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## The Evangelical Mind Revisited

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On May 21, 2005, President George W. Bush delivered the commencement address at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan. For both Mr. Bush and the college, the event seemed a no-brainer. As candidate and as president, George W. Bush had developed a reputation for paying close attention to the concerns of the conservative evangelical Protestants who cement his political base. And few institutions of higher learning seemed to fit the “conservative Christian” profile better than Calvin. While not a fundamentalist college in the sense of Bob Jones or Liberty University, Calvin’s long association with the Christian Reform Church marked it as an institution strongly shaped by its faith commitments. Many of America’s leading evangelical scholars teach (or have taught) there, and its provost, Joel Carpenter, wrote a relatively sympathetic history of American fundamentalism. The president’s visit should have been a meeting of the minds.

Yet Mr. Bush’s visit to Calvin was hardly smooth. One-third of the Calvin faculty endorsed a letter protesting the president’s policies—especially in Iraq—and also his relative indifference to the plight of the poor. Another protest letter signed by 800 students, alumni, and friends of the college asked the president to “repudiate the false claims of supporters who say that those who oppose your policies are the enemies of religion.” Despite these grievances, Mr. Bush was respectfully received at Calvin. (The same, I hasten to add, was true for me when I spoke on the same campus five months before Mr. Bush.) But the event made clear that not all faith-based colleges in the United States are filled with loyal Republicans pleased by America’s recent turn to the political right.

Calvin might be perceived as exceptional among conservative Protestant institutions of higher learning. The Dutch thinkers who influenced its development, especially the theologian Abraham Kuyper, took very seriously the life of the mind in ways that set them apart from anti-intellectualism, a long-lived characteristic of the religious right. Yet what took place at Calvin was not that different from developments at other conservative religious institutions.

In American national politics, opposition to gay marriage is a core conviction of the religious right, but at Baylor University, in Waco, Texas, an institution long known for its close adherence to Baptist teachings, the student newspaper endorsed gay marriage in 2004. (Baylor's president was appalled.) The 2003 decision by Illinois' Wheaton College to permit on-campus dancing may seem trivial in comparison, but for Wheaton—Billy Graham's alma mater, as well as that of Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert and former Bush speechwriter Michael Gerson—it was a significant and controversial step into a brave new world in which once-established Christian verities are giving way to new sociological realities.

Wheaton, Baylor, and Calvin are all institutions featured in "The Opening of the Evangelical Mind," a 2001 cover story I wrote for *The Atlantic Monthly*. In that essay, I tried to show that many liberal stereotypes about faith-based colleges were wildly out of date. Fed a steady diet of Elmer Gantry and *Inherit the Wind*, cosmopolitan inhabitants of places such as New York and Boston are likely to treat evangelicals as hopelessly backward clingers to creationism and scriptural literalism. They believe that if conservative Christians go to college at all, the institutions they attend are little better than degree mills flavored with faith—places where dogma and revealed truth replace logic and open-minded discussion.

Such stereotypes might once have been true, I argued, but conservative Christians today are not like they were yesterday. No longer confined to the rural regions of the country, evangelicals attend megachurches in exurban America, work as mid-level professionals in large corporations, and have upwardly mobile aspirations for their children. For them, college is an opportunity to be welcomed rather than an iniquity to be denounced. The published faculty at Calvin and Wheaton are as distinguished as the prospective students who clamor to get in; the SAT scores among Wheaton's entering classes rival those at some of America's most prestigious secular institutions. You do not attend Calvin or Wheaton—or, for that matter, other first-rate schools such as Westmont in California, Gordon in Massachusetts, or Seattle Pacific University—to imbibe intelligent design or to read the Bible rather than Emily Dickinson. I contend that the protests at Calvin and the refusal to condemn once frowned-upon behavior at Baylor and Wheaton as sinful suggest just how far these institutions have moved away from fundamentalist pieties.

