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REVIEW ESSAY

Trying Again, and Better

JAMES J. BUCKLEY

James Tunstead Burtchaell, C.S.C. *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998. xi + 868 pp.

James Burtchaell's epic of disestablishment and dying is a massively detailed indictment of Christian higher education in the twentieth century. For those who can weather the storm, it is also chock-full of hints about "the task of trying again, and better" (851). Only those (like myself) largely persuaded by the indictment will even care to look for the hints. Only those who look for the hints will wonder whether they amount to trying again, and better.

The book is indeed long, "of the size usually reserved for major wars" (xi). The reason for its 850-plus pages is that we need "something of a sojourn at a variety of colleges and universities and their sponsoring churches" rather than "a flying visit or a quick read" (xi). This, it seems to me, is true. A growing literature nowadays treats the nature and aims of Christian higher education. What Burtchaell provides are stories of how it has actually gone, and goes. The book has chapters studying seven churches or denominations (Congregationalist, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Catholic, and Evangelical), each represented by two or three colleges or universities. Although seventeen colleges form the major case-studies, there are paragraphs on many others along the way. Each chapter also supplies historical background for that church as well as a concluding analysis of the situation of that church's related colleges today. A short preface sketches the background and argument of the entire book. A final chapter summarizes "The Story within the Stories." The thesis, etched in the title, emerges clearly in each chapter and the conclusion, although myriad ironies crop up along the way. There is a consistency of aim and execution (and biting humor) throughout.

In the spirit of Burtchaell, I will not aim to provide readers with a flying visit or quick read of *Dying of the Light*. I will sojourn on a few hundred of its pages with two particular interests. First, Burtchaell anticipates that most readers will begin with the church-related schools they know best, then read his final overview chapter, and then compare these chapters to the remaining ones (xi). My interest here will focus on the chapter on the Catholics, with special attention to Jesuit colleges and universities. Although the chapter on Catholics is indeed the longest one in the book, a reading from the viewpoint of other churches would surely yield different lessons. Second, Burtchaell's final paragraph says that it is not the purpose of the book to offer "instruction on how to avoid the failures of the past (and present)." The very movement of the book—from case-studies to limited conclusions about each church, from such conclusions to the final "story within the stories"—leaves lots of room for readers to draw their own conclusions from the stories, or the story. However, Burtchaell also challenges those who might grumble about the book's lack of positive prescription in a concluding sentence that virtually takes back the promise not to offer remedies for avoiding the failures: "Anyone who requires further imagination to recognize and remedy them [the failures] is not up to the task of trying again, and better" (851). And so I will write with an eye to how Burtchaell implies we can try again, and better—even at the risk of eclipsing his primary end.

Burtchaell begins his chapter on the Catholics by noting some distinctive features of Catholic colleges and universities. For example, Catholics have the largest

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number of church-related schools—Burtchaell's list covers five pages (557-561). A more important but "perhaps least obvious" distinction is that Catholic colleges and universities "have always been more independent from church authorities in their governance, finance, and intellectual initiative than any of the other traditions we have studied" (562). In days when the public conversation is dominated by anxiety sprinkled with debate over the *Ex corde ecclesiae* guidelines, Burtchaell's book is noteworthy for its detailed attention to such issues of governance. But it is even more noteworthy for its insistence that such issues of civil and canon law are not central to the story. We could say of issues of legal governance what Burtchaell also contends about interference by churches and economic advantage: they are "sidebars, not the main plot" (828). What, then, is the main plot?

The three "randomly representational" Catholic schools Burtchaell selects are Boston College (Jesuit, urban), the College of New Rochelle (Ursuline, outside New York city, was and in part still is a college for women), and Saint Mary's College of California (Christian Brothers, in the countryside). For all their differences, they have similar stories: beginning with "a mission to provide Catholic education by Catholic teachers for Catholic young men and women," they came to a crisis in the 1960s, and now "can truly be said to thrive." But "[m]ore significant and interesting is the failure of nerve, the deviance of purpose, and the degradation of public discourse which have drawn these schools, severally, to abandon their calling to be ministries of the Catholic church" (563). Thriving yet failing—and worse. How can this be?

