Prejudice, Pride, and Sectarian Schools

Benjamin McArthur

"Which do you mean?" and turning round, he looked for a moment at Elizabeth, till catching her eye, he withdrew his own and coldly said, "She is tolerable; but not handsome enough to tempt me."[1] The dismissive sniff of Jane Austen's Mr. Darcy may seem far removed from contemporary American higher education. But I think the dynamic between Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet may help us think about the relationship between the secular academy and sectarian higher education. "Tolerable, but not handsome enough to bother with": that might be said to encapsulate much of elite university opinion regarding their religious counterparts. For their part, sectarian institutions sometimes display the sort of reflexive pride and resentment toward the educational establishment that Austen's Elizabeth might, with some embarrassment, recognize.

Religion's influence on American higher education goes back to its very beginning. Clearly, without a variety of sponsoring church denominations, American colleges would have developed later and in a much different manner. Through the middle of the nineteenth century, those few Americans who were college-educated became so primarily because of institutions begun by a church or a group of religiously committed laymen. The accepted narrative of American educational history confirms this story of origins, but then goes on in Whiggish fashion to celebrate the gradual emancipation of teaching and scholarship from sectarian constraints. In this telling, religious elements of college learning are bothersome vestiges of an earlier evolutionary stage. The more advanced the school, the fewer such relics litter the campus. Our most distinguished institutions seem to give proof to this theory: several of the Ivies, as well as Vanderbilt, Emory, Duke, and Davidson, just to mention a few of the worthies from my region of the country. Historical ties to the Methodist or Presbyterian or whatever denomination often referenced in university catalogs are freely admitted, being now so meaningless and unthreatening.

Well, I represent the throwback, the institution firmly mired in the La Brea tar pits of American education. Mine is a particularly well-preserved example of the Pleistocene-era species. Southern Adventist University exhibits most of

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the once-common traits of religious colleges: required chapels and religion classes, various behavioral injunctions, and religious qualifications for faculty. "A School of Standards," it has styled itself for some 70 years, a phrase charged with both lifestyle and theological meaning for Seventh-day Adventists. The institution is tightly held by the church structure. Not only are *most* of the board of trustees members of the Adventist Church, *every* member of the board must be. Likewise, every full-time faculty member must be a member, an unusual demand even for evangelical schools.

I wish to offer some unsystematic reflections on the relationship of sectarian and secular in higher education. I argue for the continued utility of Christian higher education. But I must also frankly admit the educational costs imposed by commitment to a theological confession. Requiring faculty members, for example, to be baptized members of the church does in fact restrict the available talent pool. There are no free lunches here.

I

Southern Adventist University began, as did so many denominational colleges, as a secondary training school in the 1890s. Founded in Graysville, Tennessee, it moved to its current location in 1916, becoming Southern Junior College; it made the transition to a baccalaureate institution, Southern Missionary College, in 1944; most recently it finished its ascent up the ladder of higher education by styling itself Southern Adventist University, replete with various graduate programs. It is now a school of some 2,200 undergraduates, approximately 70 percent of whom are residential.

Revisiting our college catalog and other publications from the 1920s and 1930s takes one back to a truly simpler day that we may quietly envy. In the 1930s the school proudly announced its "Good English" weeks, dedicated to encouraging correct English usage. Another news item from the period noted the recent acquisition of books for the college library, reassuring church constituents that every title suited "a school of standards." Dress was likewise scrutinized. Parents and students were provided detailed specifications about women's dress length. Dresses were to reach one-third of the distance from the knee to the floor (in stocking feet). Inspections occurred not just at the beginning of fall term but also in the middle of the year, this because "all wash dresses shrink appreciably when laundered, and in addition to this, many students gain either in weight or height sufficiently to make necessary this further inspection." It was thoughtfully suggested that wash dresses be made with hems capable of being let out. Each fall a day of school would be devoted to harvest ingathering, soliciting funds among the community for missions (a practice not discontinued until the early 1980s). Dedication to purpose left little time for vacation. In 1930 a publication announced that Southern Junior College held no classes on Christmas or the two days following, most students staying on campus for the brief holiday.

The young senior college enjoyed its 15 minutes of fame in 1956 when *Reader's Digest* ran a feature on the school's work-study program, "The School with a Built-in Pocketbook," it was termed. Students, in fact, did typically earn a significant portion of their tuition, an opportunity rarely available for private college students today.

