

# Purpose, Provender, and Promises Church-Related Colleges in a Secular Age

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Church-related colleges today face a difficult challenge: they must address pressures to increase revenue and enrollment in unique and dynamic ways that are true to their intrinsic values. Stated differently, they must find mission-based ideas and practices that will enable them to increase revenue, resources, and enrollment while remaining faithful to their historic missions.

My perspective in thinking about these questions and in framing this message is as one who serves as provost of an institution dedicated solely to 3,300 undergraduates, a college ecumenical in character while rooted in the Reformed tradition of our founders and the Reformed Church in America, the denomination with whom we enjoy a covenantal relationship. Hope College's commitment to educating students in that sure and steady formula for learning we call the liberal arts extends as well to such professional programs as engineering, nursing, education, social work, and athletic training. I also have the special privilege and unusual challenge of serving a robustly Protestant institution as a cradle Catholic, a fact that has sharpened my religious translation skills to an extent I never could have anticipated.

## Promises

It may be helpful to begin where our students begin, with the promises we make to them when we ask them to form their imaginations for what they could become at one of our colleges. We sometimes call these "distinctives" or "qualities." But at the most basic level they are promises. When we enroll a student at Hope College, for example:

- We promise them that they will receive an education that is simultaneously of high academic quality while being distinctly Christian in its orientation.

- We promise them an education characterized by a certain intimacy that allows—even requires—relationships between students and their professors, an intimacy that transforms education from mere information transfer to the formation of students who are prepared to lead integrated lives.
- We promise them an education that is broad in its offerings yet deeply rooted in the liberal arts: an education that prepares nurses who will one day run the hospital; an education that prepares teachers and social workers with the intellectual acumen and leadership capacity to influence public policy; an education that prepares engineers and business professionals whose entrepreneurial instincts serve the needs of the least among us as easily, naturally, and eagerly as they do the cause of capital.
- We also promise our students an education that helps them develop a sense of professional confidence and identity through experiences that extend the classroom into the world through student-faculty collaborative research, internships, fieldwork, and service-learning.

Leaders of church-related colleges are subject to a desire to convey a sense of quality—of excellence—to the students to whom we make these promises, but we would do well to regard Seth Godin’s (2013) admonition to avoid fooling ourselves about what quality and excellence mean in the higher education context. Kodak and Polaroid both fooled themselves into thinking that quality meant better film stock. Once they figured out that the promise their customers really wanted them to make involved the cheap and easy sharing of photos on a massive scale, well, you know how the story ended. Quality, it turns out, is a slippery fish, often without absolute measures. In Godin’s words, “It doesn’t mean ‘deluxeness’ or ‘perfection’. It means keeping the promise the customer wants you to make.”

One more thing about excellence. Careful attention to brand and effective marketing are important, but so is careful attention to outcomes. One example I can share from our experience at Hope College involves the relationship between academic performance and engagement in college activities intended to enhance students’ spiritual formation. Students on our campus who report frequent engagement in these activities not only academically outperform students who are either unengaged or infrequently engaged, they actually perform better than their incoming ACT and high school GPAs would predict. This is a powerful source of evidence for effectiveness in the heart of our mission, academic excellence, being enhanced by the very thing that separates us from the vast array of secular options our students could have chosen.

Before we can tap our missions for resources that will provide hope for the work we feel called to do, we must first and foremost identify why we exist at all. What is our central purpose? The United States Postal Service, as far as I can tell, thinks its central purpose is to deliver mail, in paper form, using trucks and mail carriers. In an Internet age this seems positively quaint—and doomed. The newspapers we all grew up with misunderstood their core purposes until the Internet reoriented their perspective. Will the Internet force us to re-examine our purpose? It unquestionably will and to some degree already has. If we view our core purposes as mere information transfer or credential building, then digitally mediated instruction offered at scale is what we ought to pursue. But we ought to ask if digitally mediated courses or even entire programs at our colleges should or can embody the distinctives of our approach to education. An online course at our colleges should be qualitatively different than an online course on the same subject offered by any of the leading universities whose cart is increasingly hitched to the horse named MOOC.