Burtchaell takes the case of Boston College to tell a story, nested in a larger story about the Jesuit educational enterprise in the United States. At seventy-plus pages, the story of Boston College is the longest treatment of any university in the book. But I will here be more interested in the nest than the egg. Burtchaell shows Jesuit education, by the 1960s, confronted with several crucial problems. A distinctively Jesuit curriculum was dissolving, especially because of the collapse of the central role

of philosophy and theology. There was massive shrinkage in Jesuit manpower, and some of those who remained thought social activism more important than academic work. "The system of Jesuit obedience" was inhibiting Jesuit institutions, particularly because of "newly intrusive" Vatican attempts to supervise civilly chartered Catholic universities and colleges. Finally, there was "most urgent of all [or so Presidents judged at the time] the threat of being denied federal or state funding because of church control" (590). Presidents ignored the first problem and tried to solve all the others "by a single stroke," persuading the Society of Jesus to "divest

itself of juridical control and management of its American colleges and universities, freeing them to take their rightful place as fully acknowledged peers of other leading independent institutions" (590). They succeeded. The result was stronger Jesuit presidents but weaker Jesuit communities. There was plenty of room for an individual's faith and less for the community's.

Burtchaell's story is not as dialectically neat as this precis suggests. For example, in the early period of flourishing, when classical Jesuit education was criticized as too uniform by advocates of diversification at newly developing research universities, "two modes of advocacy" on behalf of classical Jesuit education developed. Timothy Brosnahan, S.J., President of Boston College (1894-1898) viewed a critic like President Eliot of Harvard as a "bully sponsored by a hostile culture" and gave a truculent, well argued, highly theoretical response to the criticisms of Catholic education. The next President of Boston College, W.G. Read Mullan (1898-1903) was less inclined to enmity with the most prestigious educational institution in the country, and was pragmatically inclined "to put the best face on its faith and to emulate, not to despise, those in influence" (573). It is not necessary to say which of these modes of advocacy emerged victorious in the 1960s. Or, as another example of how Burtchaell's story is not a neat story from better to worse, even as things fell apart in the 1960s there were some prophetically sane voices. In particular, Burtchaell highlights the 1961 call of Robert Harvanek, S.J.—a former

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prefect or regional coordinator for higher education in the Chicago province—for the Society of Jesus to choose between withdrawing from universities, retrenching in a few of the best, or acknowledging them “as trusts owed to their local clientele,” and simply continuing to staff them “as best it could.” No plan was made. Or, as Burtchaell puts it, “[i]n the end the choice was made by no choice being made” (581).

In any case, as Burtchaell moves toward the present, the major options are, seemingly, to despair of the Jesuit light, to celebrate the death of the light with little sense of loss, or to repair the damage. Burtchaell gives examples of each, especially the last. Among what we might call “the repairers” are authors of the myriad documents theorizing about Catholic higher education over the last ten to fifteen years. But Burtchaell thinks that the problem is no longer making *the claim* to Jesuit education—the marketplace, I would say, still makes this essential for most Jesuit colleges and universities. The problem is “to find a faculty of Catholics and Jesuits actively willing to share such a claim” (618). Burtchaell spends time on probably the most prevalent strategy to repair this problem—finding a core, or critical mass of those “sympathetic” to the Catholic tradition to be a sort of “strategic hamlet” for the university. But he is suspicious that such efforts are, at best, the proverbial thumb in the dike. What if (Burtchaell says) we relied only on a faculty who respected teaching but were not master teachers, a critical mass of faculty sympathetic to original scholarship but not themselves scholars, a core of faculty committed to graduate studies but not qualified to direct dissertations, a critical mass of faculty “who took spoken English seriously but had never mastered it” (631)?

