Eruditio et Religio: A Comparative History of Religious Life on Four Campuses
by
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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor
of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religion in the Graduate School
of Duke University

2018
ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between religion and higher education in the United States through analyses of the religious histories of four distinct educational institutions in North Carolina’s Research Triangle—Duke University, Meredith College, North Carolina Central University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It places three seemingly contradictory scholarly representations of this relationship in conversation with one another. The first, represented by evangelical historians George Marsden and John Sommerville, claims that American higher education has come to be characterized by exclusive secularism. The second, represented by scholars of education, including Tricia Seifert, Lewis Schlosser, and Sherry Watt et al. claims by contrast that Christian privilege continues to obstruct the full inclusion of religious and non-religious minorities. And a third, represented by Rhonda and Jake Jacobsen, contends that historical Protestant and secularist predominance have been transcended by inclusive pluralism in the “postsecular” 21st century. This dissertation draws on archival research, participant observation, interviews, quantitative survey analysis, and secondary sources to demonstrate how Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces have coexisted and interacted throughout these four institutions’ histories. It illuminates how their campus religious climates have evolved in distinct ways through contingent interactions among these forces conditioned by a variety of institutional identity factors, including race, gender,
affiliation, prestige, and geographical reach. As a result, we see that the relationship between religion and higher education is not uniformly characterized by either Christian privilege, exclusive secularism, or inclusive pluralism. Distinct institutional trajectories shape coexisting forms of privilege, secularism, and pluralism that interact in specific contexts, producing unique campus religious climates that shape undergraduate identity formation.
Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated first and foremost to my wife Sarah who has suffered through this project with predictable grace and generous support. And to my daughter Eloise, who has helped me to “stay where my feet are” and relish the gift of each moment on this journey. I love you both madly.

I would also like to dedicate this work to three family members of the “Greatest Generation,” my most intimate link to the past I represent here. First to the late William “Nonna” McCowen, my mother’s father, a lover of history who taught me to love the South as a Southerner, in spite of its warts. Secondly, to his beloved bride, Virginia “Gigi” McCowen, an alumna of a Methodist equivalent of Meredith College and pluralistic Protestant mystic of the purest order. And finally, to George Parkeson, their dear brother-in-law, who has served Duke University in the Medical School for 43 years, and continues to do so at the ripe age of 90—George welcomed me to Duke, Durham, the Research Triangle, and their rich overlapping histories as only a family history buff can.
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Finally, I would like to acknowledge that, like most scholars in the humanities and social sciences, the intellectual interests pursued here emerge out of poignant personal experiences that shape my perspective. Raised in the South and nurtured by evangelical ministries as an adolescent, I experienced substantial “culture shock” when I matriculated at Dartmouth College, an elite, research-1/liberal-arts hybrid institution in New England—the most secular region of the country according to recent survey data. There, I was immersed in all kinds of diversity, facilitating productive reflection regarding how to make room for these various “others” in my worldview so that I might learn from their unique perspectives. This formative undergraduate experience motivated me to pursue this project to further reflect on the tensions between the Protestant, secular, and pluralist pulls in my own life. And this intellectual journey has
been paralleled by a spiritual one that has led me to join the Friends General Conference wing of the Quaker tradition, in which these forces interact constantly. As with every human identity and experience, there are sure to be biases and blind spots that come with mine. Still, my hope is that this perspective has facilitated a fair-minded appraisal of the strengths and weaknesses of the three accounts of religion and higher education analyzed here.

The edifying time I spent in evangelical communities helps me to appreciate the legitimacy of Marsden’s and Sommerville’s grievances, and to take them seriously, while ideological distance enables me to push back where I believe they overstep, and illuminate the competing priorities they eschew. As a member of a highly liberal religious community committed to confronting and deconstructing all kinds of privilege, I bring a sympathetic ear to critics of Christian or religious privilege, balanced by a measure of skepticism grounded in my experiences as an undergraduate on a campus where my Christian identity and personal religiosity felt like liabilities (and were, on occasion, directly attacked). And, as a “convinced” Quaker deeply involved in the life and worship of a congregation aligned with a highly parochial tradition and committed to “honoring that of God in everyone,” I bring an appreciation of both the promise and problems of pluralism. In short, I stand both within and outside the ideological positions that have shaped these various literatures to some degree, and thus appreciate both their merits and their incompleteness.
1. Introduction: Illustrating the Contingent Interactions Among Protestant, Secular, and Pluralist Forces on Campuses Through Comparison of Four Distinct Case Studies

1.1 Argument

Over the last two decades, a lively debate has emerged concerning the relationship between religion and higher education – what it is, what it has been, and what it ought to be. This debate has involved historians of American religion, education researchers, and student affairs administrators. The conversation has been hampered by a widespread tendency of interlocutors to talk past one another by characterizing this relationship in one of three seemingly contradictory ways. Evangelical historians George Marsden and John Sommerville have argued that American higher education has come to be characterized by an exclusive secularism, as historic Protestant establishments have been utterly overwhelmed by “established nonbelief.” Numerous scholars of education have claimed by contrast that Christian privilege continues to obstruct the full inclusion of marginalized adherents to minority traditions and non-religious students. A third view, represented by Rhonda and Jake Jacobsen, has contended that historical Protestant and secularist predominance have been transcended by a robust religious

pluralism in the “postsecular” era, resulting in a more open and inclusive dialogue. This “pluriform” model is closely linked with empirical and normative efforts to highlight the increasing prominence of more fluid forms of spirituality on college campuses. While all three representations illuminate important realities, each is incomplete and oversimplifies, obscuring how these Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces have coexisted and interacted throughout the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries.

Through comparative-historical case studies of four very different institutions in an academic epicenter of the American South – the Raleigh-Durham-Chapel Hill “research triangle” – I illuminate how contingent interactions among these three forces have produced distinct campus religious climates conditioned by a variety of institutional factors, including race, gender, affiliation, prestige, and geographical reach. This comparative analysis of the historical and contemporary religious climates at Duke University, Meredith College, North Carolina Central University (NCCU or Central), and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) reveals considerable local variation in the pacing and extent of historical processes of Protestant disestablishment, secularization, and pluralization that frustrates tidy timelines asserting a linear succession of distinct Protestant, secularist, and pluralist eras. It provides a more nuanced picture of how these forces ebb and flow as particular generations and educational communities balance impulses to honor a majority religious heritage, foster an inclusive environment where religious minorities are welcome to
practice their traditions freely, and create power structures that are fair to all, regardless of these differences.

1.2 Literature Review: Three Seemingly Contradictory Representations of the Relationship Between Religion and Higher Education

1.2.1 George Marsden’s and John Sommerville’s Critiques of Exclusive Secularism

George Marsden’s ambitious work, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (1996) forwarded a sprawling historical account of how exclusive secularism completely eclipsed historic Protestant privilege in American higher education over the course of the 20th century. “As late as 1870, the vast majority of [American colleges] were remarkably evangelical,” Marsden wrote. “Yet within half a century [they]…had become conspicuously inhospitable to…evangelical Protestantism…effectively exclud[ing it] from leading university classrooms.”

Marsden argued that liberal Protestants were responsible for this purging of traditional theology from academic discourse, highlighting the ironic consequence of the eventual marginalization of even modernized forms of Protestantism. “Many of the same forces set in motion by liberal Protestantism…were eventually turned against the liberal Protestant establishment itself,” he concluded. “The result was an ‘inclusive’ higher education that resolved the problems of pluralism by virtually excluding all

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religious perspectives."\(^4\) Marsden claimed that this ubiquitous exclusion of religion is so assumed and normalized “that people do not even…think it odd that such exclusion is typically justified in the names of academic freedom and free inquiry.”\(^5\) He highlighted an additional ironic motivation, which he characterizes as a kind of anti-liberal progressivism. “One of the strongest current motives for discriminating in academia against traditional religious viewpoints…is that many advocates of such viewpoints are prone to be conservative politically and to hold views regarding lifestyle, the family, or sexuality that may be offensive to powerful groups on campus,” Marsden asserted. “The incoherence of such widely current ideas concerning the meaning of tolerance, pluralism, and diversity is readily apparent.”\(^6\) As a result of such philosophical and political hypocrisies, “nonsectarianism has come to mean the exclusion of all religious concerns. In effect, only purely naturalistic viewpoints are allowed a serious academic hearing.”\(^7\)

John Somerville’s *The Decline of the Secular University* can be seen as an extended elaboration of Marsden’s “Concluding Unscientific Postscript,” presenting a sharp normative critique of a pervasive academic secularism in a “postsecular” era, which he argued explains the increasing irrelevance of the academy in contemporary society in the context of the postmodern epistemological turn. “The postmodern insistence that

\(^4\) Marsden, *Soul*, 5.
\(^6\) Marsden, *Soul*, 432.
\(^7\) Marsden, *Soul*, 440.
modern rationalism was not self-evident finally registered with students. After the class
final, they would feel free to think what they liked,” Somerville mused. “However, the
one boundary that the university knew could be defended was that against religious
perspectives.” He presents Martha Nussbaum’s *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical
Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* as exemplary of such persistent boundary
maintenance.

“In the midst of a work pleading for diversity of all kinds, when it comes to religion
she baulks. Though she thinks it is vital to have some knowledge of unfamiliar
religions, she sees only problems when students are loyal to their own...She wonders
how [religious colleges] can guarantee free inquiry and cultural diversity. She
doesn’t worry about secular colleges in that regard, hinting that secular institutions
don’t hesitate to discriminate against certain religious groups in their hiring.”

Marsden himself has also recently reinforced his position that religious perspectives are
widely discriminated against, the recent surge of literature documenting pervasive
“Christian privilege” notwithstanding. “Protestant privilege in mainstream academia
was corrected largely by privatization of religion,” he reiterated. “That led to
overcorrection that discourages expression of religious viewpoints in academia and
favors secular viewpoints.”

Marsden and Somerville illuminate secularist influences that pervade the
academy and are particularly strong at elite universities, but their heavy-handed
analyses obscure ongoing Protestant privilege and a substantial impulse towards

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8 Somerville, 18.
9 Somerville, 140-141.
religious pluralism. More precisely, Marsden makes three methodological moves that helped him to drive home the wide-ranging implications of a pattern of secularization among a white liberal Protestant elite, while obscuring continuities and developments that on the one hand preserve Protestant privilege and on the other hand enhance minority religious influences.

First, Marsden privileged elite “trend-setting” universities based on the assumption that elite institutions establish the norms to be imitated throughout the rest of the system of higher education. “Since a fairly limited number of institutions have set the standards for most of the rest of American higher education, I have concentrated on those pace-setting schools,” wrote Marsden. “Women’s colleges, African-American colleges, most southern colleges and universities, and conservative Protestant colleges were also long marginalized by those who defined the most respected standards for American intellectual life,” he continued. “[Thus] they are not central to the story of American universities.”

While Marsden’s disclaimer makes sense from a certain historical perspective, his approach obscured the ways in which non-elite institutions followed different trajectories. Marsden’s “trickle down” assumption justifies his focus on institutions like UNC-CH and Duke, which were powerfully shaped by an abiding ambition to join the ranks of the elite institutions in the Northeast and West and consequently followed the path of secularization they paved. By countering Marsden’s

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selection bias toward elite institutions through concerted attention to two minority-centered, regional institutions (Meredith College and North Carolina Central University) that demonstrate the powerful influence of local Protestant networks, I illustrate how his narrative is less representative of higher education on the whole than this “trickle down” approach suggests. While Marsden demonstrated how white male liberal Protestants presided over the secularization of the nation’s elite institutions, paying equal attention to women’s and minority institutions illustrates how this secularization narrative is more particularly white, male, elitist, and Protestant than it is generally representative.

This elite academic bias is also reflected in Marsden’s privileging of knowledge production as universities’ primary institutional function. Consequently, Marsden not only focused on elite institutions, but on presidents’ and leading scholars’ pronouncements on the idealistic aims of the educational enterprise. He assumed that the extracurricular sphere in which student religious life organizations operate is “peripheral” to the main business of the university. In contrast, while not ignoring the views and agendas of institutional leaders, I incorporate a student-centered approach, analyzing curricular, extracurricular, and informal aspects of campus religious life. From this perspective, the scholarship faculty produce is arguably much more peripheral to the undergraduate experience than the extracurricular religious life minimized in Marsden’s account. This approach reveals how Protestantism remained firmly
established well into the 1960s through religious life structures and religion departments even at elite institutions like Duke and UNC-CH. I contend that a complex and piecemeal process of secularization proceeded gradually through the dynamic interaction of faculty, administrators, students, alumni, and external constituents, rather than only through the distribution of ideas and decisions from influential leaders at the top of a monolithic hierarchy.

Marsden’s analytical focus also obscures the importance of religious minorities’ struggles for full inclusion and “the Protestant awakening to world religions.” As we see in the literature described below, a shift in the multicultural paradigm toward greater attention to religion has empowered both a more robust pluralistic dialogue and greater attention to Christian privilege since *The Soul of the American University* was published, revealing significant holes in Marsden’s argument. These oversights enabled Marsden to highlight a process of secularization, but they obscured a parallel process of pluralization resulting from religious minorities’ efforts to advocate for a more inclusive discourse, and the gradual expansion of the liberal Protestant ecumenical project. Greater attention to the evolution of extracurricular religious life structures over the course of the 20th century reveals the crucial function that this interaction between growing religious minorities and expanding ecumenism played in processes of

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disestablishment and the creation of new pluralistic spaces (such as interreligious
councils and interfaith events) that challenge Marsden’s claims that all religious
perspectives have been marginalized.

1.2.2 The Multifaceted Literature Promoting a New Paradigm
Characterized by Religious Pluralism and Fluid Spirituality

A veritable cascade of amply funded pluralistic inter-institutional activity and
empirical research regarding religion and spirituality and higher education poured forth
in the years following the publication of The Soul of the American University in 1994—
beginning with the Education as Transformation project (1996-2000),13 and followed by
Robert Nash’s Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue (2001),14 and the
quantitative Spirituality in Higher Education (2004-2011) project housed at the University
of California at Los Angeles. These noteworthy initiatives represent three overlapping
approaches to the relationship between religion and higher education—advocating for
more direct engagement with questions of meaning and transcendence, critiquing
barriers to achieving this kind of dialogue, and highlighting more fluid forms of
spirituality through empirical research—which all share an overarching pluralism
paradigm.

13 Victor Kazanjian, and Peter Laurence (Eds.), Education as Transformation: Religious Pluralism, Spirituality,
The *Education as Transformation* dialogues, conference, and edited volume all promoted a wide-ranging conversation aimed at recovering a “holistic vision” for higher education that eschews value neutral pretensions in favor of interactive engagement around experiences of “meaning, inspiration, and awe.”15 Participants in these conversations sought “greater coherence, meaning, and purpose in academic life” in the context of “the instrumentalization of higher education, intellectual fragmentation, and relativistic skepticism.”16 This normative call to a holistic turn toward direct engagement with questions of meaning would be echoed in subsequent publications, including *Encouraging Authenticity and Spirituality in Higher Education* (2006) and *The Heart of Higher Education* (2010). Such positive advocacy was paralleled by a negative critique of a widespread avoidance of these issues spearheaded by Robert Nash in *Religious Pluralism in the Academy: Opening the Dialogue*. These initiatives can be seen as responses to the 20th century secularization of higher education documented by Marsden. But while Marsden advocated for an academic discourse more accommodating of traditional religious influences, authorities, and orthodoxies, these authors pushed for a more fluid and individualistic conversation about meaning and purpose in which diverse religious, philosophical, and secular perspectives engage one another.

16 Ibid., 4.
Beginning with UCLA’s *Spirituality in Higher Education* (SHE) project, a series of large-scale quantitative studies were launched to investigate this fluid spirituality and interreligious dynamics among both students (the *College Students Belief and Values Survey* of over 100,000 students, or CSBVS) and faculty (the *Faculty Belief and Values Survey* of 8500 faculty). In *Cultivating the Spirit: How College Can Enhance Students’ Inner Lives*, SHE project leaders mobilized CSBVS data to demonstrate “high levels of spiritual interest and involvement,” “high degree of involvement in religion,” “high levels of religious tolerance and acceptance,” and “high expectations” for spiritual development through undergraduate education. Other researchers used these data to analyze the experiences of religious and non-religious minorities. Like the normative literature and inter-institutional activity preceding it, this empirical research tended to promote more direct engagement with religion and spirituality in a manner that is more individualistic and more inclusive toward non-traditional perspectives.

These developments inspired Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen’s *No Longer Invisible*, which documented the “return” of religion as a pervasive and explicit reference point in contemporary higher education in a new pluralistic form. This “foggy pluriformity” is characterized by more diverse representation of religious traditions, the increasing prominence of more fluid and individualistic forms of spirituality, and the blurring of

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lines demarcating religious and secular, public and private. The Jacobsens’ argument appropriated Marsden’s thesis about the 20th century secularization of a system of higher education previously characterized by Protestant establishment while contending that this “privatized era” has since been transcended by an open religious dialogue. Religion has reemerged, partly through the pluralistic initiatives cited above and partly as an unintended consequence of a post-modernist epistemological shift, multiculturalism, student-centered learning, and professional schools’ pedagogical engagement with ethics and meaning. “There was a time in the not-too-distant past when this whole jumble of concerns was metaphorically swept under the rug at most colleges and universities, which tended to operate on the assumption that religion was a purely personal concern that had little or nothing to do with higher education. That is, however, no longer the case.” Similarly, the authors claimed that the religious imperialism of the preceding “Protestant era” has been transcended.