Furthermore, we should ask if our students' increasingly digital engagement will exacerbate what the Jesuit's Superior General, Adolfo Nicolás (2010), has called the *globalization of superficiality*. Can we offer a kind of embodied education with disembodied technologies? Will the medium of digital technology prove to be a message antithetical to our purpose, another in a long line of what James K. A. Smith (2009) calls *secular liturgies*? Will we lament with T. S. Eliot (1937) by asking "Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge? Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?" Jonathan Malesic (2013) has a point when he encourages us to consider the possibility that:

If, in a few decades, the number of Catholic colleges in the United States amounts to only a handful of mega-universities, with most students taking classes online, in physical isolation from their professors and peers, then the project of Catholic higher education will have failed. Not only will it have abandoned personal and local education, but it will have elevated the market principles of competition and consolidation above the Catholic social-justice principles of solidarity (making decisions that benefit the common good) and subsidiarity (making decisions at the lowest and most local possible level).

In thinking about what our missions offer in an increasingly bracketed economic environment, we should at least be cognizant of innovations that might be useful in helping us fulfill our promises to our students. And of these innovations there is no shortage. A Google search for "innovation in higher education" results in 28,000,000 hits. But in few of these predictions of potentially useful innovations can one find either attention to the basics or a focus on those things that each of our institutions can do

better than any other in the world. It seems that innovations make for better media copy, but I suspect that a focus on fundamental distinctives—to the extent that they exist and are well-discerned—is the tried and true approach. Jim Collins (2001) reminds us that the niche where we will flourish is in doing the things no other organization can do as well as we can. If our missions call us to form students for integrated lives as whole persons—mind, body, and spirit—then perhaps we have all the resources we need, though we might imagine that those resources require some polishing.

Before going any further in defending this thesis, it is important to be precise about why the promises we make to students matter. There is a rather obvious moral dimension of course, but there is a practical aspect as well. Put simply, students who are unable to discern a fulfillable promise in what we have to offer will enroll elsewhere. Very few church-related colleges can afford to draw on substantial endowments to balance their annual operating statements. Such colleges are tuition dependent, which is to say student dependent, which is to say promise dependent. Seventy-eight percent of all private four-year college revenue comes from tuition and fees (*Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2011). Our institutional nourishment—our provender—is inexorably yoked to our ability to deliver on the promises inherent in our missions.

### **A Christian College in a Secular Age**

And this brings me to the central question: What is the function—the special purpose—of a church-related college in a secular age? What these colleges each have in common is the quest to understand better and live into their own particular species of church-relatedness, how that ought to define their approach to the intellectual and spiritual formation of their students, and how all of this resonates as excellence in the minds of their students. This is the question around which those who lead these colleges ought to pivot as they consider how to make the hundreds or even thousands of decisions they face on the patches of ground given to them by their founders. It is perhaps ironic that these founders took for granted the question of their special purpose. Today those who lead these colleges do not have that luxury, for it is in this special purpose that we find our primary resource. Embedded in this question is a second, more fundamental question: do we matter? And if so, how? Does the world need church-related colleges? Perhaps more to the point, do prospective students think they need such colleges? It is admittedly a sobering question, but it is also one that offers the possibility of hope.

In speaking of a secular age I do not mean a time in history where belief is absent from the world. I use the term secular age in the same sense that Charles Taylor (2007) does, that is, an age when belief is simply one option among many, and when it is not only

possible, but common, to move through life with goals that are purely immanent, in a way that takes no account of the transcendent.

As we have learned from the work of Christian Smith (2009) and others, the depth of theological understanding among young people in our day and age—to the extent that there is any understanding at all, and to say nothing of true religious commitment—is, to use language from a bygone day, “a mile wide and an inch deep.” In my tradition, we would say that they are poorly catechized. This has significant consequences not only for programming at church-related colleges, but also for hiring practices, and ultimately for the way we convey a sense of excellence to those who would consider our colleges for the most significant investment of their lives.