The world intrudes rather more these decades. Our campus is no longer safely removed from the encroachments of suburban Chattanooga, and, in any event, virtually every student has access to a car. Where in past years Saturday night lyceums or skating parties (though not dances) brought together most of the campus, now on Saturday nights the dorm parking lots empty and Student Association officers struggle to find events their peers will attend. Moreover, the blandishments of materialism wield the same insidious influence on Christian campuses as anywhere else. The school must constantly remind itself and its students that it exists as a countercultural institution, not primarily as an adjunct to the world.

"I have an excessive regard for Jane Bennet," Darcy remarked, "she is really a very sweet girl and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it"(31). I encountered some Darcys early in my academic career. For example, when I informed my dissertation advisor, an esteemed historian at the University of Chicago, that I would be joining the faculty at Southern Missionary College in Tennessee, he looked thoughtful for a moment, then consoled, "Well, take the job, and in a few years we'll look into finding you a real position." Later, in my first year or two of teaching, I was at a history convention and happened to be introduced to a notable historian of the South who taught at McNeese State University. I gave my affiliation, to which he remarked, "Is that the best job you could get?" (This, with no apparent recognition that McNeese State hardly constituted the Tulane of Louisiana higher education.) One last war story. Some 15 years ago I was involved in research on Robert Hutchins and general education at the University of Chicago. I applied for an NEH summer research stipend and was turned down. Curious as to the reasons, I exercised my option to see the referees' comments. One reader spoke highly of the project and my scholarly fitness for undertaking it; nonetheless he had to advise against my receiving the grant, judging that someone from an institution such as mine has little chance of completing a major project. This reader clearly was thinking of Darcy's admonition, "In a country neighborhood you move in a very confined and unvarying society," (38) a prejudice that is obviously alive and well in the halls of academia.

It would be a self-pitying delusion, however, to attribute either my own modest scholarly attainment or the shortcomings of sectarian colleges primarily to secular bias. To mix my literary metaphors: "The fault, dear Brutus, often lies in ourselves." I can't speak authoritatively about other religious institutions, but I suspect many of the same tendencies of my school can be found else-where. Such as: a willingness to forgive mediocrity in the name of higher purpose; a provincialism that too quickly discounts what might be learned from secular academia; a neglect in requiring students to truly engage with the representative thinkers of secular culture; and an odd mixture of insecurity and hauteur, covering fears about not measuring up to accepted academic standards with a sort of reverse snobbery toward secular schools. In a word, pride. "How despicably I have acted," Elizabeth Bennet exclaimed, "I who have prided myself on my discernment—I, who have valued myself on my abilities! Who have often disdained the generous candour of my sister, and gratified my vanity, in useless or blameable distrust.—How humiliating is this discovery. Yet how just a humiliation. . . . I have courted prepossession and ignorance, and driven reason away, where either were concerned. Till this moment I never knew myself" (171).

II

Of course, Jane Austen's characters offer imperfect commentary on our educational situation. Elizabeth's *mea culpa,* for example, is not quite a true statement of Christian higher education. The real strength of these schools is that they do know themselves. Although I detect in my college uncertainty about standards and occasional failures of nerve, the larger story is its and its peers' firmer grasp of essentials.

In what ways?

Primarily in their unapologetic promotion of values. In this they have an advantage over state institutions, whose mission must remain steadfastly vocational. But even next to most secular private institutions, church colleges appear as bastions of traditional mores. Clearly, non-religious schools champion much that is laudable. Notions of public service are forcefully advanced in many colleges, probably better than in my own. Intellectual values certainly. But as anyone who follows the *Chronicle of Higher Education* with any regularity must admit, a Babel of conflicting values afflicts our premier colleges and universities. Only the obeisance paid the gods of diversity and multiculturalism can impose a tenuous unity. What else might one expect? one may ask. Once the unifying force of Christian doctrine lost persuasiveness, followed in the 1960s and 1970s by eroded confidence in the myth of American national purpose, and further assailed by the postmodern acids regarding any transcendent truth, the center could no longer hold.

Christian institutions have the luxury of retaining not only a set of beliefs but more fundamentally the conviction that one can hold absolute beliefs without their dissolving in a drizzle of deconstruction. Yes, such confidence can devolve into shallow pontifications that fail to convey to students the complex and often inevitably tragic nature of life. But at its best, religiously based instruction offers unequaled opportunity to transmit not only information or even theory but also beliefs about a way of life that promises coherence and satisfaction.