Nearly everyone in America now rubs shoulders every day with people of differing faiths and life stances. Students know this. They know they live in a religiously pluriform world, and they are trying to figure out the implications...The push for talking about matters of religion and spirituality and answering questions about human purpose and meaning is coming from the bottom up, rather than from the top down. Paying attention to religion in higher education today is not at all a matter of imposing faith or morality on anyone; it is a matter of responding intelligently to the questions of life that students find themselves necessarily asking.

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19 Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 5.
20 Ibid., 30.
Thus, both exclusive secularism and Protestant hegemony are perceived to have been left in the past, replaced by an open, inclusive religious pluralism.

While the authors acknowledged that there are some problems with this new pluralistic discourse (i.e. “spirituality [vs. religion], teaching about religion [versus teaching religious itself]; difficult dialogues; and big questions”), they expressed confidence that these difficulties can be circumnavigated by reframing the conversation in less problematic terms (“religious literacy and interfaith etiquette; civic engagement; and character, convictions, and vocation”). “The religio-secular realities of life in America today are much more about questing and questioning than they are about defending or imposing,” they wrote. “It is this new mode of religion that colleges and universities are re-engaging today, and it is this new mode of religion that may allow the academy to recapture a nearly lost conversation about ‘things that really matter.’” The Jacobsens contended that this conversation must necessarily engage religion in an explicit and inviting way. “Asking questions in ways that welcome religion into the conversation will open the discussion to everyone,” they asserted. “Asking these questions in ways that explicitly ignore religion or render it invisible will signal something very different: that only some perspectives are to be taken seriously.”

21 Ibid., 32.
22 Ibid., 46.
23 Ibid., 156.
24 Ibid., 157.
One of the major blind spots in this pro-pluralism literature is critical consciousness regarding how “pluralism” has been constructed historically in particular contexts, evolving gradually over time and manifesting in a wide variety of forms. The language of “pluralism” (and “spirituality”) do not so much resolve the age-old problem of how to achieve inclusivity and equality of free exercise for the range of traditions represented in our institutions as provide a highly fungible vocabulary for reframing it. Much of the literature on pluralism and higher education lacks historical consciousness about the way constructions of pluralism have emerged out of an expansionist ecumenical project and consequently may privilege liberal religious forms over conservative ones. Through the institutional histories I will present, we perceive the rhetorical evolution of “non-sectarian” denominationalism into interdenominational ecumenism into the Judeo-Christian interfaith movement into broader constructions of pluralism. We also will see how such representations may belie the actual degree of inclusivity achieved within a given environment and obscure palpable divisions within traditions and institutions regarding how to navigate tensions between cultural preservation and accommodation of religious others. And chapter 4 illustrates how the language of pluralism can be mobilized toward either preserving Protestant privilege or reinforcing a secular status quo.

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The Jacobsens contribute a greater sense of historical consciousness regarding the “postsecular” emergence of pluralism. But their tidy timeline of discrete Protestant, secular, and pluralist eras ultimately minimizes important differences among distinct educational communities and exaggerates differences among generations. As we will see, 19th century Protestants made efforts, however imperfect, to include the more limited range of religious others in their midst and foster cooperation across religious differences, while the most ardent contemporary pluralists may have trouble including those holding conservative theological positions once normative throughout the institution. Moreover, rendering historical context the all-determining factor obscures other crucial factors. The problems of pluralism, privilege, and secularism are far too fundamental, messy, complex, and contextual to fit into such a neat historical framework.

1.2.3 Critics of Persistent Christian/Religious Privilege

In contrast to both the secularization and emerging pluralism narratives, numerous scholars of education have claimed that religious language, assumptions, and practices pervade American higher education and privilege Christianity. Consequently, they must be purged to achieve a fully inclusive conversation. In the early 2000’s, Tricia Seifert and others began applying classic models of race, class, gender, and sexual
privilege (for example, Peggy McIntosh’s famous work on white privilege26) to religious diversity on campus. They claimed that “Christian privilege must be acknowledged and dismantled before environments truly conducive to spiritual development for all can be realized.”27 Seifert and Noel Holman-Harmon later argued that the term “spiritual development” itself fundamentally privileges religious perspectives over non-religious ones, “remov[ing] places at the table for…agnostics, atheists, freethinkers, and secular humanists.”28

These critics of Christian privilege have pointed to the Christian roots of the academic calendar, insufficiently inclusive “invocations” at ceremonial events like commencement, and subtle discursive norms which normalize faith in a Christian God, Jesus, and Christian worship practices and texts. More recently, Kevin Burke and Avner Segall have devoted an entire manuscript to teasing out the Christian roots of concepts and practices embedded in even the most resolutely secular public education models.29 In light of such revelations, many have argued that “institutional customs will have to change. Calendars must be reevaluated…and campus climate must be evaluated in an

26 Peggy McIntosh, “White privilege and Male Privilege: A personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in women’s studies, (Wellesley, MA: Wellesley College Center for Research on Women).
effort to assist students who find meaning in ways that do not fit the Christian norm.”

In this spirit, Caryn Riswold issued a call to faculty and administrators to assume the stance of non-religious “allies...commit[ted] to name and deconstruct Christian privilege.” while Seifert and Holman-Harmon have advocated for programs for non-religious minorities analogous to the Safe Zones created for LGBTQ students. Obviously, this project implies a campus reality that is quite different from the pervasive secularist scene conjured by Marsden and Sommerville. And it challenges the Jacobsens’ assertion that Protestant hegemony has long since been transcended through successive “privatized” and “pluriform” eras.

On the other hand, these competing representations of higher education illuminate realities obscured by this singular focus on dismantling Christian privilege. Marsden’s painstaking analysis of the pivotal role that elite liberal Protestants played in the secularization of the academy through their “culture war” with conservative evangelicals raised questions about whether Christians are universally privileged over minority adherents and non-religious others that have generally been neglected in the Christian privilege literature. Much of this scholarship has assumed that, despite vast differences and tensions between particular Christian traditions, a generalized

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Christianity “function[s] as a cultural monolith.”³² Jason Nelson pointed out that this “vague and undifferentiated… unitary” Christianity is a fabrication that obscures a much more complex reality. He wrote that these critics’ construction of Christianity is “so trivialized, so secularized, and so marginalized that it is scarcely recognizable.”³³ In reality, “Christianity takes many forms, landing in rather different places on the scale of privilege depending on the [surrounding] sociocultural context…particularly in the field of education.”³⁴ Consequently, I specifically focus on Protestant privilege in these case studies and compare varying experiences of privilege among mainline, evangelical, and African-American Protestant groups.

When pressed, the assertion that Christians in general experience ideological privilege in higher education above all other religious and non-religious ideologies seems hasty. Data from large-scale representative surveys of the American population are presented to demonstrate Christian/religious privilege and the marginalization of the non-religious within higher education, but competing data from surveys of undergraduates suggests that the non-religious may be much less marginalized on college campuses than in the society writ large. Riswold presented 2012 Gallup survey data indicating that bare majorities of Americans say they would vote for an atheist or Muslim presidential candidate as evidence that atheists, minority adherents, and so-

³² Ibid., 143.
³⁴ Nelson, 42.
called “nones” are “marginalized in the classroom and by the culture.”

Riswold also stated matter-of-factly that, “although we have already seen that the number of nonreligious young people is growing, this change is not translating into higher levels of acceptance and respect.”

But surveys of undergraduates suggest otherwise. While critics of Christian privilege have frequently cited a widespread assumption that atheists are immoral, 83% of the 112,232 undergraduate respondents to the CSBVS affirmed that “non-religious people can lead lives that are just as moral” as religious people. Sixty-four percent affirmed that “people can grow spiritually without being religious” and 63% disagreed “that people who don’t believe in God will be punished.”

As Nelson pointed out, “even to the extent that Christian privilege does exist in society at large, we cannot assume it exists in the same way in [higher] education...[which] is less populated with the religious, much less with Christians, and still less with Christians of the same variety of any given person, than the general population.”

As we will see, the more recent Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey illustrates how on campuses like Duke’s, students report that evangelicals are less accepted and appreciated on campus than non-religious students. When compared to the data collected from Meredith students, we see that Christians and non-religious students may experience significantly

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35 Riswold, 140.
36 Riswold, 139.
37 Astin, Astin, and Lindholm, 11.
38 Nelson, 41.
different levels of privilege and scrutiny in relation to one another on different campuses.

In light of Marsden’s and the Jacobsens’ historical work, this call to purge religious privilege from college campuses can be critiqued as a doubling down on the secularist paradigm these authors argued predominated in the 20th century but is now outmoded at best and hypocritical and oppressive at worst. Critics of Christian privilege often seem unaware of (or perhaps unconcerned about) critiques of secularism, and they occasionally appear to be looking for a “view from nowhere.” For example, Ellen Fairchild argued that since “spirituality” privileges religious and spiritual perspectives over non-religious views, “existentialism” should be used instead to “accommodate both those who adhere to a belief in a higher power and those who do not.” But the definition she cites for existentialism “a chiefly 20th century philosophical movement...centering on analysis of individual existence in an unfathomable universe...without any certain knowledge of what is right or wrong or good or bad” — demonstrates that such language is, in fact, quite particular and not religiously neutral.

Some critics of Christian privilege have acknowledged that conservative Christians (like Marsden and Somerville) have claimed that they themselves are marginalized on contemporary campuses. But they have dismissed such claims as emotional, defensive reactions to having one’s privilege challenged. For example, Seifert

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39 Fairchild, 10.
wrote, “[Christians’] perception of a hostile academic climate, manifested in feelings of marginalization, may mask the unearned benefits they experience every day as Christians [and produce] the feeling of threat that typically results when unacknowledged privilege is highlighted.” While this point is well taken, the dismissal of conservative Christians’ charges of marginalization appears overly hasty in light of the underwhelming empirical evidence presented to support claims of ubiquitous Christian privilege.

Critics of Christian privilege have generally assumed that their efforts align with the interests of non-Christian minorities, but the more recent turn toward purging language that privileges religion over non-religion calls this in to question. As Shabana Mir shows in her insightful ethnography on Muslim undergraduate women, secular privilege is frequently experienced as more problematic and oppressive than Christian privilege. Like Mir’s subjects, the members of the Duke Muslim Students’ Association I engaged through participant-observation in the weekly Halaqa Qur’an reading group (before the adhan controversy) complained of secularist influences within the university much more than Christian privilege.

Critics of Christian privilege have occasionally acknowledged that “religious identity and the very definition of Christianity…exist always in complicated social and

40 Seifert, 13.
political context[s] where every individual identity sits at the intersection of race, gender, class, religion, and many other things” and may therefore be mitigated by a lack of other kinds of privilege. But this allowance often seems little more than a nod to a multiculturalist orthodoxy that places race and ethnicity as primary identities and religious identity as secondary: “religious identity may not be seen as a separate identity facet at all, but rather as one aspect of how [people] make meaning of their racial/ethnic identities.” Thus, these intersectional realities do little to relativize an assumed generalized Christian privilege. But as Nelson has argued, “many of the things appropriated from McIntosh’s white privilege list...[are] either highly questionable or patently false when applied to Christian identity on its own (unless combined with other identities).” The point of these critiques is not that Christian privilege does not exist, but rather that is an enormously complex and highly interactive phenomenon best studied in relational and institutional contexts in light of competing secular forces and a pluralism paradigm that harbors a historic polemic against conservative Protestants that may be felt by conservative adherents of other traditions. My comparative case studies will show how powerfully race, gender, and class condition the meaning and implications of Protestant privilege.

42 Riswold, 136.
44 Nelson, 39.
In sum, these three representations of the relationship between religion and higher education as exclusively secularist, inclusively pluralist, and marred by persistent Christian/religious privilege are skewed by (a) a widespread methodological tendency to try to represent the vast and diverse system of higher education monolithically, and (b) fundamentally opposed normative convictions about what this relationship ought to be. For Marsden and Somerville, higher education is hamstrung by a hypocritical marginalization of religious convictions and sources from academic discourses that claim “free inquiry.” Genuine free inquiry and effective intellectual leadership will only be realized by revising the norms of academic discourse to include traditional religious ideas that remain influential in the society at large. For the staunchest critics of Christian/religious privilege, American higher education is, like the rest of American society, characterized by pervasive privileging of religious perspectives over non-religious ones and Christian beliefs and practices over those of minority traditions. To achieve social justice through full inclusion, such biases must be systematically rooted out in favor of more fully inclusive language, norms, and practices that are genuinely neutral concerning the full range of religious and secular identities represented. The Jacobsens, empirical researchers on spirituality in higher education, and advocates for holistic education/proactive pluralism, have implicitly and explicitly argued that both of these perspectives are outdated. We have moved beyond both Protestant hegemony and “value-neutral” secularism into a more open and fluid “post-secular” and “pluriform”
era. For these advocates of pluralism, the “is” and “ought” regarding religion and higher education are more closely linked than polarized. Consequently, persistent Protestant and secular forces are minimized.

My view is that all three representations are both instructive and incomplete. We gain a clearer picture of the relationship between religion and higher education when we allow for more complexity and variance within and among institutions. Colleges and universities are simultaneously shaped by Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces that ebb and flow in particular ways conditioned by institutional characteristics, including racial and gender composition, religious affiliation, prestige, and geographical reach. Painting epochs and educational systems with a broad brush as either secularist, pluralist, or marred by Protestant privilege distorts how these three paradigms have coevolved contingently in particular contexts with considerable variation in the pacing and extent of processes of secularization and pluralization.

1.3 Methodology

Like Marsden’s *The Soul of the American University*, this project is first and foremost a work of history. Its primary preoccupation will be to chart changes over time

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45 Of course, Catholic schools are more powerfully shaped by Catholicism, and the same can be said for the small number of colleges aligned with other non-Christian religious traditions such as Naropa University (Buddhist). But these institutions also have to negotiate Protestant influence on American culture. Since all of the colleges in my sample, along with the large majority of American colleges and universities, are shaped by both this broader cultural Protestant privilege and a more immediate history of institutional privileging of Protestantism, I prefer the more precise focus on Protestant forces/privilege than the concept of generalized Christian privilege that obscures how Catholics and other non-Protestant Christians also experienced themselves as minorities in predominantly Protestant campus cultures.
in the structuring of religious life at Duke University, Meredith College, North Carolina Central University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Analyses are grounded in a wealth of primary sources drawn from these institutions’ archives and numerous secondary sources regarding their histories, particularly their religious life structures, religion departments, and relationships with affiliated and external religious organizations and movements. I performed a detailed review of the available relevant material at all four institutions with the assistance of their expert and accommodating archivists. As alluded to above, my primary focus was the undergraduate experience, leading me to examine any administrative, curricular, and extracurricular material relevant to the evolving campus religious climate that students navigate during their undergraduate years.

To supplement the archival material with oral histories and the perspectives of various stakeholders, I conducted eleven interviews with at least two representatives from each institution. I also recorded field notes as a participant observer at several religious life events on the four campuses that inform my representations of their

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6 These included: former Dean of Duke Chapel Will Willimon, long-time InterVarsity Director Steve Hinkle; Religious and Ethical Studies Department Chair Shannon Grimes and Chaplain Donna Battle at Meredith College; Campus Minister Michael Page and InterVarsity Director Charlene Brown at NCCU; former Religious Studies Professor Peter Kaufman, Assistant Dean of Student Affairs Dean Blackburn, former Director of Interfaith Living and Learning Community Jennie Ofstein, Executive Director of the Christian Student Center Madison Perry, and InterVarsity Faculty Advisor and Professor of Computer Science Fred Brooks at UNC-CH. I also had more informal conversations with several students, faculty, and religious life staff, including Associate Dean for Religious Life Christy Lohr Sapp, former Muslim Chaplain and current Chief Representative of Muslim Affairs Abdullah Antepli at Duke, and Dean of Duke Chapel Luke Powery.
religious climates, though only two of these ethnographic experiences are explicitly described in the text.

Finally, I incorporate analysis of the Duke and Meredith samples of the Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey (CRSCS), an in-depth and methodologically sound survey of 15,892 students regarding their experiences of campus religious dynamics at 62 institutions. This survey helps me keep students’ perspectives and experiences squarely in the picture, avoiding a more typical top-down analysis focused exclusively on the decisions of institutional leaders. All in all, this is a mixed-method, comparative project that incorporates archival sources, interviews, ethnographic observation, and survey data to yield an historical and sociological analysis of the changing place of religion on these four campuses.

The methodological approach taken here is also designed to illuminate certain blind spots. First, this project responds to the call for histories that “attend to the spatial more fully” by “locat[ing readers] in natural terrain and social space,” because comparison must be reasonably controlled and grounded in rigorous, focused analyses to be effective. The shared context – in this case the “research triangle” area of North Carolina – helps demonstrate the importance of particular variables by controlling others, thus more clearly illuminating how specific institutions and sub-institutional

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47 Alyssa Rockenbach and Matthew Mayhew, “Duke University: Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey,” and “Meredith College Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey,” Interfaith Youth Core, 2014.

segments influence and respond to these three forces in distinct ways. My analyses of these specific institutions of the Research Triangle throws conflicts between national and regional constituencies, racial and gender dynamics, and processes of religious diversification into particularly sharp relief. Thus, the aim here is not to produce a regional history so much as a geographically located history that illustrates important factors conditioning religious dynamics at colleges throughout the United States that are often missed in contexts where they are less obvious.

