincere cooperation for the good of the institution was the situation resolved in most places. 36

Several important factors can be identified in the transition that followed, a transition marked most dramatically by the shift in the composition of the governing boards of trustees from entirely religious to predominantly lay:

- Beginning in the 1960s there was a sharp decline in the number of persons entering the religious communities. With a lessened presence of religious communities on campuses, the visible signs and the language of Catholic culture began to disappear.
- In the documents of the Second Vatican Council in the mid-sixties, a new appreciation of the role of the laity was presented, and a call was issued to involve lay persons more significantly in the work of Catholic institutions.
- The complexity of the higher education enterprise was hitting home, and it was clear that if Catholic institutions were to demonstrate proficiency in that arena they would need far more expertise and resources than could be found in their individual religious communities.
- In 1965 the federal government committed itself to making post-secondary education available to all, and it was important that Catholic colleges and universities share in the funding that followed upon that decision.
- Greater attention to the voluntary nature of church membership, long held by Protestant denominations, as well as a pronounced encouragement by Vatican II to promote ecumenical activities now forced administrators of these Catholic colleges to reexamine requirements concerning curriculum and student regulations. They hoped to expand their own horizons, to

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35 Many of these discussions occurred at the annual meeting of the College and University Department of the National Catholic Educational Association, and record of them is found in the College Newsletter. A complete file is found in the NCEA archives housed at the Catholic University of America.

attract a more diverse student and faculty population, and to play a more significant role in the larger world of academia.

There was a noticeable increase in the number of Catholic university and college administrators holding office in national associations such as Association of American Colleges, American Council on Education, and the Association of Governing Boards (to mention just a few) and a recognition on college campuses of the validity of such groups as the American Association of University Professors and the National Student Association.

As the link with the religious community—the foundation stone and guardian of the church-related character of the college—was weakened, the college took on a life of its own, and that life would henceforth be lived primarily within the American higher education community. The question became: Can institutions do this and still call themselves Catholic?

3. Conflicting points of view within the two academic communities themselves led to the adaptations that were made. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the liberal Protestant community and the scholars that belonged to it were converted to a new esteem for science and scientific objectivity as the only worthy norm of scholarship. Decisions regarding curriculum were made in that context and the impact of such decisions was to stifle earlier religious influences in those institutions.

By the time the Catholic colleges were making their adaptations (late 1950s and early 1960s), the dominant concern on their campuses was not so much the demands of scientific objectivity as of academic freedom for the faculties teaching there. Anxious to be included in the wider world of American higher education, administrators of the Catholic colleges had to confront the twin pillars of academic culture—academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Limits imposed by hierarchical authority on content or method of teaching in such disciplines as philosophy, theology and the natural or social sciences were now resisted as inappropriate for a college or university. Lay faculties sought a role in decision-making and often this led to prolonged strife between lay faculty and the religious community. It was obviously a time to rethink the relationship

37 Although the questions of academic freedom and institutional autonomy are central to the tensions regarding church-relatedness I must refrain from entering upon a discussion of that topic in this paper. I refer the reader to Charles E. Curran, Catholic Higher Education, Theology, and Academic Freedom (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) and James John Annarelli, Academic Freedom and Catholic Higher Education (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987). A work that gives the viewpoint of a layman in 1963 is also of interest: Daniel Callahan, The Mind of the Catholic Layman (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1963), 99-100.
between the college and the church and to modify the former structures of
governance.

Fortunately, a more collegial relationship could find its legitimacy in
various teachings of Vatican II, including the plurality of philosophical and
theological methods, the freedom and responsibility of individuals, the gifts
proper to the laity in the church, and the role of the church itself in the modern
world. The challenge which had been issued in 1955 to Catholic higher
education by Msgr. John Tracy Ellis concerning the lack of Catholic leadership
in American intellectual life now seemed to be underscored by the universal
Church's call to recognize the place of the Catholic university in the modern
world.\footnote{John Tracy Ellis, "American Catholics and the Intellectual Life," \textit{Thought} 30.118
(1955): 351-88. The Vatican II document most influential in the rethinking of the relationship
between the Church and contemporary secular society was "The Church in the Modern
World," (\textit{Gaudium et spes}) and it did much to change the way that American Catholic leaders
in higher education regarded their task. \textit{Gaudium et spes}, Austin Flannery, OP, ed., \textit{Vatican
Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents} (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical
Press, 1975), 903-1001.}

The debates of the 1970s and 1980s bore witness to deep fractures in the
Catholic culture of the pre-Vatican days, but they also provided an opportunity
to clarify the distinction between faith and culture, a distinction that is critical in
understanding the work of the university. Between 1965 and 1990 a dialogue
to the Vatican and the Catholic universities around the world often
revealed profound disagreements about the adaptations to different cultures that
could legitimately be made, and the role that universities should play in
mediating Christian faith and religious values to the culture in which they exist.\footnote{For documentation regarding the dialogue between the universities and the Vatican, cf. Gallin, \textit{American Catholic Higher Education}.}

The passionate discussion of such questions indicates that most American
Catholic institutions still want to be identified as Catholic, albeit defined in non-
juridical terms.