Five years after I wrote my article, the issues I raised are worth revisiting. Because we have a president who owes so much of his success to both his own religious convictions and those of his followers, evangelicalism's role in American public life is especially prominent these days. At the same time, the modernizing changes sweeping through conservative American Protestantism have continued unabated. Instead of Bible-thumping preachers, we have pastors such as Rick Warren—whose book, *The Purpose-Driven Life*, has sold 25 million copies—engaged in highly visible actions designed to relieve the sufferings of AIDS-afflicted Rwandans, while the influential National Association of Evangelicals has made questions of global warming and environmental protection central to its concerns.

Will conservative Christian colleges and universities continue to move toward the mainstream of American life? Should they? And what will happen to their institutions of higher learning if they do? Colleges exist as the pivotal point between youth and adulthood. Given how many believers

there are in this country, the ways conservative Christian colleges respond to the world around them will tell us a great deal about the kind of country America is likely to be 30 or even 20 years from now.

### **In the World but Not of It?**

Not all conservative Christians are happy with the mainstreaming of their colleges and universities. George Marsden, an outstanding Notre Dame historian, is among the top-notch academics who once taught at Calvin College. He has worried aloud that, in their determination to become top-tier institutions, places such as Calvin might lose the religious character that have contributed so much to their identity. Marsden reminds the readers of his book, *The Soul of the American University*, that Ivy League institutions once had religious missions that have been supplanted for the sake of academic prestige.

Catholic universities have followed a similar trajectory, according to Fr. James Burtchaell, C.S.C., Notre Dame's former provost. Christian colleges should be wary of achieving worldly success, he argues, if it comes at the cost of what he calls "the dying of the light." Burtchaell is particularly upset at my own institution, Boston College, in which, as he writes, the Jesuits "no longer offer a Catholic wisdom cogent enough to nucleate a faculty intellectually and lead it in a critical judgment of cultures near and far."

For those strongly committed to the idea that Christian colleges should stand against the seductions of American culture, there is an alternative. As institutions such as Calvin and Wheaton edge closer to the mainstream, others become more deeply committed to the old-time religion and the arch-conservative politics that accompany it. "Why should I pay a hundred thousand dollars to have someone attack me and my child for four years?" asks Mike Faris, a parent who home-schooled his children, then presided over the Home School Legal Defense Fund, and finally founded Patrick Henry College in Purcellville, Virginia, in 1999. Patrick Henry, featured in a *New Yorker* article by Hannah Rosin and in Naomi Schaefer Riley's *God on the Quad*—a sympathetic treatment of America's religious colleges and universities—emphasizes a Great Books education, offers its students what it calls "an authentic Christian environment," and understands its mission more as propagating pre-established truths than as encouraging students to think. If students were ever to watch *Inherit the Wind* at Patrick Henry, there is no doubting whose lines they would applaud.

Evangelicals are not the only ones creating colleges and universities determined to recreate an intensely Christian subculture. Fed up with Catholic institutions that downplay their religious identity, Thomas Monaghan, founder of Domino's Pizza, is using his considerable wealth to create Ave Maria University in Naples, Florida. "As a Catholic institution of higher education dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, our patroness," writes dean of faculty Michael A. Dauphinais, "we know that her Son, Jesus Christ, is the divine Teacher who opens our minds and hearts to the fullness of Truth." Mormons, who already have Brigham Young University (BYU), have now established another even more conservative university, Southern Virginia University in Buena Vista, Virginia, which attracts students by emphasizing stricter, and far less politically correct, rules of conduct

than those found at BYU. Unlike Brigham Young, Southern Virginia's code of conduct does not condemn gender stereotyping, and it goes beyond praising chastity to forbid "all forms of sexual intimacy outside of Church-recognized, lawful married relationships, including necking, petting, and excessive public displays of affection."

