

Christian Reconstruction

Isaiah 61:4

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WHAT'S WRONG WITH COLLEGE?

by Gary North

Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ (Col. 2:8).

The college was an invention of the West. It remains by far the most enduring and influential social institution that was born in the late medieval world. I can think of only three other uniquely Western social institutions – as distinguished from technologies – that have spread to virtually every nation: the church, the hospital, and the Rotary Club. (The hospital was also a medieval invention.)

In the twelfth century, the medieval world began accept a new path to ecclesiastical ordination. The church sanctioned the addition of formal certification by college-certified scholars as an entry requirement for ordination. A collegiate community of scholars would henceforth pass judgment on the spiritual capabilities of young men seeking ordination into the ministry. This system of intellectual and academic screening steadily replaced the more personal screening of the monastery and the religious order.

This transformation did not take place overnight. The cost of educating a scholar in the medieval world was considerable. Only a tiny, Latin-speaking elite ever got into a college, let alone graduated from one. The church could not be supplied with enough ministers who had attended college. Only in the early modern period, when state churches used screening by colleges and universities as the way to promote conformity to the conservative political order, did the ranks of the clergy begin to fill with academically certified men. Access to these collegiate institutions was closed to all but the sons of the rich and to very bright poor boys who somehow had mastered Latin in a local grammar school. This was the means of closing the ministry to all but the sons of the ruling elite and a few selected poor boys.

Protestant sects refused to conform to the State churches and their collegiate screening institutions. In Protestant nations, these sects grew rapidly alongside the established churches. The Methodists in eighteenth-century England and nineteenth-century United States are the most notable examples. The Baptists were also highly successful evangelists, especially on the American frontier: from under 500 congregations in 1790 to over 50,000 in 1900. Ecclesiastical screening was performed by congregations in Baptist circles, and by bishops and congregations among Methodists.

The sects de-emphasized higher learning, if for no other reason than the fact that the certifying academic institutions in England were State-funded ecclesiastical monopolies. These

schools demanded a confession of faith in the existing established church. Sectarrians were not allowed entry. In opposition, the sects emphasized personal confession of faith and success in preaching as the key marks of God's call to the ministry. The anti-intellectualism of American life has some of its roots in an established church system that used higher education and familiarity with Latin as the chief devices to screen out rival confessions.

From Confession to Certification

Formal confession of faith in the State-established church was required for entry into Oxford and Cambridge. Attendance at one of these institutions was required for ordination in the Anglican State church. Oxford and Cambridge had long been granted a State monopoly to print the Bible in English. One way or another, the sectarians were pressured to conform. One way or another, the English State church got access to their money. The American Revolution put an end to this in the colonies.

The reaction against higher education by American Methodists was short-lived. In 1847, the first Methodist seminary in the United States was opened. In 1850, the first public complaints began within the denomination over the appearance of theological liberalism. By 1880, the Methodists had 11 seminaries and 44 colleges. The church abandoned the apprenticeship program for training ministers in the second half of the nineteenth century. As sociologists Finke and Stark write, "the larger, more affluent Methodist congregations desired educated clergy on a social par with Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians, and the clergy themselves wanted the social status and increased pay that a well-educated clergy could obtain." (*The Churching of America*, p. 155.) Yet it had been the advanced education, high social status, and high pay of the older mainline Calvinist denominations that made possible the winning of the West by low-paid, poorly educated, itinerant Methodist and Baptist preachers. The mainline churches stayed east of the Allegheny Mountains; the sectarians conquered the Western regions.

The Free Methodists came out of the old Methodist Church in 1860. But there were few who went out. As late as 1906, there were fewer than 33,000 Free Methodist Church members. A new sect came out of an older sect, which had ceased being a sect. It had gone mainstream. The mark of its mainstream status was its requirement of higher education for pastors. The Methodist Church had raised formal certification to the level of personal confession. Then, year by year, formal certification became increasingly mandatory; personal

confession of orthodoxy became far less important, even optional, and finally a distinct liability.

By demanding that its ministers receive formal higher education, especially secular education after 1880, the churches gained respectability and steadily went liberal. The Social Gospel was as much a product of liberal colleges as it was of the urban conditions of the day laborer. The minister's true confession of faith became more and more secular, as the common-ground rationalism of higher education extended its control over college curricula and faculties. Performance on formal written examinations became the supreme criterion, not the theological content of one's personal confession. This substitution of formal certification for personal confession undermined the confessional foundation of the churches. One by one, they went liberal.