The purposes of a church-related college ought to be different in 2013 than in 1513, 1713, or even 1913. The ancient European universities and early North American colleges were church-related by default, in part because the societies in which they developed were much more homogeneously Christian. All of the cultural artifacts attendant to those institutions bespoke the presumption of Christian belief and purpose. Protecting, preserving, and strengthening belief was a function taken for granted by colleges in those days. It wasn't the only function, but it would have been unusual to find a college or university in those times whose purposes did not include building the next generation of leadership for the Church, both clerical and lay. What should the role of a church-related college be in a time when belief in God—to say nothing of active worship and enthusiasm for the witness of the Gospel—is one choice among many? And how does this role serve as a resource for flourishing?

Perhaps a good place to start in framing an answer to these questions can be found in the work of John Henry Cardinal Newman who, being dispatched to found the Catholic University of Ireland—now University College, Dublin—set out his vision for the special purposes of such an institution in a series of nine discourses now collected in his book, *The Idea of a University* (1852). Newman claimed that the Church—and by extension, Christian belief—is necessary for the integrity of a university and its principal function of teaching what he called *universal knowledge*. He claimed that knowledge and reason are, “sure ministers to Faith” (a theme more lately articulated by Benedict XVI in his Regensburg address of 2006). Said Newman:

When the Church founds a university she is not cherishing talent, genius, or knowledge for their own sake, but for the sake of her children with a view to their religious influence and usefulness, *with the object of training them to fill their respective posts in life better, and of making them more intelligent, capable, active members of society.* (xix, emphasis added)

This, it seems to me, is entirely compatible with the purposes of church-related colleges as they were originally established and very much in keeping with their special purpose in the contemporary landscape of American higher education. Indeed, the global landscape as well, for the world is a shrinking place.

Even in Newman's time there was a recognition that the secular age was proceeding apace in all areas of life, including higher education. Thus he calls for a Christian form of university education, a call that would not have been required before, because the need for this kind of education would have simply been assumed.

Newman—perhaps as a mild rebuke to Seneca in his eighty-eighth epistle (oft quoted by our friends in secular independent colleges as a defense of the liberal arts)—warns against knowledge for its own sake, as it “exerts a subtle influence in throwing us back on ourselves, and making us our own center, and our minds the measure of all things.” This, he warns, was the observed tendency of universities even as early as the 1850s. Newman claims that religious truth is not only a portion, but a condition of general knowledge. To blot it out is nothing short of unravelling the web of university teaching. If the need for a special kind of college was so obvious to one such as John Henry Cardinal Newman even as early as 1850, how much more is it required in 2013?

### **The Orientation of a Christian College**

But let us turn now to the next question. If the church-related college in a secular age has a special purpose, what are the implications for those of us who lead such institutions and serve as professors there? How can we account for our vocations given the special purpose we assert for our communities of learners? In what ways should our work be distinguishable from colleges and universities inconveniently bereft of anything at all that could reasonably be thought of as a charism? How does the Christian virtue of hope orient us?

I ought to assert here—and quickly, lest you think I've fallen headlong into the deep end of the pool—that each professor at my college or any other college so oriented should be, first and foremost, an expert in his or her field. Students want to learn from the best, and part of their conception of what the best includes are professors who are deeply steeped in their little section of the body of knowledge. Our biologists need to be the best biologists. Our sociologists the best sociologists. Our artists the best artists.

Church-related colleges are—of course—primarily *colleges*. They should help students learn, in depth as well as breadth. Which brings me to the second orientation that we ought to embody. One of the functions of church-related colleges—at least for that part

of our work devoted to undergraduates—is to teach what Newman called *universal knowledge*: to help students see the broad landscape of what is known and to be able to make connections between seemingly disparate trivialities in that landscape.

Undergraduates need broadening, and it would be a mistake for any single professor to imagine that it was some other professor's duty to do the broadening. Indeed, the more professors who, being deeply invested in their own subjects, are also committed to this broadening, the more likely it is to take hold among students.