In a system of higher education as diverse as the one in the United States, there will be a niche for every taste, including those parents who want their children to be taught fundamental religious truths and exposed to traditional standards of moral conduct. Yet while they are likely to get those things at Patrick Henry or Southern Virginia, those institutions are anything but throwbacks to the days when fundamentalists set themselves apart from the rest of America out of the conviction that the world outside the church was hopelessly decadent. Patrick Henry, for example, is as committed to advancing the cause of conservative politics as it is to inculcating the faith. Its students recently beat Oxford University in a debate, and a disproportionately large number of its graduates have gone to work in the Washington conservative establishment, including the White House.

As impressive as such success may be, however, it constitutes success on secularism's terms: these are careers, not confessions, we are talking about. American fundamentalists have historically been wary of political involvement; faith represented what Roger Williams described as the pure "garden" of conviction, not the corrupt "wilderness" of power.

But Patrick Henry's turf lies in the wilderness rather than the garden; it is located firmly in this world, not in some spiritual other world in which the Lord, and not George W. Bush, looks into your heart. Interning at the White House is hardly the kind of behavior one would associate with Christians who believe that human beings will not be reformed until Jesus returns to earth after the Apocalypse. Because politics drive their mission as much as faith, institutions such as Patrick Henry are not as divorced from secular America as they sometimes present themselves to be.

Their proponents often agree with their secularist enemies that between the life of the mind and the life of faith, one has to make a choice: if you commit yourself to intellectual openness and scientific inquiry, you must give up dogma. So the hard-right Christians attracted to a school such as Patrick Henry believe that if you want to maintain the eternal verities, you have to sacrifice everything that is "liberal" in liberal education. Classes at Patrick Henry may be demanding—one does not become good at debate without logic and rigor—but the students who take them nonetheless have a depressing tendency to hue to a party line. When Hannah Rosin attended a political science class there, she could not find one student willing to entertain the proposition that their beloved George W. Bush might be following Machiavelli's advice to lie to the public. It is as if the Patrick Henry community understands that an open mind is as incompatible with faith-based politics as it is with faith itself.

Those attracted to newly created conservative Christian schools believe that their institutions need to resist the temptation to join the mainstream; for them, a Gordon or a Calvin striving to win academic respectability has lost its way. Yet in some ways, the older evangelical colleges that have been willing to open themselves up to the life of the mind are more countercultural than the

modern ones that represent intentionally created conservative communities. At a school like Patrick Henry, Christianity is likely to be viewed as a way to promote the fortunes of the Republican Party, but at a Westmont or a Wheaton, students are asked what role their Christian faith should play in promoting social justice. This allows for more open discussion and dialogue and in that sense is closer to the mainstream academic ideal. But precisely because they are more open, these older institutions are also more authentically Christian. They encourage their students to develop a living faith, rather than one taught by rote, that grows by responding to the challenges of the real world in which it exists.

Patrick Henry, by contrast, is not only dogmatic in an intellectual sense, it is closed-minded in a spiritual sense. There, religious truth does not grow out of deep reflection and curiosity about how the world works so much as it conforms to pre-established talking points. A good debater and a deep believer are not the same thing: one craves certainty, while the other is moved by mystery. In the United States today, where conservative politicians dominate all the institutions of government, Patrick Henry resonates with the dominant culture. In the English departments of Calvin or Wheaton, students reading Flannery O'Connor or Herman Melville do not.

## **All God's Children**

Moving to the mainstream is not without problems for evangelical colleges. As they come to resemble four-year colleges that, however religious their origin, are now primarily secular, they will have to deal with the same issues Amherst and Pomona are facing.

Among them is the problem of diversity. Evangelical Protestantism does not have an attractive history when it comes to issues involving race. Evangelicalism flourished in the South; it borrowed from, and also helped sustain, the racial bigotry dominant in that region of the country. Pentecostalism, for example, began as a genuinely biracial religion in the early years of the 20th century, but as it met the realities of segregation, it split into white and black branches.

Baptists, America's largest Protestant denomination and far and away the most important religion in the South, also split along racial lines. Some recent historians have demonstrated that not all white Christians were bitter segregationists and that the language of Christ was used in the South by whites as well as blacks to promote racial justice. Still, there is no doubt that the South's religion did little to combat the legacy of Southern intolerance.