This approach also helps address some of the weaknesses inhering in Marsden’s grand scope and more traditional methodological focus on elite figures like university presidents at “trend-setting” institutions. We see how the secularization process Marsden highlights proceeds through the dynamic interaction of distinct overlapping networks rather than through the distribution of ideas and decisions from presidents and other campus leaders. Moreover, by decentering historically privileged institutions as the norm for comparison, this dissertation challenges the representativeness of narratives based on institutions historically dominated by white males. Analyzing a women’s college and a historically black college/university (HBCU) illustrates the subtle but crucial ways that race, gender, and class have conditioned the dynamics of Protestant privilege, processes of secularization, and constructions of pluralism. Of course, this more focused, contextualized approach requires sacrifices in terms of scope of representation. But my aim is not to forward an alternative representation of the
system of higher education as a whole. Rather, I am trying to respond to the limitations of such grand-scale characterizations with a flexible approach that more adequately accounts for variations in historical processes, contingent interactions within institutions, and diversity among institutions.

This project is also designed to shift these three concepts of Christian privilege, secularism, and pluralism from normative frames to lenses for empirical analysis in an effort to de-polemicize the scholarly debate on the relationship between religion and higher education. Scholars critiquing both Christian privilege and secularism have used these concepts to label phenomena in order to attack them, deconstruct them, and promote alternatives. On the other hand, the literature on pluralism has celebrated the concept and used it to make normative prescriptions. The point here is not so much that normative arguments are problematic; they are likely unavoidable. It is rather that the normative motivations of these literatures have been heavy-handed and under-examined. In contrast, I do not assume that secularism or Protestant privilege are necessarily bad or that labeling something with the language of pluralism makes it good. All three should be critiqued in ways that acknowledge their strengths as well as their weaknesses in context, and that identify the purposes they serve and the problems they solve in light of the specific goals, constituencies, and histories of particular institutions. Thus, I aim to highlight both gains and losses resulting from these distinct
approaches to religion and evaluate the degree of harmony and dissonance characterizing the peculiar blends that have emerged on each of these four campuses.

1.4 Chapter Outline

While these three representations of the relationship between religion and higher education may seem incommensurable in their ideal forms, all three highlight important forces within American higher education. Yet they all overreach, obscuring how these forces have coexisted and interacted over time. I apply the strengths of all three to analyze four detailed and distinct case studies to forward a three-pronged thesis. (1) Impulses towards secularization, Protestant privilege, and religious pluralism have coexisted in evolving forms throughout these institutions’ histories, interacting through contingent historical shifts. (2) Each institution’s particular historical trajectory, peculiar institutional identity, and unique composition of constituents powerfully condition the interaction of these impulses. (3) These contingent, conditioned interactions produce varieties of secularism, pluralism, and Protestant privilege whose diversity is obscured by the overly simplified general stories asserting the exclusion of religious perspectives, pervasive Christian/religious privilege, or the achievement of inclusive pluralism.

Each case study will substantiate these theses in a different way. Chapter 2 traces the interaction of Protestant, pluralist, and secular forces from the founding of the institution that would become Duke University in 1839 to the adhan controversy of 2015. Chapter 3 shows how Meredith College’s dual institutional commitments to the
Southern Baptist tradition and empowering young women shaped a historical trajectory that (a) conditioned (and continues to condition) interactions among these three forces and (b) challenges existing models of the relationship between religion and higher education, important categories within American Protestantism, and straightforward representations of interactions among gender, religion, and power in the American South. Chapter 4 employs concepts drawn from the sociology of organizations, namely, institutional myths⁴⁹ and institutional isomorphism,⁵⁰ to analyze how distinct networks and racial, economic, and educational disparities produced markedly distinct forms of pluralism, secularism, and Protestant privilege at UNC-CH and NCCU—divergences that are obscured by contemporary structures that perform both public institutions’ compliance with the prevailing pluralism paradigm. I conclude by comparing the particular character and relative strength of interacting Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces on these four campuses. My general aim is to use these four case studies to develop a more flexible, balanced, and contextualized analysis of the relationship between religion and higher education in nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first century America.

2. The Adhan Controversy in Historical Perspective: Interpenetrating Protestant, Secular, and Pluralist Forces at Duke University, 1839-2016

2.1 Introduction: The Adhan Controversy as Clash Between Protestant, Pluralist, and Secular Forces

In January of 2015, a campus controversy surrounding the broadcasting of a Muslim call (adhan) to Friday jum’ah prayers from the tower of Duke University Chapel exploded into an international media frenzy, revealing palpable tensions between Protestant, pluralist, and secular forces within the university and beyond. The intention to broadcast the adhan was announced as the latest expansion of pluralism at Duke, a historically Methodist, research-driven institution. As Associate Dean of Religious Life Christy Lohr Sapp wrote in an op-ed in the local paper, “This opportunity represents a larger commitment to religious pluralism that is at the heart of Duke’s mission and connects the university to national trends in religious accommodation (2015).”

Conservative Protestants inside and outside the community rallied to defend exclusive Christian ownership of one of the most powerful symbols on campus. Franklin Graham, the state’s foremost conservative evangelical spokesman, lambasted the move, calling on

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1 An earlier version of this chapter has been published: Scott Muir, “The Adhan Controversy in Historical Perspective: Interpenetrating Protestant, Secular, and Pluralist Paradigms at Duke University, 1839-2016,” *Journal of Religion & Society*, 19 (2017). The main difference between the two versions is that here the “paradigms” are referred to as “forces” to better capture their fungible and dynamic qualities.

Duke donors and alumni to withhold their support until the decision was reversed.

Duke Divinity School Dean Richard Hays echoed Graham’s misgivings in a more measured tone. Citing “significant theological tension” between Christianity and Islam and “a great number of messages from inside and outside the community expressing concern or dismay,” Hays questioned “the wisdom and propriety of allowing Duke Chapel to be used for this purpose” in light of “millions of Christians living in Islamic societies where their faith is prohibited or suppressed.”

Duke administrators were thus forced to negotiate tensions between the university’s commitment to religious pluralism represented on the one hand by the *adhan* and the generous funding of Muslim and Jewish programming, and, on the other hand, the persistent Protestant privilege retained through Duke Chapel worship grounded in Protestant liturgy and a Methodist-affiliated Divinity School offering confessional graduate training for aspiring pastors. Citing “numerous verified instances of credible threats,” the university backed down, moving the *adhan* from the bell tower to the chapel steps. As Vice President for Public Affairs Michael Schoenfield explained in

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a news release, “it was clear that what was conceived as an effort to unify was not having the intended effect.”

Instead, the controversy became fodder for a polarized and fragmented public discourse, alienating conservative Protestants, strict secularists, and progressive pluralists alike. Liberal commentators decried the compromise as “a victory for American intolerance” indicative of “extremism at home,” highlighting “the irony of backing down on a powerful gesture of religious tolerance in response to [the Charlie Hebdo massacre].” Clearly, these critics were vexed by this bitter contest between the Protestant heritage and pluralist orientation of an elite educational institution they assumed to be “officially non-denominational” and “nominally secular.” On all sides of the issue, widespread amnesia concerning the historical interaction between Duke’s Protestant, pluralist, and secular commitments exacerbated the all-too-common tendency for such controversies to descend into a futile cacophony of people talking past one another.

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6 Siceloff and Bell, “Rebuked.”
Several recent works on American higher education have highlighted the tensions illustrated through the *adhan* controversy in similarly polarized terms. Evangelical historians George Marsden⁸ and John Sommerville⁹ have argued that a secularist paradigm marginalizes *all* religious perspectives from the academy, compromising intellectual freedom and academics’ influence in a persistently religious society. By contrast, numerous higher education scholars and administrators have contended that enduring Protestant privilege obstructs the realization of a truly open and inclusive pluralism on campus.¹⁰ In *No Longer Invisible*, Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen offered a historical model which contests that those lamenting Protestant privilege or, alternatively, “established non-belief,” invoke an outdated opposition between obsolete paradigms that have been transcended by a robust pluralism. The authors acknowledge that the 20th century was characterized by “privatization” (i.e. secularization) deemed necessary to dismantle the vestiges of the previous “Protestant era.” But they argue that we have since entered a “pluriform era” characterized by an increasingly diverse representation of religious and secular worldviews and affording new opportunities for open and inclusive engagement with religion on the “postsecular” campus.¹¹ These three seemingly contradictory characterizations of contemporary American higher education as pluralist, Protestant, or secularist all highlight important

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⁸ Marsden, *Soul*.
⁹ Sommerville, *Decline*.
¹⁰ See Watt, Fairchild, and Goodman; Seifert; Schlosser.
¹¹ Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 3-31.
realities, but none sufficiently account for the complex interactions between these coexisting paradigms illustrated by the *adhan* controversy.

To address this problem, I analyze how Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces have emerged, evolved and interacted throughout Duke University’s 178 years of history. First, I illustrate that, even in the “Protestant era” of the 19th century, the institution’s evangelical leaders self-consciously negotiated their confessional identity in light of secular and pluralist alternatives. Second, I demonstrate how Protestantism remained firmly established at Duke well into the middle of the “privatized” 20th century in an increasingly ecumenical form through which Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces temporarily reinforced one another. Third, I examine how Protestant privilege and secularist exclusion persist alongside the emergent pluralist paradigm. And I conclude by proposing a more flexible approach for comparing the ways these forces interact on distinct campuses throughout time and space.

While the linear model of successive eras of Protestant hegemony, “privatization,” and “pluriformity” has merit, it obscures how thoughtful educators have long wrestled to strike an optimal balance between preserving the best of a common religious heritage, protecting intellectual freedom, and maximizing inclusivity in light of their present circumstances and perspectives. Historical appreciation of the complexities involved can help us to transcend the simplistic, polarized debate represented in coverage of the *adhan* controversy through greater appreciation of the
paradoxical record of Protestant influence in higher education—exclusive and inclusive, self-righteous and self-abnegating, domineering and deconstructed. Examining the rationale, context, and consequences surrounding the distinct compromises brokered by each generation of students, faculty, and administrators helps us to perceive the relationship between religion and higher education as a contingent progression of interpenetrating trajectories rather than an inevitable evolution of discrete, contradictory paradigms.

2.2 Founding: A “Non-Sectarian” Denominational Identity Emerges Amidst Secular and Ecumenical Alternatives

While the institution that would become Duke University ultimately embraced a thoroughly Methodist identity, nascent pluralist and secular forces were present from its humble beginnings. Union Institute was named in honor of the remarkable ecumenical partnership forged between Methodists and Quakers in Randolph County in 1839. But this union between parochial Quakers and expansionist Methodists quickly proved untenable; Methodists assumed full control by the time a charter was granted in 1841. This failed ecumenical experiment informed the Trustees’ 1853 statement clarifying the school’s identity:

“The College shall be theoretically and practically religious: religious in creed and heart; religious doctrinally and by conversion. To that end the College must be denominational, without being sectarian [emphasis mine]. Different creeds may meet for fraternity, social interests, and secular work; but, when souls are to be won, each denomination must be in its own Temple. A nonreligious college is, and ought to be, a failure in human interest, if not in number of students. The student must be a Christian, or the man will, probably, be practically an infidel. The whole
tone of the College must be one of fervent piety, and revivals and conversions a part of its ordinary life.” 12

From a contemporary perspective, these strong evangelistic and denominational overtones are remarkable. But in the context of the overwhelmingly Protestant antebellum South, this self-conscious situating of denominational identity in light of the demands of “non-sectarian” inclusivity and “secular work” is equally noteworthy.

In fact, President Braxton Craven and the trustees simultaneously aligned the institution with the secular “normal school” movement for public education. They renamed it Normal College, committed its resources to the training of teachers, and operated under a public charter from 1851 to 1859. At the time, “the distinction between public and private was not very clear, and it meant much less than it does today.” 13 Church leaders, educators and legislators worked together on a plan to establish a “non-sectarian,” denominational system of higher education for North Carolina through which the major denominations would receive state support for their institutions—including Baptist Wake Forest, Presbyterian Davidson, and Methodist Normal College. In an era when society was widely perceived as a seamless whole in which pan-evangelical Protestantism, educational institutions, and the state mutually reinforced one another, it was not protests of violation of the separation of church and state that stymied the scheme, but simply the state’s inability to fund such an ambitious system.

13 Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 20.
By the eve of the Civil War, the state had abandoned the school to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, who purchased it, rechristened it Trinity College, and assumed full control of both governing boards. In hindsight, Methodist Trinity College might have emerged as ecumenical Union Institute or state-supported Normal College had the partnership or public proved as viable as denominational affiliation.

Instead, Methodist practice and piety were deeply ingrained at Trinity for generations to come through mandated courses and extracurricular activities. Like many students throughout the country, every Trinity graduate in the 1860s and 1870s took the mandatory “Evidences of Christianity” capstone class taught by the president himself. At commencement, each student was presented with a Bible and reminded “you have studied many books, but this surpasses them all; the knowledge of others will be useful, but a practical knowledge herein is essential.”14 Each day began with Scripture and prayer; each week with mandatory Sunday worship. Like “most Americans,” Trinity students and faculty generally “remained confident that Protestantism was still the best and highest expression of religion the world had ever seen.”15

15 Jacobsen and Jacobsen, 19.
But the expansionist, missionary impulse of evangelical Protestantism ironically facilitated abstract engagement with the religious other at Trinity College, long before religious minorities migrating to Northeastern (and Western) port cities made their way to North Carolina in significant numbers. We catch a glimpse of emerging concern over a generic religious other in the minutes of the Theological Society, which met bi-weekly from 1870 to 1893 to debate issues of interest. At the pinnacle of its popularity, this voluntary society claimed more than fifty members, a substantial portion of a body of only a couple hundred students. Participants frequently discussed both domestic and foreign missions, taking up the questions, “what is the best plan to get at the irreligious students of Trinity College?” and “will the heathen be saved?” multiple times.

Regarding the latter, students shifted from an absolutist stance toward other religions to a more moderate position, foreshadowing the pluralism of later generations. The original wording of the question, “will the heathen be saved?” led to a negative decision by the society. But over the years the question was reframed in ways that made it both easier for these evangelicals to entertain the possibility of salvation for non-Christians (“resolved that it is possible for a heathen to be saved without the gospel”)

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16 This term enjoyed much broader application in the 19th century than it does today. Here, I use it in that context, while highlighting the nascent shifts that would come to distinguish “ecumenical Protestantism” and “evangelical Protestantism.” See note 30 below
and more difficult to deny it (“resolved that *all* heathen will be lost,”\(^{19}\) emphases mine).

By 1888, both of these reformulated questions had rendered verdicts in favor of the possibility of salvation outside Christianity, though by thin margins. It is not coincidental that this shift in opinion took place in the decade when the majority of preachers “simply ceased to talk about [hell].”\(^{20}\) In the North, engagement with religious others through “Orientalist” scholarship and encounters with migrants was becoming more common, but even in relatively provincial Southern contexts, Protestants began to relax absolutist interpretations of the gospel and consider the viability of religious alternatives long before they were directly confronted with substantial religious diversity.

Meanwhile, expanded state funding of higher education and emerging secular models based on the German research university created new boundaries and tensions between public and private institutions at the turn of the 20th century. Renowned Methodist preacher and Trinity president John Kilgo attacked state-funded education, contesting its pretensions to theological neutrality. He argued “no man can pass through college without fixing for himself a faith that will be a plan of his life...The only option

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 25

left to education is the choice of the doctrines.”\textsuperscript{21} Kilgo’s choice was a staunchly evangelical form of Christian education “that assumes Christ’s estimate of all things and seeks to develop manhood in the light of His ideals and by His methods and inculcates His truths as the fundamental truths of personal and social character.”\textsuperscript{22} He repeatedly appeared before the state General Assembly to thwart appropriations to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH), denouncing godless secular education and campaigning for equal allocation of public funds to the major denominational institutions. As we will see in chapter 4, UNC-CH leaders would respond to these attacks equivocally for decades, promoting the democratic value of nondenominational public education while requiring chapel attendance, placing the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA) at the center of extracurricular life, and establishing a Religion Department around the piety-oriented Bible courses taught by Rev. Bernard Henry Boyd, the state’s foremost preacher.

Likewise, Kilgo was quite willing to adapt his rhetoric to emphasize Trinity’s “non-sectarian” commitments when vying for respectability and funding from an increasingly secular academic vanguard. In an application for a Carnegie grant expressly excluding ecclesial institutions, Kilgo asserted that Trinity serves all “without regard to religious creeds, political faiths, or social castes, and no attempt to proselyte students

\textsuperscript{22} Gallagher, 23-24.
would be tolerated for a moment.” In retrospect, this claim rings hollow. Every single faculty member was a white Methodist man, African-Americans would not be admitted until 1961, and the school’s mandatory chapel requirement held students captive to daily preaching (often by Kilgo himself). But the bi-directional posturing highlights Trinity’s self-consciousness regarding emerging tensions between its Protestant regional constituency and the national academic elite it aspired to join, tensions that would soon lead fellow Methodist institution Vanderbilt University to disaffiliate from the church. Secularism had indeed emerged as a formidable force in the upper echelons of higher education by the turn of the 20th century, but it would continue to be counterbalanced by persistently powerful Protestant establishments for decades to come.