So too with the third distinguishing characteristic we require of ourselves as professors and leaders in a church-related college in a secular age: a commitment to the spiritual formation of each student. A commitment that is just as strong and practically employed as our commitment to specialized and universal knowledge. And is this not the part of our special purpose in a secular age that perhaps seems most daunting to our professors? "Who am I," they might ask of themselves "to help a student along the path to an imagination for God, and a love for Jesus Christ?" They probably feel like they missed that class in graduate school.

There are two principal—even essential—qualities required of us for effective engagement in the spiritual formation of our students. The first is a commitment to our own continuing formation with a living faith that includes a real openness to the work of the Spirit. Professors wouldn't expect to be of much use to their students in helping them develop a lively imagination—much less a discerned vocation—for any of their particular academic disciplines unless they themselves were deeply and actively engaged in continuous learning in their respective fields. So too with the spiritual formation of their students. If the only spiritual resources professors have to offer are those they developed in high school, college, or—heaven forbid!—graduate school, then it shouldn't come as a surprise when students find them lacking in the depth necessary to serve as compelling role models at those times when they need someone who can help them as they seek to know the light and life of Jesus Christ which serves as the very source of our distinctiveness.

The second quality our professors must develop to foster their students' spiritual formation is a capacity for pastoral engagement. Few of our professors are trained, and none should feel compelled, to serve as pastors to their students. With few exceptions, they are not qualified for such work. That being said, each should have the capacity to be *pastoral* in his or her work with students. A capacity for pastoral engagement with students is not limited to seminary graduates. In the spiritual formation of young adults, the necessity for pastoral engagement is a broader landscape than mere ordination can traverse. For being in a pastoral relationship with students in formation requires two things: spiritual care (or put differently, care about the Spirit) and a

willingness to guide. Professors can care. Professors—assuming that they are active in their own formation—can guide. Being in a pastoral relationship with a student is much more than being “nice” or a “source of comfort,” though these are surely essential. Professors at secular colleges can do as much. And increasingly college students of every stripe, including those who attend both public and private colleges, whether secular or religious, show substantial increases in what Astin (2010) terms “Spiritual Quest” when their professors encourage them to explore questions of meaning and purpose or otherwise show support for their spiritual development. Sadly, Astin’s study of student spirituality demonstrates that most professors, including professors at church-related colleges, never discuss spiritual matters with their students. *Church-related colleges should be the outliers in this regard*, for this is the great untapped potential of colleges in this tradition. Perhaps *untapped* is too strong a descriptor. *Insufficiently tapped* may be a better fit. In any case, as Pope John Paul II (1988) reminded us, “It is not permissible for any to remain idle.”

We should be honest with ourselves when it comes to the kinds of professors that ought to inhabit church-related colleges. Even at these schools, too many professors are visible only to their students as experts in history or the sciences or in literature. How many professors are really engaged in the kind of integrating work that is the primary resource our missions provide in an age when faith is an option and education is increasingly a commodity? Too few, I’m afraid.

This is a disappointing revelation, for there is a kind of freedom in our missions: freedom of inquiry, freedom of dialogue, and a freedom to go beyond *mere development* of faculty and students and instead to put out into the deep water of *formation*. Freedoms of these types are critical resources in a secular age with commoditized education.

To those who doubt the reality or the power of these freedoms, I recommend spending some time listening to Professor Brad Gregory’s 2012 YouTube narrative of his journey from the prestige and security of a position at Stanford to the soul-nourishing soil of Notre Dame. Gregory serves as a powerful witness to the things that our colleges are best positioned to do.