But even though the fact barely registers on the radar screens of many liberals, white evangelicals have been taking dramatic steps to overcome their segregationist past. Rallies sponsored by Promise Keepers, the parachurch movement that appeals to men to renounce their sins, are more racially integrated than faculty meetings at Stanford or MIT, and multiculturalism is as likely to be celebrated at a typical evangelical megachurch as it is at Wesleyan or UC-Santa Cruz. The reason is simple: contemporary American evangelicalism is extraordinarily diverse. African Americans are strongly attracted to Pentecostal and evangelical forms of worship; increasing numbers of Hispanics have left their Catholicism behind to be born again; and Asian immigrants, primarily from Korea and China, have fueled evangelical growth from California to Massachusetts.

Yet despite all this ferment, America's evangelical colleges are not diverse institutions by any stretch of the imagination. Fuller Seminary in Pasadena, California, which trains more evangelical clergy than any other institution in the United States, is stunningly multicultural, but its success in this area has not been matched by undergraduate institutions. Only about 2 percent of Wheaton students are African American, for example, compared to 8 percent at Earlham and 7 percent at Oberlin, similar but non-evangelical Midwestern institutions. Among universities, Baylor has a relatively robust African-American percentage (6 percent), but it is still lower than at nearby public universities such as the University of Houston (15 percent) or the University of Tulsa (8 percent).

One reason why evangelical colleges lag behind secular ones in their ability to attract a racially diverse student body may be because of their relative lack of religious diversity.

Compared to the fundamentalism out of which many of these schools grew, they have opened themselves up to the life of the mind. Yet with some exceptions—Baylor is one—they insist that all faculty and students sign statements of evangelical faith. Wheaton's for example, requires them to believe that "God has revealed Himself and His truth in the created order, in the Scriptures, and supremely in Jesus Christ; and that the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are verbally inspired by God and inherent in the original writing, so that they are fully trustworthy and of supreme and final authority in all they say."

No Catholic, Jew, Muslim, or agnostic could sign such a statement—and none, short of those who have had a born-again experience, do. At schools such as these, selective measures are developed to decide who gets in, but equal time—far more than in secular institutions—is dedicated to the question of whom to keep out.

Faculty and administrators at these schools defend faith statements on the grounds that they protect and nurture community; because we have a shared mission, they like to point out, one will not find among us the groundless anomie and lack of direction associated with more secular institutions. That may be true, but community and diversity represent different values, and frequently one must choose between them. All too often, evangelical colleges prize the former over the latter. By their very nature, statements of faith are designed to defend against religious diversity. That is one reason I object to them; they smack of religious bigotry and suggest a lack of appreciation for academic freedom. But there is something else wrong with statements of faith: they manifest a defensiveness that is one of conservative Christianity's less attractive features.

Here, I believe, evangelical colleges have much to learn from Catholic universities such as Boston College (BC) or the Jewish Brandeis. Each of these schools worries about losing its religious identity, since each has become remarkably successful, and success brings with it faculty and students who at BC have never been to mass and at Brandeis read their e-mail on Yom Kippur. For those who grew up in a world of strong religious attachments, the increasing religious diversity at BC or Brandeis represents a serious loss of community. Yet both BC and Brandeis recognize that in today's world, religion has gone from being an ascribed status to an achieved one; more and more Americans choose their religious identity rather than having it chosen for them.

In today's world, religious diversity is a fact of life, and the only choice for a college or university grounded in one faith is to open its doors to others. No doubt it will, in the process, lose some of the communal understandings that once informed it. But it will gain in return a religious identity made stronger by being exposed to, and having to defend itself against, other claims to truth, wisdom, justice, or the spirit. The community protected by faith statements at evangelical colleges can be a stifling one because it is so closed to challenge and disagreement.