2.3 Expansion: Protestant Establishments and Proto-Pluralism in a “Privatized Era”

Contrary to linear models which universalize the erosion of Protestant establishments at some elite northern and western institutions during the late 19th and early 20th century, Trinity College would actually ramp up its religious commitments in spite of these ascending secular models of higher education. During Kilgo’s seventeen-year presidency spanning the turn of the century, religious mandates — both curricular

\[23\] Gallagher, 29.

and extracurricular — increased. Indeed, President Kilgo embodied the denominational campus culture in its totality. As minister, he preached “about twice weekly” in chapel and imbued ceremonial events like convocation and commencement with Methodist piety.25 As scholar, he served as the first acting chair of the Department of Religion and taught Bible courses that every undergraduate was required to take all eight semesters.26 And as administrator, he ramped up the chapel requirement to mandatory daily attendance and extended Sabbath services and Sunday school.27

Kilgo also courted the support of tobacco mogul Washington Duke. While Marsden and others have argued that increasing dependence of academic institutions on the philanthropy of business moguls eroded Protestant establishments, the Dukes clearly used their influence to preserve close institutional ties with their beloved Methodist Church. The endowment the Dukes established in 1896 increasingly dwarfed the Methodist Conferences’ annual appropriations to the school, but Washington Duke specifically stipulated that his family’s gifts would be redirected to the Methodist Conferences should Trinity ever disaffiliate from the church.28

26 Helen Curtin, “Undergraduate Religious Instruction at Trinity College and Duke University, 1896-1941: Denominational Training or Non-Denominational Education?,” 1.
28 Gallagher, 18-21. Duke also stipulated that Trinity College must begin educating women.
Both Washington Duke’s and President John Kilgo’s successors continued to reinforce this strong Methodist identity while simultaneously pursuing the aggressive expansion from a regional college into a national university that would eventually precipitate its distancing from these Methodist roots. Through the statement on the “Aims of the University” in the 1924 constitution, James B. Duke, President William Preston Few, and the trustees enshrined the institution’s persistent faith in a seamless mission in which evangelical piety, cutting-edge scholarship, civic service, and ecumenical inclusivity all reinforced one another:

“The aims of Duke University are to assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the teachings and character of Jesus Christ, the son of God; to advance learning in all lines of truth…to promote a sincere spirit of tolerance; to discourage all partisan and sectarian strife; and to render the largest permanent service to the individual, the state, the nation and the Church. Unto these ends shall the affairs of this university always be administered [emphasis mine].”

President Few pursued this strident, expansionist vision of the early 20th century Protestant establishment through the transformation of the Department of Biblical Literature and Religious Education into a world-class seminary engaged in international missions. The expanding reach of the growing university had elevated the salvation of the religious other from a theoretical question to an integral matter of self-understanding and social vision.

20 Gallagher, 47.
After years of exhorting the Methodist Church to endow a chair in missionary training, Few eventually persuaded them to sponsor both Edmund Soper and James Cannon III to teach Christian missions and world religions to both candidates for ministry and undergraduates respectively.\(^{30}\) Cannon and Soper instituted instruction regarding non-Christian religious traditions through distinct missionary lenses representing the evangelical and ecumenical\(^{31}\) forms of Protestantism that would permanently divide the Protestant establishment. Cannon’s introductory missions course “presented the whole program of Christianity in opposition to non-Christian civilizations [emphasis mine]” and served as a “recruiting ground from which missionaries will be reared up.”\(^{32}\) In contrast, Soper’s upbringing on the Tokyo mission field and over twenty years of professional and personal engagement with religious others motivated him to offer a more self-critical and reflective approach grounded in sympathetic comparative study of non-Christian religions and interrogation of Christian bias. Nonetheless, Soper maintained that while “tribal” and “national” religious

\(^{30}\) Minutes from North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, New Bern, NC, November 16-20, 1921.

\(^{31}\) David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History,* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 21. Here I follow Hollinger in employing “ecumenical” rather than “mainline” or “liberal,” as I concur that “ecumenical” “has proven the least confusing way to distinguish [this] family of Protestants…from the fundamentalist, Pentecostal, holiness, and other conservative persuasions within American Protestantism that came to be described collectively as ‘evangelical,’ even though the latter term had earlier denoted a much greater range of Protestant orientations.” I find the term particularly useful here as it was these Protestants’ ecumenical stance that signaled their accommodation of secular and pluralist forces in contrast to evangelicals’ resistance.

traditions may have merit, Christianity constituted the only “universal” tradition adequate for a rapidly shrinking world.\textsuperscript{33}

Both approaches were also conspicuously represented on campus by students themselves through the mainline Young Men’s and Women’s Christian Associations (YMCA and YWCA) and the militant Student Volunteer Movement (SVM) mobilized by the “watchword:” “the evangelization of the world in this generation.” Duke sent sixteen students to the North Carolina SVM conference in 1926, more than any of the other twenty-nine colleges represented. Duke SVM members canvased their campus with colorful posters and printed propaganda exhorting students to mission fields all over the globe: “The heart of the Christian message is missionary in its nature... The true missionary does not wait until reaching a foreign soil to share his experience of Christ...He who will not venture is belittling God.”\textsuperscript{34} In contrast, the YMCA and YWCA took the “soft sell” approach to recruitment, affording them wider bandwidth and considerable support from the university. Each incoming freshman was presented with a “Trinity Y Handbook” which opened with a message from President Few encouraging all students to involve themselves in the various activities of the YMCA and YWCA, including the “Voluntary Study Committee” advertised on page 14:


\textsuperscript{34} “The General Council’s Emphasis on Recruiting for the Year 1928-1929,” The Reverend Dr. Clarice M. Bowman Papers, Duke University Archives.
Among the most important world movements of this age is Foreign Missions. We are proud that more and more students each year are studying in the voluntary classes about missions, but a still further extension of this work is needed.\textsuperscript{35}

In hindsight, it is remarkable how well these militant and mainline organizations and scholars worked together. William Hutchison has argued that such “opposing forces could collaborate because the principal common enterprise, converting the world to Christ, seemed more compelling than any differences; but also because they shared a vision of the essential rightness of Western civilization and the near-inevitability of its triumph.”\textsuperscript{36} This missionary thrust clearly illustrates the persistence of a formidable Protestant establishment on campus well into the 20\textsuperscript{th} century. But missionary engagement with religious others and their traditions also sowed the seeds of pluralism that would set this Methodist institution on an ecumenical trajectory of gradual distancing from its evangelical roots and increasing accommodation of religious others.

In the mid-1930s, there was a palpable shift from the old “non-sectarian denominational” identity to an ecumenical, “interdenominational” identity in which Protestant privilege, pluralism, and secularism were reframed as reinforcing one another. Mainline leaders at Duke and beyond increasingly justified their privilege on the basis of liberal Protestantism’s “universalism” and superior self-abnegating ethic, which were


demonstrated through gestures of progressive inclusivity toward secular social forms, scientific knowledge, and religious minorities. Critical reflections on engagements with religious others on colonial mission fields forwarded by popular novelist Pearl Buck and Harvard heavyweight William Hocking helped launch the nascent interfaith movement and precipitated a decisive shift from proselytization to “no strings attached” social missions across the mainline denominations. At Duke, ecumenism overwhelmed evangelism. The SVM disbanded and the YMCA/YWCA dissolved its foreign missions committee.37 For the first time, chapel attendance became purely voluntary and the sermons preached there grew more broadly inclusive than confessional. For example, liberal Methodist preacher-scholar Lynn Harold Hough’s sermon at Duke Chapel’s dedication christened it as a “monument of that authority and learning for which the university stands…wide enough…to give every human being who comes through its walls a home for [our] highest ideals…whatever our religion, or lack of religion.”38

But campus culture did not become religiously “privatized” so much as liberalized and bureaucratized. Protestant structures were expanded and elaborated as the university grew, but they assumed an ecumenical form seemingly compatible with the nascent “interfaith” movement and academic secularism. Methodist leaders made the Duke University Church (DUC) occupying the newly completed chapel expressly

37 Annual Reports 1930-1940. YMCA Records. Duke University Archives.
“interdenominational” and established the Office of Religious Activities (ORA) to more adequately represent the growing range of religious identities, including Catholics and Jews. The office began hosting an annual “Brotherhood Day Banquet” bringing together “roughly thirty” representatives each from the Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant traditions for “one of the outstanding events of the year in campus religious life.”

President Few characterized this shift as both a reclaiming of the original “interdenominational” identity of Union Institute and a progressive reorientation “in line with the spirit of the age.”

Still, Protestantism remained powerfully established on campus through the mid-century revival, a reality obscured by the “writing on the wall” approach taken by scholars asserting the earlier ascendance of a secularist or “privatized” paradigm. A survey of student religious identification from 1939 reveals that though there were small but significant minorities of Catholics (196, nearly 7%) Jews (89, or 3%) and “Nones” (67, 2%), the four largest denominations (Methodists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Baptists) still claimed over three-quarters of the student population. When we compare this survey to one of the population of the Women’s College in 1953, it seems that

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diversity may have actually decreased in the coming decades.\(^{41}\) Moreover, despite occasional interfaith gestures, religious life structures continued to exacerbate Protestant predominance. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s ORA staff solicited students’ participation in the mainline Protestant worship offered by DUC through mailings and personal invitations extended to unaffiliated students to “come in for a conference...[to] discover means for helping them grow in their religious experience.” These efforts to involve each student in the mainline programming of the ORA and DUC were apparently successful, as voluntary student participation reportedly reached record highs as national church attendance peaked amidst the postwar revival. Such active recruitment sent a clear message to religious minorities that Duke’s was a decidedly Protestant culture. In the early 1960s, the three university-funded religious life positions were all staffed by mainline Protestants, two of them ordained Methodist ministers, and all six recognized campus chaplains represented mainline denominations.\(^{42}\) Clearly, the “Protestant era” lasted far into 20\(^{th}\) century, though it evolved to accommodate secular and pluralist forces.

The 1960s marked the pivotal turning point; academic secularism, cultural upheaval, and baby boomer youth culture permanently fractured this apparently

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\(^{41}\) Ethelene Sampley, “Report of the Acting Director of Religious Activities,” 30 July 1940, Religious Life Collection, Duke University Archives. This gendered sample is admittedly not equivalent. But given that these two data points are all that could be found, they help to illustrate persistent Protestant predominance and the lack of evidence supporting a steady, linear pattern of diversification and/or secularization.

\(^{42}\) “Religious Life Staff, Duke University, 1959-60,” Religious Life Collection, Box 1, Duke University Archives.
seamless ecumenical paradigm. At Duke, a civil war erupted at the dawn of the 1960s between the “old guard” seeking to preserve the institution’s Methodist and regional identities—represented by President Hollis Edens and the Methodist-dominated Board of Trustees—and the “new guard” pushing to pursue the path of secularization undertaken by the elite national institutions whose ranks they aspired to join —led by university administrator Paul Gross and his Endowment Board. The latter pushed to reformulate the “Aims of the University,” garnering wide support among the faculty, several of whom called for the elimination of the required Bible courses and questioned “why any university should have such sectarian concern.” The battle ended in a stalemate: both leaders in the “Gross-Edens” controversy were forced to resign their posts and the religion requirement was modified but retained. But Gross’ secularist faction would ultimately win the war: the religion department was overhauled toward greater academic sophistication and confessional neutrality, the religion requirement eliminated a decade later, and the administrative influence of the Methodist Church was steadily curtailed.

Such secularist influence echoed through the student body as the 1960s progressed. Students helped erode Protestant establishments by vying for more freedom of ideological expression in the classroom, lobbying to dismantle heavily gendered

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loco parentis social regulations, and calling for the diversification of the student body, including intentional counterbalancing of southern over-representation.\textsuperscript{45} A comprehensive study of campus life conducted by students in 1969 found that, although 70% of students reported active participation in their home congregations before matriculating, “less than half” attend church or chapel even “occasionally” while at Duke. Only a small minority were actively involved, while most students were “indifferent,” critical, or hostile to religious life programming. Moreover, conservative Christians charged that the “ethical humanism” preached at Duke Chapel effectively forfeited a primary platform for effective witness in the face of ascendant secularism.\textsuperscript{46}

Meanwhile, tensions emerged between the Protestant establishment’s paradoxical pretensions to both pluralism and exceptionalism, opening a widening chasm between liberal ecumenicals and conservative evangelicals. Duke University Parish Ministry increasingly integrated a growing Catholic presence into its mainline chapel worship in the wake of Vatican II and welcomed “all other persons and religious groups interested in a cooperative ministry.” The United Christian Campus Fellowship, later known as the Duke Christian Unity, formed in 1968 as an ecumenical initiative “for all people” [emphasis theirs] grounded in the notion that “all groups must be involved in coming together to love each other irrespective of theological convictions” [emphasis

\textsuperscript{45} Student Perspectives: A Compilation of Student Opinion, (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1969), 30-47.  
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
The group engaged contemporary cultural and political controversies in a manner that supports David Hollinger’s characterization of ecumenical Protestants’ “self-interrogation” of ethnocentric and sectarian beliefs and practices. Flyers from the period advertised events focused on raising awareness about the sinful consequences of American imperialism and Western colonialism, including the Vietnam War, nuclear proliferation, and hunger in Sudan. And “values clarification” and identity exploration groups targeting African-Americans, women, and agnostics encouraged a “privatized” approach to religion. In hindsight, we can perceive how such ecumenical efforts toward sympathetic dialogue with religious, racial and secular others emerged out of the security of Protestant predominance and helped usher in the pluralism of the postmodern era that would mitigate it.

This ecumenical project of self-interrogation alienated evangelical parachurch groups like InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, Campus Crusade for Christ, and the Navigators, prompting them to employ a diverse array of methods to make an exclusivist interpretation of Protestant theology salient in the university’s intellectual marketplace. These evangelicals conducted “market research” surveys of students’ religious attitudes and needs, sponsored visits by conservative Bible scholars and

itinerant evangelists, and distributed publications offering biblical perspectives on contemporary moral and social issues.

These initiatives self-consciously confronted secularist and pluralist forces. For example, through mass mailings and a “Faculty Forum on Religious Life,” InterVarsity eagerly sought allies amongst an increasingly secular faculty to defend evangelical theology in the positivist terms of academic debate:

“We...are concerned that the claims of Jesus Christ be presented on campus... that all persons shall know the way of salvation. Biblical Christianity stresses not only a personal relationship with God but also that the Christian faith is intellectually defensible based on historical data [emphasis mine].”

Similarly, promotional materials aimed at students exhorted authentic Christians to engage the diversity surrounding them without accepting the allegedly relativizing logic of pluralism: “Once there was a university and everybody came... There were agnostics, Jews, atheists, followers of the occult, some with Christian backgrounds...and a few who believed in Jesus Christ as their Savior and Lord.” The latter were encouraged to train for the “battle” for the “secular campus” by participating in Bible studies and worship and inviting “non-Christians into their communities [to] share Christ with them.” This militant rhetoric reflects an assumption made explicit in a 1981 CCC report: “college unfortunately is a place where many Christian students lose their faith or begin to

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49 John DiPasquale, and Roland Wilkins, Letter to Faculty and Staff on behalf of InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, March 21, 1968, Religious Life Collection, Box 1, Duke University Archives.

50 InterVarsity Brochure, Religious Life Collection, Box 1, Duke University Archives.
radically question its validity.” This sense of alienation from the increasingly post-Protestant cultural establishment ironically provided a countercultural appeal that stimulated considerable growth amongst evangelical groups in the context of the post-60’s “backlash” sustaining Protestant witness on campus through bottom-up resistance to academic secularism.

2.4 “Pluriformity,” Protestant Privilege, and Secularization: The Contest over a Diversified Campus Culture

While Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen framed the turn of the 21st century as the point transition from the “privatized era” to a “postsecular” “pluriform era,” they acknowledged that “this new, foggy pluriformity did not emerge overnight.” They traced it back to the social upheaval of the 1960s, the gradual diversification of the student population in the wake of the immigration reforms of 1965, and the reemergence of religion as a global political force in the late 1970s. But it is important to note that this late 20th century pluralism emerged through interactions between the top-down ecumenism of the liberal mainline leadership, the increasing secularity of students and faculty, and expanding student representation of religious minorities pushing toward a more fully inclusive pluralism.


Jews had long been the only non-Christian religious group to enjoy organized representation through Hillel, founded in 1937, as well as participation in interfaith events like the Brotherhood Day Banquet. Nonetheless, many Jewish students were alienated by Protestant hegemony. In the wake of African-American students’ efforts to confront white normativity through the occupation of the Allen building in 1969, Jewish students pushed for more equal representation. In the early 1970s, the Duke and UNC-CH Hillel chapters banded together to establish a para-curricular religious education program called the “Free Jewish University of North Carolina.” In 1978, Jewish representation fragmented along cultural lines comparable to those dividing Protestants. Liberal Jewish students who did not feel represented by Hillel formed the Duke Jewish Forum, a more secular alternative geared toward contemporary social and political issues.\(^53\) In the same year, freshman Jeremy Glaser demanded

\begin{quote}
the university take steps to either declare [the High Holy Days] as University holidays or to take such measures as are deemed necessary so that no Jewish student is denied the class and lab time that he is forced to miss through this general University indifference to his beliefs.\(^54\)
\end{quote}

John Fein, then Vice Provost and Dean of Trinity College, balked at the proposal, arguing that “the academic calendar does not take any religious holidays into account” (in spite of the month-long break centered around Christmas) and that it would be impossible to broker agreement on observances among all represented religious groups.