This is a good question, to which I shall return. But first it is important to note that the situation may be even worse. Such reparative efforts may disguise the fact that the dike has long been broken. Recruiting Catholic sympathizers may function merely to mask the absence of practicing Catholics. Burtchaell tells a story of select faculty at Boston College coming to agree on three findings: “(1) they wanted BC to be Catholic; (2) only a determined effort to recruit Catholic faculty could bring that about, and (3) they were solidly against such an effort” (625). Burtchaell notes that there are important “critical voices” against such thinking—the recent call, for example, for “accountability” in the documents of the 34th General Congregation—but notes that attempts at something like “Jesuit accreditation will seem no less threatening in the 1990s than they were in the 1960s. This is

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especially so now, when some publicly celebrate the death of the light as “the ‘coming of age’ of Catholicism in this country” (633). If recruiting Catholic sympathizers is not enough and recruiting Catholics has become impossible, then what?

Could it be that Catholics should turn to other, non-Jesuit Catholic colleges and universities as an alternative? Burtchaell offers a summary of “The Catholic Trajectory” that shows the momentum of Jesuit colleges and universities to be an instance of a larger story: Catholic education reaches a manifold crisis in the 1960s, to which a “complex and impulsive response” is given. New presidents seek access to government funding, combined with entrepreneurial expansion into the new market of vocational education. While presidents of Catholic universities bear a great deal of responsibility (according to Burtchaell they are “the most independent, least accountable college presidents in the country” [709]) they are by no means alone. One diagnostician claims that, at one university, “Catholic students would probably have destroyed the viability of the denominational approach . . . regardless of other factors” (710). Burtchaell provides no examples in support of this claim, but it stands as a reminder of the importance of the student vote on this issue. Further, philosophy and theology are benched (or benched themselves), precisely at the moment when “a freshet of young Catholic philosophers and theologians was becoming available” (711). To complicate the issue, all the participants engage in “a rhetoric of fantasy” that evades the many ironies at stake. Liberal arts are claimed at the center exactly at the moment when education for the professions of the nation-state has displaced them. Recruiting Catholics is eschewed just at the time Catholics are increasingly graduating from the best Catholic and non-Catholic universities in the nation. As higher education has fragmented into a medley of mutually re-enforcing autonomies, Catholics celebrate their coming of age by joining the crowd. Most of us (in the cave, as it were) see the darkness, or the flickering light, only when the shades of night are gathering.

Each of Burtchaell’s seven chapters proceeds similarly for each of the churches discussed. So successful is Burtchaell in focusing on the particularities of the stories that some might be surprised that there is such a thing as “the story within the stories.” But, in Burtchaell’s final chapter, a story does indeed arise. It goes something like this. Against those out to restore some more ideal earlier time for church-related colleges and universities,

Burtchaell says that the connection of Church and college in their beginnings (Catholic and Protestant) was “circumstantial and indirect.” Precisely because of the indirect and circumstantial links, when the financial and social demand for autonomy came, the disestablishment project could take on the appearance of reform from within. College presidents initially played a central role, and anyone tempted to think Boards of Trustees are marginal should study the ways in this book that presidents and boards persistently out-wait students, and out-smart faculty. But the breakaway from legal governance had no single pattern. Strong and weak: Christian colleges and universities have waxed and waned under a number of different juridical arrangements. Parenthetically, I take it that readers can conclude that, if issues of legal control are a sidebar and not the main plot, Jesuit abandonment of juridical control was bad *Realpolitik* (perhaps because it tried to solve the web of problems mentioned above “at a single stroke”) but not the death of the light—unless combined with the other factors Burtchaell mentions. This conclusion would not have to deny the humor Burtchaell finds in an Order that gave up legal control of its institutions—but then went on to register “Jesuit” as a legal trademark (605)!