This substitution of a sanctioning hierarchy based on formal academic performance for a hierarchy based on personal piety and personal service has transformed the West. I think it is no exaggeration to say that this shift in sanctioning is the medieval world's most important legacy to the twentieth century. Modern bureaucracy would not be conceivable without this shift in certification. The twentieth century is the premier era of bureaucracy – a degree of bureaucracy not seen since the pharaohs, Max Weber wrote in 1909. I think he was correct. The spread of occupational certification by means of formal written examinations has engulfed all rival forms of training. What the church did first, the State has imitated.

The Secularization of the College

The best account of this process is George Marsden's 1994 book, *The Soul of the American University*. The American university sold its soul the day it became a university. A university in the United States is an academic institution that grants the Ph.D. From the appearance of the first American graduate seminars at Johns Hopkins University in the late 1870's, the graduate school curriculum was secular. Graduate education, Marsden reports, was secular from the beginning in the United States, except for theological seminaries, which had first appeared in 1808 in a reaction against Harvard College's decision in 1805 to appoint a Unitarian to its faculty. Graduate education was never under the domination of clerics in the United States. Its standards were always some variety of common-ground rationalism.

In the twentieth century, theological liberals and secularists joined forces with the Federal government to insure that academic accreditation for colleges was in the hands of men who had earned advanced academic degrees. Beginning in 1902, the newly created Rockefeller foundation, the General Education Board, began making grants to colleges that hired holders of the Ph.D. for their faculties. This money, which continued to flow for the next three decades, brought a revolution in formal criteria for higher education. Coupled with Federal monopolistic licensing of the regional accrediting agencies, this seed money created the modern system of secular higher education.

To grant a higher degree than a high school diploma, colleges must have people on its faculties with at least an M.A. and preferably a Ph.D. Those institutions granting a Ph.D. must have faculties composed almost exclusively of Ph.D.-holding professors, with only an occasional special faculty position open to non-Ph.D.s. This system has centralized education in America, despite state and private funding.

I know of no published history of collegiate accreditation

in the United States. The history of the General Education Board is known only to specialists in education or the Rockefeller dynasty. The story of how the regional accreditation agencies have been granted monopolistic power by the Federal government is an untold story. No historian has ever used the Bible's five-point covenant model as a guide to evaluate the history of American higher education: (1) who is in charge of this formally decentralized system; (2) the hierarchy of status and power that has preserved the system; (3) its academic content (confession) and rules of certification; (4) the sanctions – blessing and cursing – possessed by the accreditors; (5) the institutional continuity preserved by the system.

We should begin with a premise: "He who pays the piper calls the tune, unless you can control the licensing of pipers, thereby limiting the supply of pipers to those who will play only accredited tunes." The revolution in American higher education was accomplished by a revolution in funding. Unlike the British system, in which the national government had worked for centuries with the national church to fund Oxford and Cambridge as screening institutions for the lifetime employees of both institutions, the American system of higher education had been decentralized from the beginning. The national government had no institution of higher learning other than West Point. The states funded higher education in Virginia and the South in the early nineteenth century.

Then came the Civil War's most important educational legacy, the land grant colleges created under the Morrill Act of 1862. This legislation granted free Federal land to states for the purpose of creating agricultural and mechanical colleges. The act granted 30,000 acres of public land per Senator to each state. The emphasis on "practical education" was one of the keys to success. This inexpensive land grant laid the foundation for the modern system of state universities. The states took this Federal aid and created a secular system of "practical" agricultural and mechanical colleges, all of which have added the liberal arts to their curricula.

Conclusion

For as long as taxes are used to fund higher education, it will remain secular. It will remain a subsidized means of evangelism for secular liberals who rejoice in the golden opportunity of capturing the hearts, minds, and souls of the children of their class enemies and covenantal enemies. For as long as they retain the monopolistic power of academic accreditation, they will control the content of education in every Christian college. When the textbooks are written by the secularists in terms of their religious presuppositions, Christian higher education will remain what it has been throughout the twentieth century: baptized humanism.

The public school is America's only established church. The hirelings and beneficiaries of this coercive establishment are as blind to the moral and institutional implications of this coercion as New England Congregationalists were blind to the coercion of the established church in 1750. But New England went liberal first: Unitarianism and then Congregationalism. They lost the battle on the frontier, where there was no establishment. They could no longer compete in the marketplace of the soul.

We shall have liberty only when, to paraphrase Jean Messelier, the last state university president is strangled in the red tape of the last Secretary of Education.

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