Hillel continued to press for equal accommodation through a letter to the faculty on behalf of Jewish students requesting that allowances be made for absences and, if possible, that make-up times be offered for any important assignments that must be held on the holidays.

The gradual, steady increase in the number of immigrants and international students from non-European countries further diversified the student population, precipitating the establishment of the Muslim Students Association in 1960 (MSA, a.k.a. the Islamic Association or IA) and the Baha’i Club by 1974. Despite the ascendance of interfaith ecumenism, these minorities outside of the “Judeo-Christian tradition” had to struggle mightily against entrenched prejudice. IA leaders were compelled to defend Islam when the 1979 Iran hostage crisis prompted unidentified Duke students to lynch a dummy with a representation of the Quran in its hand in a conspicuous spot on campus. IA leaders published an official statement decrying the “sick-minded group [that has] used the political crisis between the two countries to create tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims.” They demanded the administrators hold the perpetrators responsible and vowed to defend Islamic values “even if it costs them their lives.”

Clearly, such strong rhetoric reflects the besieged stance of a minority group that felt their standing on a historically Protestant campus was extremely precarious.

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These minority religious communities’ struggles for inclusion pushed the university to take greater responsibility for facilitating the religious expression and development of an increasingly diverse student body. But while many of the elite private research universities Duke sought to compete with thoroughly disavowed historic Protestant affiliations in the name of secular neutrality, Duke’s Methodist leaders sought to maintain their privilege while simultaneously embracing pluralism.

Duke President Terry Sanford, a devout Methodist and former Democratic Governor, hired Will Willimon, a rising star in the Methodist Church, to be the Minister to the University in 1984 and shore up an increasingly insecure Protestant privilege. “Your job,” Sanford pronounced, “is to do your best to make the Christian faith credible to some really smart young people.”56 This concern with “credibility” reflects the ascendance of a secularist academic paradigm through Duke’s transformation from a regional Methodist college to a selective national research institution, but the old guard’s influence could still be felt through the continued predominance of white male Protestants in the alumni and administration. As a child of the 1960s, Willimon recognized tensions between secularism, pluralism, and the Protestant privilege he represented that had remained obscure to his predecessors. “[By the time] I worked in

56 William Willimon, Interview, October 25, 2012.
Duke Chapel, it was the symbol of the hegemony of Protestant Christianity over American life,” Willimon quipped, referring to it as a “dinosaur.” 57

Within a year of Willimon’s arrival, Sanford retired, and Willimon’s twenty-year tenure would span the presidencies of both Keith Brodie and his successor Nannerl Keohane. These presidents embraced multiculturalism, prioritizing the diversification of the faculty and student bodies through trailblazing initiatives, including the mandatory “A Vision for Duke” bias-interrogation workshops for incoming freshmen and the Black Faculty Resolution. This stance led them to downplay Duke’s Methodist identity and critique the privileged position Protestantism continued to hold on campus as an obstacle to inclusivity. Consequently, the staunchly Christian “Aims of the University” were abandoned in favor of a new mission statement framed in secular terms. 58 This consequential shift led Willimon to engage “the postmodern mood” and employ caustic irony against his secularist opponents in the ongoing contest for the campus culture. When an African-American woman serving in the Methodist ministry and as a resident advisor for undergraduates was asked by administrators to terminate her Bible study because of a perceived conflict of interest, Willimon attacked what he perceived as hypocrisy in a university that advertised itself as an inclusive arena for ideological debate. “Can you say the word ‘university?’” he asked sarcastically. “I’ll be damned if

57 Ibid.
58 Marsden, 421-422.
I’m going to sit here and let you make religious people the one group that isn’t able to get into the fun and mix it up.”\textsuperscript{59} This perceived hegemonic secularism motivated Willimon to pursue a more uncompromising ministry as a “missionary in a non-Christian culture.”

While playfully characterizing himself as a “belligerent” opposing the secularist establishment “using any means necessary,” Willimon had to embrace pluralism as administrator of an increasingly diverse array of student religious organizations. For most of his tenure, the chapel basement housed a multiplicity of such organizations before separate facilities for Jewish, Muslim, Catholic, Presbyterian, and Methodist organizations were constructed. Willimon valued how this intimate arrangement facilitated interreligious dialogue, cooperation, and, when conflict emerged, reconciliation among both chaplains and student representatives. In 1993, he oversaw the revision of the procedure and policy for the official university recognition of campus religious organizations which mandated that all “recognize and affirm the reality of pluralism at Duke University” and be “respectful of the faith and beliefs of all other individuals and groups.” “Door-to-door solicitation” and the “harassment of individuals in order to promote the interests of the group” were grounds for de-recognition.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{59} Willimon, Interview, October 25, 2012.

On the other hand, the policy also required organizations “to recognize the Dean of the Chapel [Willimon] as the authenticating agent for recognizing religious groups.”\textsuperscript{61} Willimon’s theological orthodoxy and willingness to confront secularism endeared him to evangelical parachurch leaders, who accepted the ban on proselytization and became formally incorporated into official religious life structures for the first time. But non-Protestants obviously experienced such oversight somewhat differently. Willimon recalls being “chided” by President Keohane for describing Duke Chapel as a place of “interfaith hospitality” because of the implication that the “powerful are welcoming the powerless.” He retorted, “Well, that’s probably how it feels to be a Muslim on this campus.”\textsuperscript{62} While Willimon’s response may seem to indicate complacence concerning power disparities, it also reflects a self-consciousness regarding the reality and consequences of privilege notably absent among his predecessors.

In light of such structural complexities, Willimon ultimately credited the students for achieving a transformative pluralistic dialogue that simultaneously challenged secularism \textit{and} Protestant privilege, citing a particularly comprehensive illustration involving a student-led “teach-in” on the quad in response to a racial incident on campus:

The kids planned everything. And this young African-American woman gets up and says ‘alright, we’re ready to begin. Let us pray.’ And she led this prayer in

\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Willimon, Interview, October 25, 2012.
Jesus’ name! This was followed by a Buddhist who spoke about being in touch with the world. And then a Muslim got up and led us in this long Muslim prayer, in Arabic and then English. Then the President of the Interfraternity Council gets up and starts screaming that he is possessed by a demon of white racism…”Oh God, who will deliver me from this demon?” Then a woman sings a spiritual a cappella. And the Episcopal campus minister leans over to me and says, “don’t you just hate it that we live on this godless secular campus?” And I said, “wow, the kids don’t seem to have gotten that memo have they?”

For Willimon, this incident represented a pluralistic revival among Generation Xers rebelling against the vapid secularism of their baby boomer parents.\(^{64}\) Despite his stridently Christian theological commitments, he perceived God at work in students expressing a diverse array of religious commitments in the face of an “aging liberal” administration to facilitate “a broader, deeper discussion.” “God can use this,” Willimon asserted, adding provocatively, “I thank God that I wasn’t here in 1950 when we were powerful.”\(^{65}\) For this Methodist bishop, the challenge of negotiating persistent Protestant privilege amidst secularist and pluralist paradigms seemed better for faith itself than the assumed compatibility of previous generations.

After Willimon’s departure, structures reinforcing Protestant privilege and pluralism were decoupled, allowing for distinctive representation through expanded university investments in religious life. Sam Wells, Willimon’s successor as Dean of the

\(^{63}\) Willimon, Interview, October 25, 2012.

\(^{64}\) Here, Willimon’s perspective mirrors the “backlash” thesis articulated by Putnam and Campbell in *American Grace*, but in a more pluralistic and less politicized form.

\(^{65}\) Willimon, Interview, October 25, 2012.
Chapel, delegated oversight of the diverse array of religious organizations represented on campus to Christy Lohr Sapp, a theologian of religious pluralism. Over the past decade, Sapp has enhanced interreligious dialogue and cooperation through the Interreligious Council and joint service initiatives. The Dean of the Chapel position, now occupied by African-American Baptist Luke Powery, is no longer primarily focused on ministry to undergraduates, but rather pastoring the multi-generational congregation of Duke Chapel, teaching in the Divinity School, and serving as a kind of theological ambassador for the university through scholarship and public speaking engagements. Meanwhile, Jewish and Muslim students have acquired their own centers, led by multiple full-time “chaplains" staffed by the Office of Student Affairs. Consequently, the landscape of university-sponsored religious life has shifted significantly from exacerbating Protestant privilege to more equally supporting Duke’s increasingly diverse religious communities. Yet, Protestant privilege persists through conspicuous symbols, including the official Duke seal’s prominent cross and motto, “eruditio et religio (knowledge and piety),” and the architectural dominance of an imposing cathedral at the heart of the cruciform quad.

\[\text{\textsuperscript{66}}\] Willimon had successfully lobbied for a permanent change in title, arguing that “minister to the university” was inappropriate in a post-Protestant era when many students had no desire for a “minister.” \[\text{\textsuperscript{67}}\] Several observers have noted the Christian privilege embedded in this title that retains universal status in academia, the healthcare system and the military. While these communities may prefer to refer to these leaders as rabbis and imams, respectively, I use the university title to highlight that the hiring of these religious leaders is an explicit effort to achieve equivalency regarding a position long afforded to Protestants.
The responses of 246 Duke undergraduates to the 2013 *Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey* (CRSCS) further suggest that contemporary Duke students experience the influence of all three paradigms simultaneously, with pluralism permeating co-curricular programming, secularism predominating in the classroom, and Protestantism looming largest symbolically in institutional and cultural heritage. Students testified to the impact of initiatives aiming to diversify the campus population and pluralize religious life programming, registering significantly above average levels for “pluralism orientation,” “structural worldview diversity,” “provocative experiences with worldview diversity,” “informal engagement with diverse peers,” and “transformative impact of college on worldview” compared to the other 61 institutions surveyed.

But such pluralistic encounters often prove difficult; students reported above average levels of “negative inter-worldview engagement,” “divisive psychological

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69 My global interpretation of the results in light of historical context.  
70 “captures the extent to which students are accepting of others with different worldviews, believe that worldviews share many common values, consider it important to understand the difference between world religions, and believe it is possible to have strong relationships with diverse others and still hold to their own worldview.”  
71 Defined as “perceptions of the proportional representation of various religious and non-religious groups on campus.”  
72 “captures whether students have had challenging or stimulating experiences with people of different worldviews.”  
73 “measures the degree to which students feel their religious or spiritual worldview may have changed due to their overall college experience.”  
74 “measures the negative quality of students’ interactions with peers from other religious or spiritual traditions.”
climate,” and “insensitivity and coercion on campus.” These tensions may result from clashes between secularist and religious worldviews as much or more than between particular religious traditions. Duke students reported significantly lower levels of “curricular or faculty-led religious and spiritual engagement,” suggesting that religious perspectives are not perceived to be welcome in the classroom. Within the student body, non-religious students are rated as the most accepted group on campus, and by a wider margin compared to other schools surveyed. According to the survey, Christians (52.8%) still constitute a “worldview majority,” though the inclusion of Catholics and others suggests that Protestants retain a mere plurality. Furthermore, results indicate that ascendant secular and pluralist forces have subjected conservative Protestants to exceptional scrutiny. Compared to other institutions sampled, Duke students reported significantly below average levels of acceptance of and appreciative attitudes towards Evangelicals and Mormons, groups rated the least warmly of all. In contrast, acceptance and appreciation levels for Jew, Muslims, and Atheists were all significantly above average. While the adhan compromise and powerful symbolic vestiges like the chapel, Divinity School, seal, and motto all testify to persistent

75 “refers to the degree of conflict or separation that exists between different worldview groups on campus.”
76 “reflects the frequency of insensitive comments or behaviors directed toward different worldview groups.”
77 “refers to how frequently students engaged in academic pursuits addressing religion and spirituality.”
Protestant privilege, the CRSCS results suggest that contemporary students feel the force of the pluralist and secularist paradigms more immediately and forcefully.

2.5 Conclusion: The Adhan Dialogues as a Metaphor for the Relationship Between Religion and Higher Education

This historical case study helps us to make sense of a particularly palpable moment of conflict among Protestant, pluralist, and secular forces at Duke. Outside observers aligned with all three paradigms lamented the adhan controversy as a disaster for oppositional reasons, missing an opportunity to critically engage both the divergences and convergences between the respective constructions of pluralism fundamental to each of their arguments. Crucial differences notwithstanding, Franklin Graham, Christy Lohr Sapp, Richard Hays, and secular journalists all explicitly recognized the right of all members of the Duke community to express their religious commitments freely, as well as the fact that the adhan carried implications for our understanding of a historically Protestant sacred space.

While such shared reference points were utterly obscured in news coverage of the controversy, many members of the university community benefitted from the opportunity to explore them. Hundreds of non-Muslims showed up for the compromised adhan to hear the Duke Muslim community testify to its shared faith, in all likelihood far more than would have had it not been contested. Later, students and faculty packed a Divinity School lecture hall to hear a panel including Islamic Studies Center Director Omid Safi, secular humanist and cultural anthropologist Diane Nelson,
and Protestant theologians David Marshall and Luke Bretherton, all representing distinct, and often contravening viewpoints. There were opportunities for ardent pluralists and ecumenical Protestants to cast visions of interreligious unity, conservative Protestants to voice their concerns regarding important differences between the traditions and their relevance for maintaining the integrity of sacred spaces, and staunch secularists to offer analyses of the controversy in terms of power, privilege, and freedom of expression. Everyone was welcomed, treated with respect, and confronted with the palpable tensions between these distinct perspectives. Safi best captured the spirit of this candid, inclusive dialogue in his frank but inviting address to the diverse audience: “You are here and you belong wholeheartedly. If we are not able to have these kinds of open conversations in a university, where are we supposed to have them?”

This case is as instructive for scholarship on religion and higher education as it is for religious dialogue on campus. The seemingly contradictory literature reviewed in the first chapter highlights important realities regarding Protestant privilege, secularist exclusion of religious perspectives, and pluralist engagement with religious diversity, as well as historical shifts in the balance of power among these forces. But these scholars all emphasize the predominance of a single paradigm to the point of obscuring the coexistence of others. The result is that relative differences are rendered absolute: we

become insuperably separated from those of previous generations by determinative historical context, and the differences between conservative Protestants, inclusive pluralists, and strict secularists are ossified and exaggerated. More often than not, such simplified presentations serve to shore up our most deeply held commitments—be they grounded in confessional faith, multiculturalism, or positivism—at the expense of competing priorities. This case study shows how different individuals and groups joined together by a common institution have responded to a shared human problem: how should communities in diverse societies balance priorities to honor a majority religious heritage, foster an inclusive environment where religious minorities are welcome to practice their traditions freely, and create power structures that are fair to all, regardless of these differences?

Leaders representing Islam, secular humanism, and conservative and ecumenical forms of Protestantism created space in the wake of the adhan controversy to share distinct perspectives regarding the sharing of sacred space. This serves as an apt metaphor for my main analytical point: the reality of religion on American college campuses is an ever-evolving dialogue between particular Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces shaped by specific historical and institutional contexts. Awareness of these complexities engenders appreciation for how the relative strength of these three forces will vary between institutions, within institutions, and even within individuals’ particular experiences of them. Thus, instead of talking past one another, asserting
competing characterizations regarding what the relationship between religion and higher education is and ought to be, we can share in a critical dialogue regarding the wide variety of responses to a persistent paradox in which we all have something to learn from one another.
3. A Puzzle of Paradoxes: Women’s Education and the Evangelical Mainline at Meredith College, 1900-2017

On the surface, the religious history of Meredith College might appear so straightforward as to warrant little more than a footnote: a liberal arts college for women conceived, nurtured, and eventually lost by the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) amidst the “conservative resurgence” of the late 20th century that ousted moderates refer to as the “fundamentalist takeover.” Then again, this supposedly straightforward story would be told quite differently by distinct observers. From the perspective of conservative Christian scholars of religion and higher education George Marsden and John Sommerville, Meredith’s story would fall into a larger narrative of a secularist purging of formative religious influences from the academy, which they argue came to be defined by “established non-belief” over the course of the 20th century. And from a feminist perspective, disaffiliation from a patriarchal church body would seem logical, even mandatory, for an institution to faithfully pursue a mission to empower young women through critical liberal arts education. While proponents of pluralism might frame Meredith’s disaffiliation as exemplifying how such Christian privilege has been transcended in order to include religious minorities in a more inclusive dialogue, critics of Christian privilege might question whether Meredith’s disaffiliation redresses a more fundamental, pervasive privileging of Christian perspectives over minority traditions and non-religious worldviews. These representations of Meredith’s trajectory would all
contain some truth, but they ultimately are incomplete, and even misleading, for they all obscure the way these Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces have interacted throughout Meredith’s history and continue to shape its complex campus climate.