In any case, chief among non-juridical factors was the fact (so Burtchaell concludes) that “the faculty was the first constituency to lose interest in their colleges being Lutheran or Catholic or Congregational” (828-29). Colleges gradually transferred their identities “from Church to Nation and Guild” (835 *ff.*). “The church has compliantly withdrawn to an impotent distance, while civil authorities at every level now make no apology for imposing their laws and regulations on zoning, gender and ethnic imperatives for enrollment, occupational safety, hiring and faculty appointments, the positioning of chapels, the array of varsity sports, *et cetera*” (834)—even as many academics still talk as if they and their disciplines were free from influence by such political incidentals. The Guild is really (Burtchaell sometimes suggests) a medley of disciplines offering a medley of courses taught by faculty members with “an education that might include very little of the history, philosophy, and theology required to give them a disciplined perspective on their own scholarly pursuits” (836).

It would be interesting to know how deep such criticisms of higher education (church-related or not) go. Certainly it is a central presumption of this book that Christian higher education needs to be deeply critical of the culture’s colleges and universities. “Let’s come of age”

becomes the juvenile “Everyone’s doing it”—a mode of protest that subverts itself. Yet Burtchaell’s criticisms of the Academy do not go as deep as those of some of the Mennonite, Mormon, Quaker, or Seventh Day Adventist schools he knows he has left out—the study of which, he says, “may have been even more interesting” (x). Burtchaell clearly cherishes colleges’ and universities’ commitment to master teaching and original scholarship. His complaint is less about the Academy than about the Nation whose bureaucratic impositions make teaching and scholarship more rather than less difficult—a Nation whose impositions the Academy of teachers and scholars accepts with less wariness and criticism than we accept those of the churches. Burtchaell, I suggest, calls us to be something like what Michael Walzer, in *Interpretation and Social Criticism* (Harvard, 1987) calls an “internal critic” rather than an “external critic” of the academy—more like one of the classical prophets, criticizing his own people, than prophets like Jonah, criticizing those in a foreign land. Burtchaell is clearly more interested in the mainstream than “sectarian” tributaries.

But we might wonder how many of the foibles of higher education issue from external mandata of the Nation, and how many from the collapse of the Academy into its own variety of strategic intellectual hamlets. For example, David Kelsey’s *Between Athens and Berlin* (Eerdmans, 1993) describes “the theological education debate” as a debate between *paideia* (roughly, character formation aimed at knowledge of the Good) and *Wissenschaft* (roughly, disciplined research for professional life in the democratic nation-state). I wonder if some such tension or contradiction could not be expanded to apply to other fields in the university, explaining why the Nation’s bureaucracies have been able to invade an academy already divided against itself. And, if the Academy is thus divided against itself more than Burtchaell sometimes seems to think, the suggestion that we repair the damage via strategic hamlets of teachers and researchers sounds quite reasonable—as,

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then, might the tactic of cultivating critical masses of Catholics and their sympathizers. That is, if the Academy is divided against itself between *paideia* and *Wissenschaft* and if we choose the path of the internal rather than external critic, developing hamlets of faculty who combine *paideia* and *Wissenschaft* in innovative ways seems reasonable—although it will seem hopelessly utopian to those who aspire only to *paideia* or *Wissenschaft*, or to those who have despaired of both. In any case, before we can “try again, and better” we need to know more about how to negotiate these issues.

Whether the strategic hamlet strategy can work not only for teachers and scholars but also for Catholics and their sympathizers will depend on how we diagnose the diseases of the Church rather than of the Nation or the Academy. Indeed, despite what the previous paragraphs might suggest, Burtchaell does not put the primary responsibility for the dying of the light on a “secular” academy out to kill the light, or let it die. There is even a stalwart minority of that secular culture that will resist the light’s own Nation-assisted suicide, and Burtchaell periodically makes their case part of his own. But, again and again, Burtchaell insists that Christians have dug their own graves. The label he comes to give the digging is “the Pietist instability” (838) that seeped into colleges and churches, Protestant and then Catholic. For those unfamiliar with the label, it is important to know that “Pietism” is common parlance among intellectual historians for seventeenth century Protestant movements against the supposed rationalism of the “Protestant Scholasticism”—a Scholasticism that, in turn, arose after the sixteenth century Reformation. Pietism was, it is sometimes rightly said, a “[seventeenth century] reformation of the [sixteenth century] Reformation.” It aimed to transpose alienating public doctrine and institutions into consoling private affections and individual faith. This explains why the best place to see Pietism at work in Burtchaell’s book is less in the chapter on Catholics than in a flying visit to the

non-Catholic churches Burtchaell analyzes. For example, Congregationalist “polity, from the late sixteenth century, has denied that it is acceptable or even possible for them to engage as a community in a defining exploration of their faith” (99). Again, the “Baptist doctrine of the church held that Christian conversion was what the individual, converted believer brought to the church rather than what he or she was invited into the church to share” (437).