And so it is incumbent on the leaders of church-related colleges to ensure that we hire carefully—another old thing—seeking only those professors who have an instinctive understanding of our charism. Even then we should not presume that they know how to do the integrating work—indeed, the pastoral work—so vital to our continuing place in the landscape of higher education. Don’t forget that the youngest of new professors aren’t that much older than the oldest of undergraduates. Their catechesis is likely to be

a pretty thin garment when they arrive on campus, no matter the degree of their eagerness or earnestness. It is necessary to provide programs that shape a culture for their continuing formation. A *receptive ecuminism* (Howard 2013) friendly to most church-related college missions can serve as a resource for lowering the boundaries for tension points between various campus constituencies. Indeed, we are reminded that on the day of Pentecost through the power of the Holy Spirit all those gathered heard of the wonderful works of God in their own language (Acts 2:1–12). So can it be on our campuses if we can commit to long suffering patience with each other while avoiding the false irenicism (Pope John Paul II, 1995) that is the product of settling for a “least common denominator” kind of mushy spirituality.

Some may be wondering if I am insisting on a “Christians only” hiring policy as the only way to deliver on the promise of our missions. Though my instincts and the formational needs of our students tilt me toward such a practice, I’m humble enough to recognize that this is controversial, and that experience with a more inter-religious approach might lead others to believe that they can keep the faith-related promises of their institutions without insisting on such uniformity. A recent article in AAC&U’s *Liberal Education* by Larson and Shady (2013) seems to offer a helpful model for an exclusivist hiring policy successfully augmented by authentic interfaith dialogue and service. My sense of things is that an inter-religious hiring approach is likely to work best at those institutions whose students are most robustly formed in their own faith. Well catechized students will be best prepared to investigate the truth claims of other faiths precisely because they understand the underpinnings of their own faith.

I mention this with the caution provided by Christian Smith (2009), whose concept of “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism” describes well the shallowness of the typical American young person’s religious belief. If you have a student body filled with well catechized young people whose upbringing, family structure, and religious formation has helped them avoid the seemingly ubiquitous snares of MTD, then an inter-religious hiring policy might be appropriate; however, a student body so oriented is the rare countercultural phenomenon.

While some colleges have religiously-exclusivist policies and others take more of a critical mass approach, we would do well to recognize that colleges are essentially analog in their nature. They exist along a continuum across a wide variety of characteristics, including the faith commitment of their students and faculty. It is perhaps ironic that prospective students are asked to make decisions about enrolling in colleges that are essentially digital, which is to say binary: enroll or do not enroll. The challenge is convincing these seventeen-year old emotives that we will keep the mission-related promises we make to them, regardless of our hiring policies and

practices. No matter a college's practices in this important area, they all must take an approach to hiring that avoids finding virtues that do not exist in applicants for our faculty positions. A deeply religious member of our faculty recently told me that he would rather have Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu colleagues who were committed to the Christian formation of our students than lukewarm Christian faculty members who leave this duty to others. If we fail in this vital area, we should expect no more than professors whose faith, according to Robert Louis Wilken (2008), "...is a private and personal thing, an affair of piety and practice, divorced from the intellectual enterprise that is the business of the university."

These three qualities, then, are the elements of church-related colleges' special purpose in a secular age: deep engagement on the part of our professors with their disciplinary vocations, a broadening engagement sufficient to impart universal knowledge, and an active role in the spiritual formation of our students. And without this last quality, church related colleges will simply be another group of independent colleges among many.

### **Conclusion: Hope as an Orienting Virtue**

I am employed by a college named for one of the Christian virtues, and what a convenience it is in times such as these. Hope—both the college and the virtue—is a source of daily comfort as I sip my morning coffee while the *Chronicle* screams out anathemas on the present system on the slow days and announces the end of days the rest of the time. Each of us could use a regular jolt of hope as we straddle the growing divide between what we thought was permanent and what we fear isn't anymore, lest we slip into that state of error G. K. Chesterton calls the *blasphemy of pessimism*. Former office furniture company CEO and chair of Hope College's Board of Trustees, Max DePree (2004), reminds us that the first duty of a leader is to define reality. The second is to provide hope. My first address to the Hope College faculty—eighteen months or so into the recent recession—was focused almost completely on defining reality: the reality of the present and worsening challenges to the higher education model, rising costs, - diminishing yields and revenues, demographic facts robed in righteousness. As I think back on it, I have an image of a wild-eyed John the Baptist crying out "Make straight the crooked paths!" (Luke 3:4). Even though our leadership team had foreseen the coming challenges and was at that point in the fifth year of an aggressive stewardship mode regarding all things financial, this had never been explained to the faculty in a way that they could truly understand. So I took that opportunity—my first opportunity—and explained it with the scientific and actuarial certainty of one on fire. Hope (the virtue) could wait until the next year. How I wish I could turn back the hands of time on that decision. The faculty members, having been educated utterly as to the facts of the