Similarly, the assumed incongruence between Meredith College’s longstanding dual commitments to the Southern Baptist Convention and women’s empowerment obscures more than it reveals. For throughout the 20th century, these commitments were inseparable from one another. The form of empowerment that Meredith sought for its students was powerfully informed by a Southern Baptist piety culture, and the Baptist faith preached there was one that held the elevation of women through education to be a godly mission. Broader historical events help explain why Meredith presents itself today in ways hardly distinguishable from other independent private women’s colleges inspired by religious missions that were ultimately abandoned in the 20th century as a new identity coalesced around empowering the “new woman.” The sexual revolution of the late 1960s and early 1970s made dismantling patriarchy part and parcel of a mission to empower women, as the secularization and diversification of American higher education fundamentally changed norms regarding institutions’ religious affiliations. These developments are crucial for understanding why Meredith’s current promotional campaign pivots around the word “strong,” while its deep Baptist roots are not mentioned at all in its current mission and vision statements, with only a brief allusion to “heritage, including its founding by North Carolina Baptists” buried within its
summary of institutional values. But to understand how an institution that was literally owned by the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina (BSCNC) for the large majority of its history has ostensibly severed these deep roots within a generation, it is even more crucial to understand how the fundamentalist takeover of the SBC amidst the post-1960s culture war changed what it meant to be Southern Baptist.

The religious history of Meredith College presents us with a puzzle of paradoxes that frustrates conventional accounts of historical change regarding religion and higher education, constructions of gender, and American Protestantism, and challenges the categories we use to make sense of those changes. In this historical case study, I unpack these paradoxes to enhance our understanding of these phenomena, analyzing how Meredith was simultaneously feminist and patriarchal, liberal and conservative, elitist and populist, evangelical and mainline, utterly Baptist and non-sectarian. First, we see how Baptist faith simultaneously inspired, hampered, and threatened to destroy the institution in the more than 100 years between the time when a “female seminary” was first conceived by North Carolina Baptists and Meredith’s achievement of a measure of financial stability. In the early 20th century, this male-dominated institution expanded women’s intellectual, social, and vocational horizons through first-rate liberal arts education and boundary-pushing extracurricular activities while simultaneously reinforcing a patriarchal order through institutional structures, classroom instruction, and a strict *in loco parentis* code of conduct thoroughly regulating every aspect of
students’ lives in accordance with gendered norms of propriety. At mid-century, we see Meredith as a peculiarly Southern Baptist community displaying characteristics of both the progressive “mainline” and post-fundamentalist “neo-evangelical” subculture, thus disrupting the conceptual fulcrum of accounts of the fracturing of the Protestant establishment. I examine the religious and gendered implications of this “evangelical mainline” culture in the context of the secularization of higher education, the women’s liberation movement, and the American South. Next, I frame Meredith’s disaffiliation in the late 20th century as a dramatic chapter in the heavily gendered power struggle within the SBC that permanently ruptured the network that had sustained this precarious institution from its conception, rather than the inevitable result of larger educational and cultural trends. In hindsight, we can see that Meredith’s longstanding commitment to empower young women through education precipitated its disaffiliation from the SBC and subsequent secularization and pluralization, despite the explicit intentions of the Board of Trustees to preserve the college’s progressive Baptist identity while freeing it from patriarchal constraints. We see how this history has conditioned interactions between Protestant, pluralist, and secular forces that in turn shape how each individual student conceives “what strong looks like”1 at 21st century Meredith College. In conclusion, I reflect upon the broader relevance of the paradoxes drawn for American religious history and the role of women’s education and the SBC within it. Throughout,

1 A reference to Meredith College’s current marketing tagline.
we see how Meredith has simultaneously reinforced problematic boundaries and equipped its students with cultural and theological tools to transcend them, just as Southern Baptist bodies have been simultaneously “church” and “sect,” mainline and evangelical, ecumenical and parochial, expansionist and reactionary, a disruptor of traditional social norms and an establishment reinforcing them.

3.1 Founding: Baptist Faith Inspires, Hampers, and Threatens Women’s Education

North Carolina Baptists’ long struggle to establish a college for their daughters illustrates how their faith both inspired this mission and relegated it to secondary priority. They formally articulated a vision for a collegiate institution for women only three years after they moved to establish Wake Forest for men in 1832, but the prioritizing of men’s education delayed the founding of the proposed “female seminary” for six decades. Meredith College is named for Thomas Meredith, founder and editor of the Biblical Recorder and leader of a group repeatedly exhorting the Baptist State Convention to make provision for a college for women in the late 1830s. His committee cited a blend of Protestant, secular, and proto-pluralist reasons such a venture was necessary to fulfill the directives of Christian faith, “civilization,” and “liberal sentiment.” But their rhetoric also drove home its secondary importance. “[We] deem it proper and seasonable to express [our] views of the great importance of Female

Education, as well on account of the direct improvement of one-half of our species as on account of the *indirect influence* which well-educated women exert on the welfare of the whole community [emphasis mine].” \(^3\) Consequently, the committee concluded it “not expedient” to divert resources from Wake Forest at the time. Asked to report on the matter again in 1838, Thomas Meredith offered a more impassioned appeal on behalf of the enterprise, which he clearly envisioned to be a non-sectarian endeavor. He testified that the dearth of quality educational institutions for women bred confidence that a quality institution “would receive ample support” from Baptists and non-Baptists alike. \(^4\)

Nonetheless, the venture stalled in a season of recession and apathy. And periodic quickenings of interest came to little consequence until the end of the 19th century. \(^5\)

This long history of false starts in the founding of Meredith reflects a parallel history within the SBC of near misses regarding opportunities for expanded leadership roles for women. In 1882, the convention had authorized the appointment of a salaried position for a woman to serve as “Superintendent of the State Central Committees, whose duty it shall be to collect and disseminate information and in other ways to

\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) In 1849, the state convention approved “a female college for the state of elevated character,” opening Oxford Female College in 1851. But the Convention proved unwillingly to offer the fledgling school sufficient support to survive due to its prioritization of growing the endowment of Wake Forest. By 1857, Oxford College was sold for debt to John Mills, who, along with subsequent proprietors, ran the school with mixed success until its closure in the 1930s. Like many women’s institutions at the time, its academic standards seem to not have been up to those we would associate with a “college” today.
stimulate and strengthen woman’s [missionary] work for woman in all lands.”⁶ But in light of the controversial women’s suffrage movement, the Foreign Missions Board balked at the proposal lest they make a “false step [that] might entail fatal embarrassments for years to come,”⁷ reflecting a sectional blend of churchly self-consciousness concerning conformity with regional gendered norms of propriety and sectarian anxiety regarding excessive accommodation of secular forces from the North. In the same way, Meredith’s female seminary was hampered by ambivalence among Baptist leaders about diverting any power from men to women. “The reason assigned [for the long delay in founding Meredith] was poverty, but Wake Forest grew and accumulated $100,000 in endowment before the Civil War,” Meredith’s second president, Richard Vann, wrote. “I fear, therefore, we must admit that the longstanding assumption of superiority by men over women was responsible for this neglect.” An inequality reinforced by “a widespread fear that any training which went beyond the cultivation of ‘the polite arts’ might unfit Woman for her Place in the Home.”⁸

Baptists were not the first to establish an institution of higher education for women in North Carolina. Moravians had taken the lead, establishing Salem Female Academy in 1772. And around the time that Thomas Meredith’s committee proposed a Baptist “female seminary,” Quakers opened the coeducational New Garden Boarding Academy in 1772.

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⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Johnson, Meredith, 7-8.
School destined to become Guilford College (1837), while Methodists founded Greensboro Female College (chartered in 1838 and opened it in 1846). Though the remarkably democratic Separate Baptists of the 18th century “allowed remarkable freedom of participation of women” on the basis of the traditional Baptist doctrines of “soul liberty” and the “priesthood of all believers,” this freedom diminished after 1800 as a result of their union with Regular Baptists, along with the will to witness against the evils of slavery. As Christine Heyrman has argued, this shift was part of a larger process of accommodation of mainstream mores regarding race, gender, and the family amongst evangelical churches attending their transformation from outsider upstarts advocating sectarian opposition to mainstream social norms into establishment institutions reinforcing them. While preaching Baptist women had pushed gender boundaries in the 18th century, Southern Baptists debated whether women should be permitted to take communion or allowed a voice in electing their pastors in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Perhaps it is not surprising that men sought to curtail women’s power, for, according to one 1885 estimate, 60% of the one million Southern Baptists were women. Women’s ordination would remain off the table entirely until the late 20th century, when it would provoke a firestorm of controversy and a reactionary backlash.

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The perceived impossibility of women’s ordination at the time hampered Meredith’s progress, as the training of clergy served as a primary legitimator of institutions of higher education, particularly in the eyes of denominational sponsors. Nonetheless, Baptist commitments to the “priesthood of all believers” and a democratic polity helped preserve institutionalized opportunities for women to assume official leadership roles within the SBC, including colleges like Meredith and the Women’s Missionary Union. In contrast to the hierarchical Methodist Church, congregations ultimately held authority within the SBC. Since women were usually permitted to vote on matters of congregational business, there was reason for even the most obtuse patriarch to see the wisdom of educating Baptist daughters, despite the gendered prejudice of the time, exacerbated by sectional pride in southern “chivalry.” Meredith College would continually reflect this paradoxical history throughout its tenure as a Baptist institution, forwarding an original vision of “soul freedom” without respect to gender while explicitly reinforcing the boundaries surrounding mainstream Southern conceptions of femininity. This particular pattern reflects a broader reality in which secular political and cultural values and a variety of Protestant faiths generally reinforced a thoroughly patriarchal order, especially in the South, but with notable exceptions.

Meredith was, from its conception, highly patriarchal and paternalistic while demonstrating an exceptional commitment to meeting the same educational standards
as colleges for men. While many women’s “colleges” at the time were little more than glorified finishing schools, Meredith’s committee had from the first envisioned a Raleigh-based institution offering “first rate” instruction, “modeled and conducted on strictly religious principles” but “free from sectarian influence.” They also specified that it would be governed by “one man, who, together with his lady, should constitute a sort of temporary parentage.”

12 The patriarchal structure of the Baptist community was such that investments in developing female leaders, including the proposed “female seminary,” had to be spearheaded by male leaders, among whom there was considerable opposition. Baptist historians Rufus Spain and Leon MacBeth concluded from their respective surveys that “Southern Baptists spoke out often and almost with one voice against women voting (in government elections), women speaking in mixed assemblies, women preachers, and coeducation.”

13 The rationale offered to support these patriarchal positions — including “women’s supposed delicate nature, the law of God,” and sectional sentiments (i.e. “our people South, as a rule, are unalterably opposed” to such practices) — illustrate how such prejudice was as much derived from socio-cultural conventions as fidelity to Protestant teachings.

Paradoxically, Meredith College both reflects and contravenes this history of entrenched patriarchy in the SBC. Widespread opposition to coeducation enabled the

12 Johnson, Meredith, 4.
13 MacBeth, 14.
14 Ibid., 14-15.
possibility of a woman’s college, which afforded opportunities to disprove claims that women were intellectually inferior to men. Meredith could not have succeeded without the leadership of men like evangelist and educator Oliver Stringfield, men who similarly challenge chauvinistic characterizations of Southern Baptist men at the time through the blood, sweat, tears, and dollars they spent establishing the college. Stringfield’s passionate, tireless campaign on behalf of the university is legendary in Meredith lore. But his paternalistic rhetoric also gives us pause. In an article published in the Biblical Recorder in 1894, Stringfield testified, “We verily believe that God has men with enough money to erect suitable buildings and endow the school so that we can, under God, do a work for the Baptist girls of the State that will live forever [emphases mine].” But Stringfield must be evaluated within the context of the patriarchal world in which he lived. He did the best he could to create the opportunities for women of which he could conceive. College historian Mary Johnson recounts how

With [great] conviction, he went up and down the state from the mountains to the sea, speaking wherever he could get a hearing—at the Convention and at associations, in city and country churches, in schoolhouses and under brush arbors. Tall and awkwardly lanky, dark as an Indian, he caught the attention of his audience as soon as he rose to speak. Pleased with the informality of his manner and with his keen sense of humor, his listeners were soon absorbed in the theme that absorbed him—the glorious destiny of the Baptist Female University [BFU].

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15 Oliver Stringfield, “Cold Water on the Baptist Female University,” Biblical Recorder, May 2, 1894.
16 Johnson, Meredith, 44.
In Johnson’s estimation, it was Stringfield’s grassroots, state-wide campaign that finally garnered the breadth of support that yielded sufficient funding to realize this vision. Meanwhile, Meredith’s more staid and well-positioned benefactors made crucial maneuvers on behalf of the institution in Raleigh, overcoming a number of challenges to finally open the school in the fall of 1899. These origins reflect the culture Meredith grew out of, where women had little choice but to depend on the goodwill of benevolent patriarchs for their educational aspirations to be realized.

Men genuinely committed to the mission of empowering women through education would serve and control the institution for decades to come. The Board of Trustees was all-male for several decades, and the paintings that adorn the Board Room and administrative offices long honored an exclusively male pantheon of Meredith luminaries, including Thomas Meredith, Oliver Stringfield, and the various presidents. A woman would not become president until 1999. In retrospect, it is remarkable how frequently throughout Meredith’s history the addresses given at ceremonial occasions like Founder’s Day have not only been delivered by men, but given androcentric titles like “The Church, the College, and the Man” and “To Sway the Minds of Men.” Moreover, other Baptist men outside of it would threaten its very existence again and again.

17 Johnson, Meredith, 310.
18 Johnson, Meredith, 319.
Throughout Meredith’s history, financial instability and the priority of male education continually threatened the precarious institution. Three years after BFU was chartered, and four years before it opened its doors to students, delegates put forth an alternative proposal to make Wake Forest coeducational. In 1923 and 1939, proposals to merge Meredith and Wake Forest were again promoted by convention members. When Wake Forest voted to allow women students in 1942, still another groundswell for consolidation of the two institutions emerged. This substantial ambivalence among Baptists regarding Meredith undermined the institution. At the same time, the school would not have survived without the annual appropriations of the state convention and contributions from rank-and-file Baptists rich and poor, with and without direct ties to the school. John Weems, who served as President from 1971-1999, would remind the Meredith community of this fact by telling the story of how generous Depression-era Baptists once allocated to Meredith half the total contributions to the convention in order to keep the College “open and alive.” Paradoxically, the Southern paternalism that held that women must be sheltered from young men and other temptations helped to preserve an institution where women could push the boundaries of that very patriarchal order.

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20 Ibid.
3.2 Challenging and Reinforcing the Gendered Boundaries of Southern Propriety and Baptist Piety

The female faculty and staff who served the institution both helped reinforce and challenge those boundaries. Women held secondary leadership posts that remained inaccessible to them at most coeducational institutions, but their status within the hierarchy depended upon their internalizing and publicly reinforcing the patriarchy that pervaded it and the surrounding society. The women who maintained positions of influence in the institutions were those who strictly reinforced the gendered boundaries of propriety. Dr. Delia Dixon Carroll, who, as resident physician, was one of the most educated women on the initial faculty, was famous among “generations of college students [for her] annual declaration: ‘every young lady in this institution is expected to wear a sleeve, and not a lace curtain; and if I find on the first day of November one single girl in low shoes, nothing under high heaven shall prevent her being sent home immediately.’”21 Not only their dress, but students’ comings and goings from the campus were zealously policed, primarily by female faculty and staff. Though the original campus was only a couple acres in downtown Raleigh, students were only permitted to leave it twice a week—for church on Sunday and either a date or shopping for any necessities, and they were only allowed to receive gentlemen callers on Monday afternoons.22

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21 Johnson, Meredith, 128.
22 Johnson, Meredith, 140.
At least one woman on the early faculty modeled an alternative conception of femininity. Effie Freeman Thompson, hired as Professor of Bible and Philosophy in 1907, was the first faculty member to hold a PhD, an especially difficult feat for a woman to achieve at the time.\textsuperscript{23} She was dismissed in 1910, apparently for appearing unbecomingly uppity and insufficiently deferential to the all-male administration, who “for several years shied away from women with PhDs, attributing the peculiarities of this one to her training rather than her temperament.”\textsuperscript{24} In persistently provincial Raleigh, it did not help that Thompson had been trained exclusively in the North—at Boston University, Newton Theological Institute, and the University of Chicago. Apparently, the students felt quite differently about Professor Thompson’s performance, for “they organized a demonstration to protest her dismissal,”\textsuperscript{25} an impressively bold initiative at the time. Thompson’s hiring and firing represents the tensions between Meredith’s aspirations to be a rigorous, female-centered institution that met the academic standards set by the increasingly secular elite institutions of the North and West while hewing to the restrictive bounds of propriety governing the Southern Baptist Church specifically and Southern culture more broadly. For the next several decades, Meredith’s dual identities as a Baptist women’s college would both serve to insulate it from secular and pluralist forces that might erode these gendered boundaries.