Thus, one characteristic of Pietism in such churches is that it explores the faith of individuals rather than of a community. Further, Burtchaell agrees with Marsden’s and Longfield’s claim about Presbyterian higher education that “the key factor in the secularization of church-related colleges seems to lie in the realm of ideas”—the victory of affect over assent, of spirituality and social justice (Catholics might say) over theology. Similarly, Methodist colleges (Burtchaell judges) “were not an intellectual project” (329)—“they wanted their students’ souls, not their minds” (330). Individuals abstracted from or barely attached to community, practice with a minimum of theology, affect with suspicion of intellect—such are some characteristics of Pietism. And many Catholics have become “card-carrying pietists” nowadays (835).

Even further, both colleges and churches are jointly responsible for the dying of the light. But “[Pietism’s] self-destructive pathology arose first within the churches, not within the colleges” (847; my emphasis). Just as Burtchaell’s book is not a tale of a secular academy out to destroy Christian colleges and universities, so it is not a story of colleges that set out to destroy their relationship to their churches. Non-academic Christians (whether bishops or lay or religious) can take no greater self-righteous delight in Burtchaell’s story than academic Christians (whether teachers or students or administrators). If Burtchaell is right, we can add this to his litany of ironies: ingesting the Pietism of the churches, church-related colleges found the warrant for distancing themselves from those same churches.

Burtchaell is, once again, right on track—or so I think. So much for theological dissent: at the precise spot colleges and universities should have been dissenting from their churches, they submitted intellect and will and institution. Nonetheless, I am not sure “Pietism” is the best label for the confluence of Christianly anti-intellectual forces that Burtchaell narrates and analyzes in such amazing detail. It works well for Protestant colleges and universities but less so for Catholic ones. I am

not denying that there is such a phenomenon as Catholic Pietism. In fact, I think Burtchaell is right to see such Pietism as the real culprit behind what is usually called ecclesial, episcopal, or papal interference. It is not that Burtchaell wants to deny such interference, even if it is not part of the main plot. But the real root (Burtchaell hints) of much such interference is a kind of Pietism that simply cannot understand faith seeking understanding, communally and institutionally. Speaking of an intrusive Cardinal of the Sacred Congregation of Seminaries and Universities in the 1950s and 1960s, Burtchaell writes, “[k]nowledgeable observers [from within Catholic universities] were aware that the Cardinal’s own intellectual gifts were not such as would have gained him admission to any of their institutions had he applied” (588). And the Pietism label also works for those Catholics who lead the disestablishment charge by uniting church and academy “within themselves but not within their institutions” (ix)—pious presidents or board members, faculty or students who erect a wall of separation between their personal piety and institutional embodiment.

But the issues at stake are not only Pietism’s individualism versus more communitarian (churchly) understandings of the faith. There are as well competing communitarianisms. (This awkward word is mine, not Burtchaell’s.) This, again, is one of those places we need to know more to try again, and better. For example, it is not clear to me that by book’s end there is much left of the general project of “Christian” churches or higher education in the book’s sub-title. All along Burtchaell diagnoses problems in Protestant colleges and universities as rooted in various seventeenth-century Pietisms, even as he distinguishes Pietism’s reform from the classical, sixteenth-century Reformers. But by the book’s concluding chapter Burtchaell judges that the “radical disjunction between divine knowledge and human knowledge” is central to “classical [sixteenth-century] Reformation thinking” in contrast to “the older pre-Reformation [i.e., Catholic] view” (842), although the chapters on individual churches seem more hopeful about some Lutheran and Evangelical schools than about their Congregational, Presbyterian, or Methodist brothers and sisters. This diagnosis is surely preferable to an ecumenical irenicism that avoids substantive oppositions among Christian churches. And the “radical disjunction between divine knowledge and human knowledge” articulates a deep problem with the likes of Luther and Calvin. But it is not the whole story—and neither is