4. It may be that one reason there is still a strong desire to maintain the
Catholic identity of the colleges and universities is the very challenge that they
have received from the leaders of the church.\footnote{I am not sure of the extent to which Protestant church bodies challenged the
colleges as they moved toward the disestablishment of religion; my understanding is that such
a challenge would have had to come from the denominational community within the college or
from a congregation or synod that was related to it. Was there any role for the National
Council of Churches or similar bodies?} The authorities within the
Catholic community raised serious questions in the 1970s about the direction in
which they saw Catholic higher education in this country moving. The challenge
to their position pushed educational leaders to a thoughtful reflection on their
institutions’ religious identity. Justifying the colleges’ Catholicity is a task that many presidents and others have accepted and addressed in the past two decades. They have also made a strong corporate response through the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities which has existed since 1899 and to which over 90% of all Catholic colleges and universities belong. At the turn of the century, the Protestant colleges did not have the advantage of a challenge and corporate presence of this sort.

5. Another difference in the Catholic and Protestant situations is the role theology and/or religious studies play in the university curriculum. Again, one of the major changes in the mainline Protestant universities of the late 19th century was the decision to place theological studies in divinity schools and seminaries since that was where the church’s ministers would be trained. Presumably, the strong tradition of Sunday school and the emphasis on sermons in church services precluded the need for religious education in public schools or in higher education.

The Catholic decision to have their own parochial schools where religion would pervade the entire curriculum was carried over into secondary schools and thence to colleges. As a result Catholic colleges made philosophical and theological disciplines central to their educational design. The level of religion courses prior to the 1960s seldom rose above didactic or apologetic content. But in the late ‘50s a new organization of teachers of sacred doctrine in colleges, now called the College Theology Society, spearheaded a significant change in the way that theology was taught, and promoted the education of lay persons and non-clerical religious in theological studies. This was a response, in part, to the decision of states and accrediting agencies to recognize credit given for theology courses if they were of a quality equal to the rest of the curriculum. Even though many theology programs still leave much to be desired, it can be said without argument that Catholic colleges and universities have not abandoned them nor transferred them to the divinity schools and seminaries. Much of the serious work being done today in Catholic theology is being done in universities. While there is a renewed interest in the study of religion in secular universities, it does not seem to be in the direction of strengthened Christian theological reflection.

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43 For a helpful view of this contemporary movement, see D. G. Hart, “American Learning and the Problem of Religious Studies,” in Marsden and Longfield, chapter 7.
Marsden explicitly excluded Catholic colleges and universities from his study because “they had little to do with setting the standards that eventually prevailed in American academic life.”

Marsden, however, recognizes that the very fact that they were excluded was significant, and in our study of the experience of inculturation of Catholic higher education in the American experience such exclusion is extremely important. History bears witness that Catholic scholars had not made their mark in the circles of academic reputation. In 1955 Rev. John Tracy Ellis berated Catholic institutions of higher learning for not having gone beyond mediocrity. He denounced their emphasis on moral training to the detriment of creative and critical thinking. In the following decade, his words were repeated by many others, and the Catholic academic community took them to heart and engaged in a great deal of self-examination and public discussion about their weaknesses.

The challenge issued by Ellis was intensified in the documents of Vatican Council II, especially in *Gaudium et Spes*. To the Council Fathers, the role of the Catholic university was crucial in the ecclesial mission of responding to the signs of the times. The call to be active in the formation of culture and to assume places of influence in society gave Catholic universities a new agenda. There needed to be a profound commitment to research at the larger universities and ways had to be found to develop a corps of recognized scholars if Catholic universities were to have any influence on American higher education. Active leadership in scholarly associations and publication in refereed journals began to be required as the *sine qua non* for promotion and tenure, and even at non-research colleges and universities the enthusiasm for scholarship was awakened.

However, we have yet to see widespread scholarly contributions in areas of study that arise from our Catholic roots, such as ethics, philosophy, theology, social justice, jurisprudence, history, literature and science. Where universities have developed research capacity it has often been in fields where money was available, such as engineering, hard sciences, business, or medicine, rather than in those areas where our tradition might have something special to offer. The Christian integration of which we boasted in the 1940s and 1950s did not carry over into inter-disciplinary studies but rather seemed to falter just at the time when the possibility of ecumenical dialogue would have enriched the understanding of such integration. Certainly there is great need for research and teaching about the different Christian traditions as well as the religions of other cultures; where could this be more appropriate than at Catholic universities?

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45 Ellis, 351.
Ecumenical dialogue does not suggest a lessening of Catholic thought but rather an intensification of it, along with a recognition of the reality of pluralism and a welcoming attitude toward different cultures and religions. According to Bruce Douglass, a true pluralism rests on "the critical indwelling of an established tradition." He underscores the fact that "there is a world of difference between openness with and without a defining center." It is a point similar to that made by William Shea when he urged dialogue only when participants stand on firm ground. For such dialogue there is need "...to take responsibility, intellectual and spiritual, for our convictions, and to exercise and argue those convictions with some courage in the political, educational, and the ecclesial arenas."

Because of their strong religious tradition Catholic universities could become communities where such a dialogue would have pride of place. If they did this, they would be making a tremendous contribution to American higher education and would, one can hope, be welcomed in the academic community as institutions offering a distinctive environment rich in possibility for meeting the intellectual needs of contemporary men and women. Having explored the values of the secular academy, they would have reason to reaffirm their Catholic heritage as they move into the twenty-first century.

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47 Ibid., 54.