\textsuperscript{24} Johnson, \textit{Meredith}, 115.
\textsuperscript{25} Crook, 14.
Thompson’s case also illustrates Meredith’s paradoxical role regarding the nascent discipline of religious studies. “Meredith was in the vanguard [in terms of pioneering] the academic study of religion,” establishing a “Department of the Bible” in 1902 for what was “not a common subject for undergraduate study” at the time nor for women more generally.26 And it expressed a commitment to meeting the same standards of intellectual rigor governing the secular sciences, pursuing “as painstaking, as accurate, and as thorough scholarship as the work of any other department.”27 Some form of religion requirement has been in place from Meredith’s founding to the present. For decades, there was a two-semester Bible requirement covering both testaments. Thus, virtually every student who passed through Meredith’s halls in the early 20th century was subjected to theologically moderate survey of the entire Bible that reflected Baptist interpretive priorities. The hermeneutical approach taken likely appeared provocatively liberal to many students reared in conservative churches. Still, the pious purposes of such study were made quite explicit: “The aim is to furnish an intellectual grasp of the Bible, not as an end in itself, but as a necessary means to their practical use through life, in the nurture of spiritual character.”28

The pressure to conform to the piety culture of the SBC tethered the department to the conservative wing of the discipline and relativized standards regarding the

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26 Ibid., 6.
28 Ibid.
academic credentials of instructors for much of the 20th century. After Thompson’s firing, all full-time religion faculty were male Baptist pastors through the late 1970s, and several either had or would later serve as foreign missionaries. Most had attended Baptist seminaries, and many brought credentials that were more pastoral than academic. Though students were exposed to critical scholarly approaches, the aim of these courses was ultimately to inculcate Christian character by stimulating personal application of Biblical teachings.

The pernicious influence of Professor Thompson notwithstanding, the substantial religious instruction offered at Meredith during its early decades generally reinforced the boundaries of the woman’s sphere. For example, the “Christian Nurture” course was designed “to prepare [students] for moral and religious instruction in the home and Sunday school . . . [through] a careful consideration of those phases of biblical truth best suited to promote Christian Nurture at [each stage of children’s development], and by practice work in applying these principles by actual teaching in the Sunday schools of the city.”29 Meredith effectively prepared its students for one of the only forms of Christian leadership that Southern Baptists had deemed permissible. More broadly, the department made it clear that its purpose was not “vocational preparation . . . [rather] it is intended to be an important and integral part of a student’s personal and

intellectual growth, no matter what are that student’s career objectives. That is the logic for Meredith’s requirement that all students take some work in religion.” This ambivalent statement is representative of the tendency of Meredith’s leaders to speak out of both sides of their mouths concerning the controversial question of “vocational preparation,” presenting the curriculum as edifying for both the home-making Southern lady and those aspiring to work outside the home, thus forestalling charges of corruption from conservatives.

In the same way, while gender-segregated education was presented as ideal for cultivating proper femininity, it also provided opportunities for women to try on leadership roles and activities inaccessible in coeducational contexts. The insulated nature of the small campus afforded opportunities for students to push other gender boundaries through participation in extracurricular organizations including the Athletic Association (established 1903), the Dramatic Club (1903), and the Student (government) Association (1905). Local residents were shocked to learn that these young women played basketball in shorts and performed both the male and female roles in A Midsummer Night’s Dream, scandalous activities they likely attributed to the emerging secular culture of the early 20th century. This performance “brought the school such severe censure that for several years no plays were given.” The Student Association has

30 Crook, 4.
31 Johnson, Meredith, 130-136.
32 Ibid., 136.
always held an exceptional degree of power concerning student discipline and school policies compared to other institutions, whether male, female, or coeducational. So empowered were students to actualize their full rights to such authoritative representation, they pushed (without success) for power equivalent to the faculty senate in matters of college business less than ten years after the Student Association’s founding.\textsuperscript{33} Throughout Meredith’s history, student representatives would consistently vie for maximal responsibility and frequently win inclusion into important decision-making processes. For many students, the pursuit of such leadership positions was empowered by pious desires to be faithful stewards of their talents. At Meredith, young Baptist women denied access to the pulpits of their churches seized extensive opportunities to minister to one another, leading the morning watch and nightly vespers services, as well as voluntary classes offering instruction in the Bible and preparation for missionary work.

Meanwhile, the steady stream of annual rituals that have constituted a robust ceremonial culture from the school’s founding to the present were imbued with pious overtones. For example, at commencement, each student was presented with a Bible, and the “entire student body, faculty, and the trustees [would march] from the College to” First Baptist and the Tabernacle Church respectively for the morning baccalaureate

\textsuperscript{33} Ibid., 139.
and evening missionary sermons given by Baptist luminaries. But many of these rituals counterbalanced such pious solemnities with playful performances of transgression, including Stunt Night, the faculty performance of Alice in Wonderland, and Class Day, which involved the burning of the class’ most detested book. As President Richard Vann put it, “with no trace of cant or suppression of the natural, bright joy of youth, there is evident among our women a healthy, vigorous religious life.” While marked by Baptist peculiarities, it was also an ecumenical community from the outset, drawing students and faculty from the range of Protestant denominations and affirming their right to adhere to these alternative traditions. This ubiquitous mingling of Protestant, secular, and proto-pluralist forces produced a paradoxical campus climate, a pious culture of propriety replete with boundary-pushing, leading one historian of early student life at Meredith to title her account “Liberally Conservative and Conservatively Liberal.”

3.3 The Evangelical Mainline at Midcentury: Progressive Social Engagement and Evangelical Witness

Reframing this student historian’s paradoxical formulation in terms of the history of American Protestantism, we perceive a thoroughly Southern Baptist institution representing the “evangelical mainline and mainline evangelical” — for

34 Ibid., 141-142.
35 Ibid., 132.
36 Tammie Coble, Liberally conservative and conservatively liberal: student life at Meredith College, 1899-1920, 1993. Sadly, this resource appears to have been lost, leaving only its title to be referenced.
Meredith reflected both the mainline impulse to accommodate secular and pluralist forces and evangelical will to resist them. This binary, pivotal for conventional accounts of the decline of the Protestant establishment over the course of the 20th century, breaks down when we consider the midcentury religious climate at Meredith College. And the same can be said regarding assumptions concerning the conservative social influence of evangelical Protestantism on whites in the “Bible Belt” during this period. To be sure, Southern regionality helped reinforce conservative norms of propriety as well as preserve Protestant influence and conservative theological perspectives. But at Meredith we see how such fervent evangelical faith could empower progressive and ecumenical initiatives generally associated with the mainline.

As a highly reputable but decidedly regional institution owned by the BSCNC, Meredith continued to cleave closely to this church body into the late decades of the 20th century. In contrast, neighboring Duke drifted from their churchly foundations as they strove to compete with the national academic elite. When we compare these two schools, we see how both came to adopt increasingly progressive stances regarding racial justice, women’s empowerment, and ecumenical inclusivity, but that Meredith maintained traditional theological commitments while Duke shifted toward a decidedly liberal theological stance and secularized much more rapidly. While displays of Methodist piety were increasingly compartmentalized within Duke Divinity School and a bureaucratized religious life structure, an ecumenical form of Baptist piety continued to
imbue campus culture at Meredith for decades to come. While chapel attendance had become voluntary at Duke and many other colleges in the preceding decades, Meredith students were required to attend chapel five times a week through mid-century.37 This contrast can be attributed to a number of factors, including a greater degree of direct control by Baptist Conventions compared to the Methodist Conferences, Duke’s ambition to compete with elite institutions, as well as the links between evangelical faith and conservative constructions of gender analyzed here. And while the Duke endowment grew to dwarf the Methodist Conferences appropriations and its endowment board became aligned with the secularizing faction led by Paul Gross, every one of Meredith’s trustees would be a North Carolina Baptist until the college disaffiliated in the mid-1990s. Meredith was highly dependent on both the BSCNC’s annual appropriations and the small donations of alumni and sympathetic Baptists who “owned” Meredith to a much greater degree than rank-and-file North Carolina Methodists owned the expansionist Duke University.

As an academically rigorous and thoroughly SBC college, Meredith both provided an evangelical witness in the “privatized” era of higher education and a progressive witness within a conservative church, thus challenging accounts of the wholesale secularization of higher education and characterizations of the SBC as inherently socially conservative. In many ways, Meredith aligned with what Grant

37 Johnson, Meredith, 276.
Wacker has called the “southern evangelical mainstream,” the broad Church of the American South in the Troeltschian sense, which comfortably reinforced the standing social order. While this “mainstream” may appear quite conservative in hindsight, in context it reflected a moderate balancing of the Protestant, secular, and proto-pluralist forces of a region that remained overwhelmingly Protestant — a Southern civil religion. The most conspicuous markers of this identity were Meredith’s “predictably orthodox” theology and emphasis on respectability, manifested in regulations mandating “moderately conservative in matters of personal style.”38 But Meredith also showed occasional sectarian tendencies, testifying to particularly Baptist constructions of orthodoxy and orthopraxy and betraying missionary zeal that gave it “sore thumb” status among institutions of higher education. At the same time, Meredith professors pushed students to critically engage both intellectual challenges (evolution and Biblical criticism) and social problems (segregation) that many mainstream southern evangelicals preferred to keep at arm’s length. In this way, Meredith both reinforced and at times challenged the “definable social ethic” Wacker described. Meredith operated according to “this system of implicit protocols [that] favored comfortable whites and disfavored both blacks and uncomfortable whites.” But they proved more willing to reach beyond those boundaries to engage racial, regional, and religious others outside

this bubble than most mainstream southern evangelicals, taking stands more commonly associated with the progressive wing of the Protestant mainline.

Paradoxically, Meredith’s religious climate became both more specifically Baptist and more self-consciously ecumenical during this period. The first seeds of the broader religious pluralism that would come to characterize campus culture in the 21st century were sown. A growing number of Catholic and Jewish students were welcomed into eminently Baptist religious life activities and encouraged to share perspectives, just as they were in religion classes. One orthodox Jewish student attending Meredith in the early 1960s wrote that she “felt very much at home at Meredith,” recounting how she was exposed to the New Testament through her fulfillment of the religion requirement. She reports being so thoroughly influenced by the school’s Baptist identity that “when I saw a sign at State College saying, ‘Attention, all Baptists’ I paused immediately to read it!” 39 This testimony reflects how Meredith’s campus culture was both unapologetically Baptist and increasingly inclusive toward religious others.

The more generic Protestant identity represented by the YWCA in Meredith’s earliest decades had yielded to the more particular denominational character of the Baptist Student Union (BSU) that would serve as the primary extracurricular religious organization at Meredith until 1963, when it became a subset of the more ecumenical Meredith Christian Association (MCA). The BSU’s mission was “to provide an

39 Johnson, Meredith, 279.
informative program concerning Baptist doctrine, institutions, and affairs, and to project a dynamic program of missionary education.”

The BSU fostered a revivalistic culture on campus that reached an annual crescendo during Religious Emphasis Week (REW). REW was a popular practice on many college campuses during the post-war period, the high watermark for religious participation in American history. But at Meredith, REW was more involved and more Baptist; it was more than a flurry of student religious organizational activity, it was a college-hosted revival/convention drawing Baptist leaders and laity from throughout the region. President Carlyle Campbell clarified REW’s purpose “to make a decided impact for Christianity upon every phase of college life and in every area of the campus activities,” adding his fervent “hope for a prophetic experience.”

The docket of speakers was overwhelmingly Baptist and mostly male, and many of the talks were explicitly evangelical expositions on missions. For example, the 1950 schedule featured addresses entitled “Christ, the World’s Alternative,” “The Reality of God’s Power in China,” and “The Christian Movement in the World Today,” as well as “Christianity and Higher Education.” While neighboring Duke had featured such missionary activity heavily in the late 1920s and early 1930s, it had since been all but abandoned. Meredith continued to display such missionary zeal into the late 20th century.

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40 “By-laws,” Baptist Student Union, Meredith College Archives, Raleigh, NC, 1964.
41 “Religious Emphasis Week,” REW Box, Meredith College Archives, Raleigh, NC, 1950.
century, not only because it was a Baptist college, but because it was a Baptist women’s college.

Women and missions had long been closely linked within the SBC. Baptist women began forming mission societies throughout the South by the 1820s, forming a formal Woman’s Missionary Union (WMU) in 1888. It would remain one of the only opportunities for official leadership for women in the SBC until the middle of the 20th century. Of course, piety was also used to reinforce the notion that women’s sphere of influence was in the home, and compared to other denomination’s female missionary societies, the WMU was subordinated to male-led structures in the convention to an exceptional degree. Reflecting this paradoxical history, REW seminars were designed to promote dual conceptions of Christian womanhood to students: “Tomorrow you marry” led by Mrs. Winston Pearce, and “Dedicating my Vocation” by the unmarried missionary to China Emily Landsell.

While this marriage of missionary fervor with conservative constructions of feminine identity appears to mirror the ethos at Bible Colleges founded by fundamentalists during this period, students at midcentury Meredith were invited to engage the very secular and pluralist forces that such fundamentalist institutions were established to resist. Evolution and Biblical criticism, which would continue to serve

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42 Leon Macbeth, “Role of Women,” 11.
43 “Religious Emphasis Week” Pamphlet, REW Box, Meredith College Archives, Raleigh, NC, 1950.
post-fundamentalist evangelicals in the decades to come as leverage in both their feud with the mainline churches and broader battle for American culture, had been taught at Meredith since the end of its first decade. “While the controversy over evolution was raging in North Carolina, Professor Boomhour’s course in geology presented the theory of evolution so distinctly, yet so unobtrusively, that his students took it as a matter of course.” Boomhour, who became dean in 1912, was characterized by President Brewer as “an inspiring teacher, an active Christian.” Lemuel Freeman, professor of Bible (as well as philosophy, sociology, ethics, and education) from 1910 to 1949 and a product of Harvard and the University of Chicago, taught as “a liberal conservative, keeping his students abreast of the best in Biblical criticism without shaking their faith in the authenticity of the Book.” This will to engage the controversial topics of the time would continue to hold through the cultural upheaval of the 1960s. For example, freshmen seminars for the 1970-71 school year surveyed topics ranging from women’s liberation to black poetry to overpopulation to contemporary cinema. Unlike many evangelical colleges that took an oppositional stance to intellectual and cultural trends deemed threatening to Christian orthodoxy and conservative social norms, Meredith students engaged secular and pluralist forces in an

44 See section 4.2 below.
45 Johnson, Meredith, 121.
46 Ibid, 121.
47 Ibid., 124.
48 Catalogue, Meredith College, 1970-71, Meredith College Archives, Raleigh, NC.
environment where they were openly permitted to interact with traditional Protestant faith.

Meredith faculty also encouraged students to confront systemic racism decades before civil rights activists won broad sympathy for their movement by exposing the brutality of Jim Crow. Professor Freeman and his wife had “always been leaders in interracial equality…by precept and practice…long before [its] need was [widely] recognized.”\textsuperscript{49} Freeman organized religious activities, bringing together Meredith students and students from local historically black institutions Shaw University and St. Augustine’s College. He hosted the anti-segregation “Fellowship of Southern Churchman” in his home, and later taught at Shaw part-time after his retirement from Meredith in 1949. Professor Roger Crook kept this legacy of prophetic witness alive, publishing a provocative book on race relations and sectionalism entitled \textit{No South or North} in 1959, invoking Galatians 3:28 to tell white Southern Christians that they are one in Christ with African-Americans and Yankees. Clearly, Dr. Crook was swimming against the mainstream of the SBC. The book was published by the Disciples of Christ’s Bethany Press after Broadman Press, the Southern Baptist publishing house, rejected the manuscript on the grounds that “now is not the time for a book on race.”\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{49} Johnson, \textit{Meredith}, 124.
\textsuperscript{50} Crook, 47.
Both Crook and department chair Ralph McLain spoke at Shaw frequently. And “long before it was accepted custom, audiences in the Meredith auditorium were non-segregated.”51 Meanwhile, the MCA mobilized students to engage Raleigh’s African-American community through multiple service projects. Students toiled weekly alongside Shaw students in American Friends’ Service Committee work camps and participated in a 1964 drive to register more African-American voters throughout Wake County.52 Still, Meredith long reflected the segregated South in admission policy and student composition. It was not until 1962 that trustees voted to accept students “without regard to race or national origin” and no African-American students were permanently enrolled until 1968.53 Nonetheless, the fact that religion faculty consistently and publicly pushed for racial justice during a time when such views were unpopular among the white establishments of both SBCNC and the SBC is quite remarkable.

Through the religion requirement and departmental offerings, Meredith students were steeped in the “evangelical mainline” ethos of its faculty. Mid-century was a golden age for the department. The faculty grew considerably as the number of majors increased exponentially, making it one of the most popular majors on campus. In the 1930s, the department graduated fewer than two majors per year. By the 1960s, the

51 Johnson, Meredith, 285.
52 Ibid., 282-285.
53 Ibid., 286.
average was over fifteen per year.\textsuperscript{54} Though the religion faculty encouraged students to confront the racial boundaries of the Jim Crow South, traditional Southern norms regarding femininity were left unquestioned, if not actively reinforced. Of the 160 students who majored in religion during this period, all but 13 would marry. All of those who married took their husband’s name, and the majority identified themselves as homemakers rather than professionals.\textsuperscript{55} On the other hand, three would go on to become ordained ministers, and one, Phyllis Trible, earned a PhD from Union Theological Seminary and eventually became a highly renowned professor of Old Testament there, earning international recognition for her work on women in the Hebrew Bible, as well as her iconoclasm.\textsuperscript{56} The department continued to be overwhelmingly Baptist, Bible and theology courses continued to dominate its curriculum, and its growth led to more particular denominational offerings such as “Baptist History and Beliefs” and “the Local Church Program.”