the suggestion that “the older pre-Reformation view” did not have its own such disjunctions. The fact is that our modern and/or postmodern circumstances raise issues that neither Catholics nor Protestants have previously faced—and that both may well have distinctive resources for addressing. But my point here is not to pursue the technicalities of ecumenical theology. My point is to suggest that the Catholic university needs to be a site where competing Christian communitarianisms are lived and debated. Burtchaell would, I take it, agree. But we need to know more about how Christians with competing conjunctions, or disjunctions, between divine and human knowledge can do this.

Learning (or re-learning) from Israel how to be a particular people amidst the nations—a *theologically* strategic hamlet, if you will—would be a good start. But the fact that some Catholics would find an allusion to the Jewish community in an essay on Christian education strange is a reminder that my point about competing communitarianisms (not just individualistic Pietisms) applies closer to home: other examples of competing communitarianisms are found within the Catholic community itself. There are, of course, what students of Catholic life and thought will recognize as modernizers and Americanists among us—as there are integralists and ultramontanes. But then there are the rest of us—on the faculty, in the student body, on boards of trustees, in student life and campus ministry. And we disagree, both within our bureaucratic classes (faculty and student and administrator) and between them. “Dynamic membership in the Catholic communion,” Burtchaell says, “is a primary professional qualification for any academic on a Catholic campus, and any campus whose faculty disclaims the capacity, the interest, or even the legitimacy of appraising this along with other credentials is as out of place as a paraplegic in a fire department” (713).

I agree that the best of the next generation of Catholic colleges and universities will be those that successfully recruit as faculty, among others, the best Catholic graduates of the best graduate programs. This will become increasingly clear as interested Catholic parents and students notice the growing number of strategic hamlets for Catholics on several excellent non-Catholic campuses. However, if Catholics led Catholic education into this mess (and Burtchaell makes a good case that this was so), what has changed to make Burtchaell think that there are good Catholics to be hired to lead us out of it?

The problem that needs more exploration is one Burtchaell himself, not surprisingly, notices. Catholics have yet to figure out how to handle what Burtchaell rightly calls that “internal dissent and criticism” that “burst forth with pent-up force in the late 1950s” (707); in still other words, we have barely begun to learn (as John Paul II put it in his first encyclical) to be critical even of our self-criticisms. In such circumstances, I know of no better tactic than theologically strategic hamlets, dedicated to embodying the best of our self-criticisms in our personal as well as professional lives.

But I should finally admit that this defense of theologically strategic hamlets, even if there were time and space to fill it out with concrete detail, could well be whistling in the dark. If “internal dissent and criticism” is not a severe problem, then the strategy of theologically strategic hamlets is tantamount to self-marginalization (much as, if the Academy is not divided against itself, academically strategic hamlets will be acts of intellectual despair). But there may also be a deeper worry. As Burtchaell argues that Catholic colleges and universities have abandoned their calling to be ministries of the Catholic church, he leaves us to wonder “whether—and in what sense—the drive for self-survival is, as the anthropologists tell us, our most basic instinct, if the *who* or the *what* threatened is not the *who* or the *what* that survives” (563). Could the dying of the light be the death we want, even under the mask of survival and flourishing? Like many of Burtchaell’s unanswered questions, this one is deep. It would lead us eventually to Jesus’ crucifixion. But that will have to be a matter for another day. I hope it is clear that my criticisms of Burtchaell’s book are mere quibbles—at least quibbles compared with the *status quo* that will surely resist his indictment. We need to know more than Burtchaell says to see how to try again, and better. But Burtchaell’s book will be, I hope, the epic of that future sojourn.