present circumstance, were sobered, but not fed. To borrow from the noted Confederate General, J. E. B. Stuart, "I have regretted it only once, but that has been continuously."

I mention this because the Christian virtue of hope is one of the most powerful resources we have in creating the kind of campus culture that can stand as a bulwark to the *insistent individualism* (Bennett, 2003) that is one of modernity's principal features and is part and parcel of an increasingly commoditized higher education landscape. And by hope I do not mean simple optimism, wishful thinking, or even universal longing. I mean the hope of the Gospel. A hope based on evidence of things seen and unseen, of things promised by the God who made each of our students and who knows them all by name. A hope that allows us to lean into our work with a transcendent confidence. A hope that gives us the courage to utter what Wendell Berry (2000) calls "the terrible prayer." *Thy will be done*. A hope that, as Eugene Peterson (2000) characterized it, is "imagination put in the harness of faith."

Near the end of the last school year my wife and I shed ourselves of most of our worldly possessions, left the suburbs behind, and took up residence in the cozy world of a downtown apartment very near our campus. I now have the somewhat strange circumstance of having the college—always a kind of family to me—as a neighbor. I'm told that families who are also neighbors can be a tricky thing: we'll see. So far I am enjoying it unreservedly. Every morning I roam about the neighborhood. I tell myself and others that this is for healthful exercise, but lately I've come to realize that my walks have less to do with exercise and more to do with the care and feeding of an inner life.

As I walk through my own neighborhood—the campus of Hope College—I marvel at what has been built there over the course of 150 years. But I've also come to realize that the stately buildings, the lovely gardens, and the winding paths—indeed, the overwhelming sense of Dutch tidiness—these things are only a kind of shimmering mirage in the long sweep of time and history. This thought came to me one morning as I, for reasons I still cannot explain to you or myself, left the known world of the sidewalk near our football stadium and ventured down into the *terra incognita* of the creek that flows almost invisibly, sheltered by woods, between the soccer and softball fields. And there amidst the willows, I came across small bits and pieces of our founder's homestead, demolished in the 1960s as a nod to progress. There's not much there, a few bricks, glimmers of glass, and various shards of green tile. As I stood over this patch of detritus it came to me that most of the physical things—the things of this world—that Albertus Van Raalte thought he had given to posterity back in 1866 have either been swept away or transformed beyond what he would recognize. Everything,

that is, except for the one gift that is impermeable to bulldozer and crane. Impermeable to progress as the world usually understands it.

Van Raalte's principle gift to my neighborhood has been hope. Hope that our college could serve as a kind of shining city on a hill (Matthew 5:14), filling students with both the discovered and the revealed truth, and having done so, sending them forth as agents of that hope unto the whole of the Earth. I don't imagine I'll have to go too far out on the proverbial limb to suggest that what was true for Albertus Van Raalte in 1866 is likely true for those who founded other church-related colleges as well. And this is the primary resource our missions provide in a changing world. No other group of colleges I know is better positioned to convey hope to a world of young adults in desperate need of it than those with a robust connection to the church. I have hope—and, by the way, faith—that we can help those students presently maturing in a secular age they neither understand nor even perceive. Hope that we can help them give voice to their hopes, those already named and those yet to be discerned. Hope that we can help them shape their lives in such a way that they are oriented to the One True Hope who does not disappoint (Romans 5:5).

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