But what about freedom of speech on Christian campuses? Isn't it encumbered? Yes, by most accepted definitions professors are constrained on certain topics, being expected to support positions of their church. Such constraints form the heart of the secular academy's problem with Christian colleges. Phi Beta Kappa, for example, won't authorize a chapter on even the most distinguished Christian colleges if it detects any inhibitions on free speech. At the risk of getting way, way politically incorrect, I'd like to suggest that this chestnut of American intellectual life needs rethinking on two counts.

First, the confusion about the meaning of free expression on many university campuses is painfully evident. Proud statements of toleration, marketplace of ideas, and so forth are belied by speech codes, needed, we are told, to maintain campus civility. Civility, we can agree, is a good thing. But when such codes are enforced, as they sometimes are at certain prominent institutions, they stand as troublesome rebuttals to "the creed" and render rather hollow such institutions' denunciations of sectarian intolerance. In my 25 years at Southern, I've never heard any suggestion that we need a code to insure civility of discourse. Perhaps another advantage of shared purpose.

I think the meaning of academic freedom needs rethinking from another angle as well. As much as I admire Sir Isaiah Berlin, I find his famous distinction between positive and negative liberty inadequate in an educational context. If indeed the only real liberty is freedom from external restraint, then any limitations on faculty or student speech is misplaced. This stands as one of the central tenets of the secular academy, building on John Stuart Mill's stirring call to free speech and fortified by brushes with intolerance during the heroic age of university building. The only sure means for the advancement of knowledge, argument goes, is by ensuring complete academic freedom. Even sexually explicit student publications must be sanctioned, as Harvard University recently concluded, since concerns about freedom of speech trump vestigial notions of rectitude. By this reasoning, because Christian colleges set boundaries they thereby impede the search for truth and conversely nurture ignorance.

Yet the mere act of throwing open all propositions for debate is no guarantee of intellectual progress. Indeed, without the discipline of shared rules of inquiry there would be no academic disciplines. I would argue that positive liberty, meaning here the freedom to embrace revealed propositions that then cast obligations for one's life, is not an oxymoron. (Berlin would probably agree, though not in the political arena.) This definition works in an environment where all share a related notion of the good for which they strive. Faculty at a Christian college, such as my own, trade a penultimate goal of unbounded classroom and lifestyle discretion for the opportunity to engage in a larger purpose: contributing to an educated Christian community. I find that a fair bargain. To be sure, even the most conservative Christian institutions must guarantee sufficient latitude of inquiry so that students can engage critical ideas. And in truth, I've never felt unable to say whatever I wanted in a class.

The matter of academic freedom brings up a related and even more troubled corollary: oversight of student life. One of the great revolutions of the past several decades has been higher education's retreat from *in loco parentis.* This has gone forward under the banner of treating students as adults. In fact, it represents an abject surrender, abdicating responsibility for the well-being of young people, who in some cases are but four years out of eighth grade. The fruit of this policy fills the pages of the *Chronicle* week after week, including accounts of parental lawsuits against colleges that they feel have failed to give their children proper oversight. These suits have gotten the attention of institutions, and we have seen some rethinking of university obligations (remarkably even at Brown, where former president Gordon Gee urged a reconsideration of university-student relationships).

In loco parentis remains a fact of life at Southern as at some other evangelical schools, a situation that seems to please most parents, if not every student. Night-time comings and goings are monitored; there is a curfew. Absolutely no alcohol on campus nor in student possession anywhere else. Internet sites for gambling, pornography, drugs, and hate speech are blocked. (We actually had a coed dorm of sorts though only temporarily because of unbalanced student numbers; like every other school, the numbers of our males are dwindling.) In truth, the various regulations do wear heavily on many students, and Southern has witnessed the familiar attrition of chapel requirements and a modest liberalizing of off-campus living privileges. Yet the university remains committed to providing a conservative residential environment. This is founded on a realistic appraisal of eighteen- to twenty-year-olds' decision-making skills—often immature and unduly influenced by peers—and a recognition that a reasonable level of prescription nurtures development better than a completely open and neutral environment.