Does the lack of religious diversity at evangelical colleges contribute to the lack of racial diversity? In theory, it should not. Faith statements say nothing about race and in that sense should attract anyone who subscribes to the faith in question, irrespective of skin color. But in practice, faith statements reinforce a history of appealing to particular communities, particular high schools, and particular churches, which is not the way to bring to campus those who might offer fresh perspectives shaped by backgrounds and upbringings different from those of the Christian students typically attracted to these schools. Diversity, unlike tap water, cannot easily be turned on or have its temperature adjusted.

But this is what evangelical colleges and universities are trying to do. They want students from many racial backgrounds to attend so they learn to speak in the language of diversity, but they also want to preserve their particular religious identity so they also speak in the language of uniformity. Because evangelical Christianity is itself so multiracial, colleges that speak in its name ought to be more diverse than secular ones. But because they lack sufficient appreciation for diversity in all its aspects—religious and intellectual, as well as racial and ethnic—they fall behind secular institutions in their ability to bring together students from a wide variety of backgrounds.

## **The Truth and the Light**

One other significant challenge faces evangelical institutions determined to take seriously the life of the mind: they have to make a decision about truth. This ought not to be a problem for them, since serious Christians do not think that their views about God's existence are just matters of opinion. They are convinced that claims of faith are truth claims. Indeed, one of the main gripes conservative Christians have about secularists is their presumed moral relativism, their unwillingness to say flat out that certain things are true (or good or just), and other things are not.

Yet a funny thing happened to the conservative Christian approach to truth over the past few years: it met post-modernism. Given its appeal to the left, post-modernism should not have won that many friends in the conservative Christian world. But persuaded that believing Christians were a victimized minority and in that sense not different from women or African Americans, conservative Christian scholars began to endorse the notion of viewpoint discrimination. The dominant paradigms in the academic world were hostile to their claims, they charged. Christians read Stanley Fish in great gulps and were convinced that the liberalism to which modern universities subscribed was an ideology unreceptive to any potential challenges, including those offered by religion.

Perspectivism—the notion that we all see the world through the lens of our standpoint—came to

their rescue. Throughout much of the United States, conservative Christians never stopped fighting their war against Darwinism. But they have changed the language they use to promote their faith-based understanding of human creation. Evolution, they claim, is just a theory. So is intelligent design, the latest manifestation of the argument in favor of God's role in human creation. Fairness, runs the next step in the argument, means that both points of view should be taught, much the same way Stanley Fish's colleague Gerald Graff argued that controversies over the interpretation of texts should be taught. The goal is religious while the means are liberal—even secular.

But modern science is not perspectivist: some truth claims have the weight of scientific evidence behind them, and some do not. If they are to maintain themselves as serious centers of intellectual inquiry, evangelical colleges need to find ways to allow their science departments to continue to teach real science. These issues reached a boiling point at Baylor, resulting in the firing of William Dembski, an intelligent design theorist, and the closing down of a center he had been hired to direct. Other schools, such as Wheaton, do teach intelligent design but to only non-science majors. Movements sympathetic to intelligent design are growing in parts of the country where evangelicals congregate, and as they do, conservative Christian colleges are likely to find themselves torn between the communities from which they receive their students and the desire of faculty to keep the scientific respectability they have gained. Any lingering sympathies toward post-modernism are not likely to help them resolve the problem.

As an event like the anti-Bush protest at Calvin College signifies, conservative Protestant colleges and universities have become too varied and interesting to pigeonhole into the categories of America's culture war. They can no longer be caricatured as simpleminded defenders of the old-time religion and hostile to reason, any more than secular colleges can be characterized as globally hostile to religion and traditional moral values. All institutions of higher learning have responsibilities to both the intellectual and moral formation of the students who attend them. Evangelicals may strike the balance one way while more secular colleges will strike it another, but both struggle to find a livable equilibrium.

To be sure, conservative Christian colleges have their problems, but theirs are America's problems. There no longer is as wide a gap between Wheaton College in Illinois and Wheaton College in Massachusetts as there once was, any more than the differences between red and blue states are as stark and simple as they sometimes seem—and that, for the future of both higher education and the United States, is a good thing indeed.