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The Ghosts of the Past: The De-Christianization of Dartmouth

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“We must confront the ghosts of the past,” said James O. Freedman, president of Dartmouth College. While dedicating the new Roth Center for Jewish Life at the college, Freedman used the occasion to look back to Dartmouth’s past and a legacy of “bigotry” the college had long since repudiated.

As evidence, Freedman read from selected letters written by Dartmouth admissions officers before World War II indicating Jewish admissions to the college should be limited. The letters reveal shocking language and anti-Semitic arguments from both alumni and college officials. No institution would allow such ethnic arguments today, and the language is rightfully offensive.

The real issue, however, was not the correspondence between these alumni and officials but the origins of Dartmouth College as a Christian institution. The very thought of such origins was almost too much for Dr. Freedman to bear. He read from a 1945 newspaper interview in which Ernest M. Hopkins, then president of Dartmouth, said, “Dartmouth is a Christian college founded for the Christianization of its students.”

This statement demonstrates just how far Dartmouth and other elite academic institutions have departed from their Christian roots. Dr. Freedman, caught up in the current American hunger for the public confession of historic “sins” such as the ambition to christianize students, sees Dartmouth’s founding as a Christian institution as one of the “ghosts of the past.”

Actually, Dr. Freedman did not do justice to the real nature of Dartmouth’s Christian roots. Rev. Eleazar Wheelock, a leading light of the first Great Awakening, founded the school with the purpose of evangelizing American Indians. “Moor’s Indian Charity School” began operations in 1750, but Wheelock quickly determined to see the school become a full-scale college to rank with Harvard and Yale. The school was to retain its evangelistic mission and to accept liberal arts students, with the goal of training them as missionaries.

The mission to “christianize the heathen” was attached to the British royal charters for the colonies, but Wheelock’s greater concern was the evangelistic commands of the Bible. As he stated in his memoirs, “But that which was of greatest weight and should powerfully excite and persuade us hereto, is the many commands, strong motives, precious promises, and tremendous threatenings, which fill so great a part of the sacred pages, and are so perfectly calculated to awaken all our powers, to spread the knowledge of the only true God and Saviour, and make it as extensive and common as possible.”

President Freedman did not read from that passage. Nor did he acknowledge the school’s first charter, granted by George III, which stated that its purpose should be “for civilizing and christianizing the children of pagans, as well as in all liberal arts and sciences, and also of English youths, and any others.”

Hopkins was merely stating the obvious in his interview. The mission of the school was to evangelize its students. Yet even in 1945 his claim that Dartmouth was a “Christian college” was quite a reach. Dartmouth had already abandoned its Christian mission. All that remained was a glorious history and a rather disingenuous transformation of the school into an increasingly secular institution.

This is the great tragedy of American higher education. All of the colleges and universities founded before the

Revolution were established for the training and educating of Christian ministers and for the evangelization of the nation. Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and even the Anglican “College of William and Mary” were essentially religious institutions. This pattern remained true through most of the nineteenth century. As late as 1945, President Wheelock felt the need to define Dartmouth as a “Christian college.”

The radical secularization of American higher education began with a broadening of the schools’ missions and purposes. Eventually this led to a denial of Christianity as normative for the institutions. Now, as President Freedman’s comments show clearly, the very Christian roots of the schools are cause for head-hanging shame inside the ivy-covered walls of the elite academy.

The end result of the radical secular transformation of American colleges and universities is the virtual banishment of authentic Christianity. Anything else—indeed everything else—is welcome and has a place on the campus, in the curriculum, and in the culture. All that is left is what historian George Marsden calls “established unbelief.” As he explains, “Today nonsectarianism has come to mean the exclusion of all religious concerns. In effect, only purely naturalistic viewpoints are allowed a serious academic hearing.”

Historian Sydney Ahlstrom once remarked that Dartmouth, more than any other institution, provided missionaries and ministers for the Great Awakening on the frontier. Modern secular Dartmouth, stripped of its Christian identity, is still producing missionaries. But these are missionaries of a very different gospel. These evangelists are bent on removing even the memory of Christianity.

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