In addition to the above characteristics, I am refreshed by my institution's attitudes toward faculty and administrative salary. Southern received unwanted notice in a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s listing of highest and lowest paying schools. There, planted firmly at the bottom of the national heap was my school. (The salary figures were incorrect; unfortunately, they weren't *that* far off.) Yet I appreciate the philosophy operating behind the modest remuneration. Our church has always operated on the basis of a kind of Christian socialism, where salaries are to be sacrificial among all workers, and the range of salaries from President through the humblest staff position is not great. I'm particularly reminded of its virtue when I read about the shameless bidding wars going on in the higher reaches of American education, especially accounts of university presidents' salaries that now rival their football coaches. I am gratified that my school resists the urge to prove its worth by showing the world how much it can pay its trophy chief executive. Our current president is certainly among the lowest paid of any head of a four-year institution. Yet his record refutes the current orthodoxy that princely salaries are essential to finding capable leaders. He is something of a throwback to nineteenth-century conceptions of the position, a bearer of his church's standard, an exhorter of moral truths, a Mark Hopkins figure, who is comfortable on the metaphorical log conversing with students. I understand that demands of fund raising have refashioned the presidential role in private education, but I am old-fashioned enough to believe that the role of exemplar should remain central to the office.

If conservative sectarian colleges have so much going for them, one would think that all denominational institutions would cleave to their formula with the care Tom Osborne bestowed on option offense. Alas, anyone who has spent more than five minutes reviewing the history of American higher education knows otherwise. George Marsden and James Burtchaell have chronicled the melancholy tale of the advance of secularism in the American academy generally and the retreat of religion in many Christian institutions specifically.[2] Burtchaell's *The Dying of the Light* offers multiple case studies in excruciating detail, retelling what seems a distressingly similar story of lost purpose: indifferent support from denominational sponsors; student bodies that don't share institutional mission; a faculty so beguiled by professional disciplinary values that they eagerly fob off student religious affairs to campus chaplains and deans; a curriculum increasingly bereft of religion in favor of emphasis on personal probity and social conscience; college presidents, whose rhetorical homage to school religious tradition masked their secular priorities; and ultimately, widespread campus impatience with denominational influence on college governing boards, which finally brought that influence to an end.

Coming from a school resolutely sectarian, I was interested in Burtchaell's observation that most nineteenth-century Christian colleges sought to avoid any taint of sectarianism. They never wanted to be thought pinched or narrow, nearly always welcomed faculty who displayed sufficiently pious credentials from whatever denomination. An infatuation with diversity, it seems, cast its spell even long ago. Lacking a firm commitment to a defined theological tradition, Burtchaell finally judges, many Christian colleges were always at risk of losing their moorings.

Well, sectarianism has clearly not lost its taint in some higher educational circles. Placing loyalty to authoritative scripture above a detached search for "truth" remains anathema. And yet there has lately been some encouraging debate on these issues. Marsden's and Burtchaell's well-received critiques have evoked other thoughtful writings and spurred conferences on the subject. Baylor University, after contentiousness during the 1990s about its religious future, has with some fanfare announced its "2012 Plan," stating an intention of becoming a first-rank research institution while also renewing its commitment to traditional Baptist beliefs and standards. A sign of the times might also be seen in a highly remarked *Atlantic Monthly* article several years ago by prominent sociologist Alan Wolfe, who tells how schools like Wheaton, Valparaiso, Calvin College, and Pepperdine are seeking academic respectability within a framework of Christian confession.[3] Further, Wolfe acknowledges that there now exists something that may be termed evangelical scholarship, removed though it usually is from mainstream academia.

Whether a Wheaton College or Fuller Theological Seminary can in the long run resist the same secularizing forces that afflicted so many other striving institutions remains to be seen. Will evangelicalism's desire for intellectual respectability inexorably draw it into the orbit of secular presuppositions? I think it is in the best interests of us all to hope not.

It would be naive to think that just as Elizabeth and Darcy overcome their antagonisms and fall in love, so Christian and secular institutions will one day join hands in an educational love feast. Such a development would necessarily be on secular terms. And that would imply that Christian schools no longer have anything distinctive to say. Some may already believe this to be the case. But I don't think anyone should really wish that. An ecological metaphor helps make the point. One might think of traditional college campuses such as Southern as being part of a dwindling educational rain forest. These small scattered patches may appear bereft of large meaning, but in fact they possess useful genetic material which even a secular society ought to value, to wit, nearly pure remnant strains of a Protestant culture that did so much to shape modern America. These include habits of self-discipline, firm notions of right and wrong, a lively sense of humanity's innate sinfulness, an insistence on transcendence, and finally, hope for the ultimate transformation of the world. The survival of such qualities and beliefs can enhance the well being of society—secular or otherwise.

Notes

1. All references to Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* are from the Penguin edition of 1996, edited by Vivien Jones. This passage is taken from page 13.
2. George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).
3. Alan Wolfe, "The Opening of the Evangelical Mind," *Atlantic Monthly* (October 2000).