Numerous students’ accounts from this period emphasize the powerful faith-reinforcing influence of a highly pastoral faculty. “All of the men who taught in the department [in the late 1950s and early 1960s] were ordained ministers and served a number of churches as interim pastor.”\textsuperscript{57} But the department also became more academically rigorous, gradually increasing its scholarly output and ramping up

\textsuperscript{54} Crook, 100-113.  
\textsuperscript{55} Crook, 49.  
\textsuperscript{56} Crook, 50.  
\textsuperscript{57} Crook, 46.
qualification standards for instructors. And it reflected an increasingly robust religious pluralism. While a substantial missionary thrust persisted, particularly through the “World-wide Christianity” course, other religious traditions were now engaged on their own terms for the first time. Department Chair Ralph McLain, a graduate of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary who had briefly served a congregation, developed the college’s first World Religions course in the late 1940s (entitled “The Religions of Mankind,” emphasis mind), and he and his wife would host dinners for students in their home that featured foods associated with the various traditions encountered through the course. The first foray into social science of religion, a “Psychology of Religious Living” course, was also introduced, a harbinger of increasingly secular analytical approaches to religion. Still, this course, and every other course essentially took a traditional western Christian approach and generally reinforced a Southern Baptist worldview.

While many colleges around the country were dismantling in loco parentis regulations as students flexed their freedom in provocative ways, Meredith moderated its behavioral policies in a collaborative spirit. Students were exceptionally involved in the curriculum and policy overhaul of 1970. Brooks McGirt, editor of the student newspaper, described how the many social and academic changes achieved came through cooperation between students and the faculty, administration, and board, in contrast to confrontations between these parties unsettling college campuses around the country at the time. “Students, bringing their requests before the Trustees, found a body
of men and women eager to hear and act on these requests. Faculty and administrators have shown their willingness to cooperate . . . [and] students . . . have shown their willingness to work . . . [and] wait patiently.” Students defended their significant new-won freedoms—including the abolishing of dress regulations and right of free passage to and from campus after the first semester—testifying to their possession of the requisite responsibility and respect for tradition to the Alumnae Council. In keeping with Baptist teetotalism, alcohol remained prohibited on campus and all college-sponsored events. In the same year, while other colleges were scaling back positions geared toward paternalistic oversight, a new position for a pastor-in-residence was introduced at Meredith in addition to the existing office of Campus Minister, both of which were filled by Baptist men. For all the changes that aligned with mainline patterns of accommodation of secular and pluralist forces, evangelical piety with a strong Baptist flavor still pervaded the campus culture, shaping students’ educational experiences. As one graduate of the class of 1971 testified, “I know that [Meredith’s] church-related [status] reveals more than denominational sponsorship; Meredith regards true relationship with Christ as the center of every real life, making all other relationships meaningful.”

59 Johnson, Meredith, 352-353.
60 Johnson, Meredith, 339.
61 Johnson, Meredith, 370.
3.4 Rupture: Meredith in the Crosshairs of a Baptist Battle Over Faith and Gender

In the late 1980s, when the college’s leaders began to contemplate the upcoming centennial and cast a vision for the institution’s second century, they explicitly assumed that Meredith would remain “a small, liberal arts, church-related, regional college for women [emphasis mine].”62 In less than a decade, Meredith would sever its deep, pervasive ties to the SBCNC and SBC. Meredith had remained a peculiarly Baptist institution throughout the 1970s and 1980s, while many of the major colleges in the surrounding area had secularized in the 1960s (and decades earlier in the Northeast and West), and had begun to embrace a broader pluralism in their rhetoric and religious life structures. For many of these institutions, including Duke and UNC-CH, these processes of secularization and pluralization were quite self-conscious, directly related to ascendant norms of academic respectability and inclusion among the elite research universities with which these institutions sought to compete.63 But the influence of these secular and pluralist forces was substantially muted at Meredith, which, internally, remained comfortable with its parochial identity while striving for excellence in liberal arts education. Indeed, the campus culture arguably listed to the right during the 1980s along with American culture more broadly. Evangelical parachurch groups committed to evangelism—including InterVarsity, the Navigators, and Campus Crusade for

63 See next chapter for theoretical analysis of this process.
Christ—grew at Meredith at the expense of the ecumenical MCA, just as mainline churches declined while the “Religious Right” rose to prominence.

The evolution of the Religion department during these decades illustrates how Meredith continued to strive for a balance among Protestant commitments, secular academic norms, and inclusive pluralism that was increasingly difficult to maintain during an era of polarization. On the one hand, the department kept pace with the process of professionalization that was transforming religious studies from a refuge for the kind of morally-oriented education that once dominated college curricula into a critical academic discipline straddling the porous boundary between the humanities and social sciences. Academic training now trumped pastoral credentials, publishing standards for tenure and advancement were increased, and the primary outlet for faculty members’ work gradually shifted from denominational publishing houses to academic journals and university presses. Just as earlier Meredith faculty had engaged contemporary debates over Biblical criticism and evolution head on, Professor Peggy Starkey introduced courses in the 1980s demanding students wrestle with the gender bias implicit in traditional texts and structures in light of the sexual revolution, as well as the theological and social challenges of religious pluralism. This shift towards interrogating rather than reinforcing received wisdom seems to have had negative consequences for the department. As pastoral stalwarts like McClain and Crook retired and the department became increasingly decoupled from religious life structures, the
number of religion majors declined sharply despite general growth in enrollment. The department had kept pace with growing enrollment in the 1970s, graduating over 21 majors per year. But the department graduated only 9 majors per year from 1985-1989 and only 5 per year from 1990-1994, despite continued growth in enrollment. In his history of the department, Crook argues that this downturn can be explained in reference to the conservatism of the Reagan era and the rise of the Religious Right, the “backlash” to the cultural upheavals of the 1960s. As a result, “an increasing number of students became uncomfortable with the academic study of religion,” just as the discipline was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with confessional approaches.

On the other hand, the vast majority of course offerings remained strictly preoccupied with Christianity. Only “the Religions of Mankind” surveyed other traditions, but psychology, sociology, and American religious history courses, as well as independent studies of other traditions, offered alternative perspectives. Faculty hires represented the desire of the department to simultaneously deepen the confessional curriculum and broaden offerings toward more diverse subject matter and critical engagement. Starkey, hired in 1979, brought training in world religions from Union Theological Seminary and a feminist perspective. Emphasizing the need for inclusive

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64 Calculated from lists of majors found in Symmetry, 107-125.
65 Crook, 76.
67 Crook, 76.
language and being “more concerned with understanding other religions than spreading Christianity among other people,” she acted quickly to replace “The Religions of Mankind” with “World Religions” and “World-wide Christianity (essentially “a theoretical basis for Christian missions”)” with “Christianity and Other Religions.” She later introduced a “Women of the World” course examining how diverse religious traditions shape gender roles. As if to balance this pendulum swing to the left, the department next hired a theologian. This balancing act was repeated again in 1987, when the department hired John Saunders, a missiologist with a strong background in homiletics, and Gayle Felton, a historian of American Christianity (trained at Duke) with expertise regarding race and gender.

The department thus kept pace with developments in the discipline of religious studies while continuing to offer theological instruction more commonly found in seminaries. Its paradoxical position betwixt and between confessional theology and critical religious studies is best illustrated concerning the question of missions, which became controversial within Meredith’s religion department more than a half century after the missionary enterprise had been abandoned at Duke. While Saunders promoted the evangelical mission to a world in need of Christ’s salvation, Starkey critiqued the entire premise of missions in light of the history of colonization.

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68 Crook, 79.
much greater degree of theological unity than existed in most undergraduate religion departments. Although “a bit diverse theologically,” the faculty of this period “all stood within the perspective that in Baptist circles was later to be labeled ‘moderate,’” “maintain[ing] a strong commitment to the Christian faith and to life and work in the church” and “willing to respect the convictions of their students.”

The threat posed by this emerging evangelical-mainline divide was most palpable and pivotal concerning the relationship between Meredith’s administration and SBCNC and SBC leadership. At Duke, the Gross-Edens controversy had ignited in the early 1960s between rival boards within Duke representing, on the one hand, fidelity to its regional, Methodist heritage and, on the other hand, ambition to join the secular national academic elite. But Methodist leaders, for the most part, stayed out of the fray. Methodists had apparently learned from losing Vanderbilt University early in the 20th century that discretion was advisable concerning the governance of its universities. Besides, retaining nominal proprietorship over top-notch educational institutions arguably served the United Methodist Church’s expansionist priorities more fully than fighting to preserve a campus culture of piety or insisting on a precise theological orthodoxy. In Troeltschian terms, Baptists were not so ready as Methodists to complete the transformation from sect to church. There were leaders within the SBC who aspired

20 Crook, 77.
to the kind of broad churchly influence that Methodists pursued, but a powerful faction emerged to launch a crusade to protect the sectarian integrity of the SBC.\(^{71}\)

This conservative faction could mobilize significant popular support, for rank-and-file Baptists had generally held more tightly to denominational particulars than Methodists had as the 20th century progressed. The controversy began in the early 1960s as conservatives began grumbling that leaders of denominational agencies, seminaries, and colleges were taking the convention down a liberal trajectory. They slowly began organizing to steer the SBC toward the Right. The ensuing “conservative resurgence” of the late 1970s and 1980s precipitated crises at many Baptist colleges and seminaries, but Meredith’s was exacerbated by two crucial factors. The first was financial. As a smaller college without the massive endowment of larger coeducational Baptist colleges like Wake Forest and Baylor, Meredith was more financially dependent on the annual allocations of the BSCNC. Meredith had never enjoyed the scale of private benefaction these higher profile schools could rely upon, making disaffiliation more drastic and risky. The stakes were also higher at Meredith because of the pivotal role that conflict over gender played in the struggle between conservatives and moderates for the SBC.

While biblical inerrancy served as the rallying cry and dismissals of seminary presidents and faculty were typically justified by accusations of theological liberalism, gendered controversies related to women’s ordination, complementarianism, and

patriarchy were central to debates. As Elizabeth Flowers has argued, “as Southern Baptist moderates and conservatives fought for control of the denomination, the issue over women’s changing roles and their bid toward greater ecclesial power moved from the sides to the center of the controversy.”72 Just as Southern Baptists had a reactionary response to the woman’s suffrage movement of the late 19th century, the sexual revolution was a primary motivator for the conservative turn in the 1970s, as were parallel initiatives within the SBC toward more freedom for women to serve in ministry with which Meredith was directly implicated. Addie Davis, the first woman ordained to the pastorate by a Southern Baptist Church, graduated from Meredith College. She was ordained in 1964 at Watts Street Baptist Church in Durham, just twenty miles from her alma mater. Reflecting on this event, Baptist historian Leon MacBeth emphasizes that “ordination was a matter of local church decision only, so one cannot conclude that the denomination would approve. Indeed, the evidence is that the majority of Southern Baptists would not approve.”73

After a firestorm of controversy regarding resolutions related to the women’s liberation movement and women’s ordination erupted at the national convention in 1973, and again in 1974,74 the BSCNC took up the issue in 1975. “After extensive and vigorous discussion,” the state convention passed a resolution citing Galatians 3:28, the

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73 MacBeth, “Perspectives,” 31.
74 Ibid., 31
priesthood of all believers, individual freedom of conscience, and examples of female leaders in the early church, that “affirmed the right of all Christian women to follow God’s will in their lives, including those whose call leads to ordination and professional ministry.”  

While the resolution did not pave the way for a great many female pastors, it has resulted in more women deacons in North Carolina than any other state in the South, apart from Virginia. In 1978, eleven SBC denominational agencies sponsored a three-day Consultation for Women in Church-related Vocations. “Women from agencies, schools, and churches expressed their sense of call, their fulfillment in their careers, their anger over lack of support by virtually all the entities of the convention, and their frustration over the confusion of SBC voices.” Conservatives criticized all of these developments as excessive accommodation of a culture that had abandoned biblical models of patriarchy.

The very next year, 1979, conservatives succeeded in electing Adrian Rogers as President of the SBC, initiating a top-down political strategy that successfully steered a denomination that has historically prided itself on congregational autonomy, the priesthood of all believers, and “soul liberty” in a more conservative and hierarchical

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75 Charles W. Deweese, Women deacons and deaconesses: 400 years of Baptist service, (Mercer University Press, 2005), 114.

76 Ibid.

direction. Conservatives have controlled the presidency ever since, and thus the power to appoint the committee members and trustees who select agency heads and institutional presidents, including those of the seminaries. Gradually, the conservative resurgence rolled back the aforementioned gains for women’s liberty. Though local congregations still control ordination, a 1984 SBC resolution “On Ordination and the Role of Women in Ministry” specified that “women should be encouraged to serve in all capacities of church life except pastoral duties or anything requiring ordination,” a position reified in the 2000 revision of the Baptist Faith and Message which guides official denominational policy. And a 1998 resolution made clear that women were not only to be subordinated within the church, but within the family. While the BSCNC that owned Meredith is an independent body, these developments in the SBC clearly threatened Meredith’s identity as a Baptist institution for empowering women.

Consequently, Meredith became an important launching pad for a series of counteroffensives. Trustee George McCotter had “sounded an alarm as early as 1980, warning the board that fundamentalists would gain control of the Southern Baptist Convention ‘state by state and college by college.'” McCotter began to mobilize for the coming war, founding Friends of Missions, an organization of moderate Baptists. And the Southern Baptist Alliance, a more substantial confederation of moderate to liberal

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79 Blevins, 67.
80 Ibid., 68.
81 Robinson, Vision, 218.
congregations contemplating withdrawal from the SBC, “was born in the conference room of [Meredith’s] Jones Chapel” in 1987. The alliance specifically affirmed the autonomy of the local church to ordain both men and women as one of its seven core principles, and encouraged the hiring of women as senior pastors.

In light of all that had transpired, both conservative Baptist leaders and Meredith’s Trustees had reason to suspect one another. President Weems’ 1990 annual report addressed that uncertainty in a section titled “A Clear and Imminent Danger:” “It becomes important for those of us related to Meredith to consider all the options available and begin to position the institution for possible external attacks of a nature we have never before experienced.” The pivotal issue surrounded board selection. The BSCNC had elected Meredith trustees since the creation of the Cooperative Program to fund North Carolina Baptist colleges in 1927. This arrangement had generally benefited the college greatly, the aforementioned proposals to consolidate Meredith and Wake Forest notwithstanding. But Weems warned of a possible fundamentalist takeover of the Board of Trustees of the kind that had occurred at nearby Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1987 and was concurrently underway at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. He predicted that Meredith would become coeducational in this event because “women have not been the first priority of the

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82 Ibid.
83 Ibid, 219.
conservative movement!”

He reported on how Wake Forest, Furman, and Stetson had redefined their relationships to their conventions as potential models Meredith could emulate to preemptively assert its independence.

The “then-current trustees concurred that the risk that Meredith would lose its identity, its freedom,” and perhaps its entire existence, was too great. “The only solution, it seemed, was to find a way for the College to elect its own trustees.” Chair Margaret Parker appointed a charter resolution committee in January 1991 and the board acted unanimously on February 22nd to amend the charter, justifying their action by reference to a state law that requires them “to act in the best interest of the organization for which they have been elected trustees.” As if to confirm Weems’ pronunciation about the lack of priority of women’s education for conservatives, little fuss was made over Meredith’s disaffiliation, except, ironically, by more moderate members of the BSCNC who had a greater stake in maintaining Meredith’s affiliation. They immediately placed the $1 million annual allocation in escrow and threatened a lawsuit that was never filed. Meredith’s leaders, for their part, affirmed that they would yet cling tightly to their Baptist identity despite their new independent status, justifying their grab for independence on the basis of their Baptist commitments:

The Board of Trustees affirms its intention that Meredith College remain a North Carolina Baptist College of Christian higher education, [and] its intention to elect

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84 Ibid.
85 Ibid., 218.
86 Ibid., 219.
trustees who are North Carolina Baptists . . . The amending of the charter in no way indicates a new direction for the institution. Rather, it reflects an ongoing desire of the Board of Trustees to be good stewards of Meredith’s Baptist heritage, to protect academic freedom, [and] to safeguard the financial security of the institution.\footnote{Ibid., 219-220.}

But the road to secularity is paved with pious intentions. Much like James B. Duke’s and President William Few’s eternal pledge of Duke University’s faith in Christ and service to the Church, Meredith’s all-Baptist board’s intention to maintain a Baptist identity independent of BSCNC affiliation was undone within a generation. A new direction would be forged, as financial security, academic freedom, and an institutional commitment to empowering young women would come to trump their stated priority to preserve Meredith’s Baptist identity.

3.5 Reorientation: Women’s Education and Institutional Mission in the “Pluriform Era”

Today, Meredith presents a different paradox; externally it now appears indistinguishable from most independent private colleges throughout the country (except for the obvious distinction of being a woman’s college), but internally it remains indelibly shaped by its Southern Baptist history in many subtle ways. Meredith’s current mission statement, vision statement, and stated values are secular, excepting a few brief references to its Baptist heritage characteristic of many independent secular colleges originally founded by church bodies. There is no mention at all of the loose affiliation

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the college maintains with the progressive Cooperative Baptist Fellowship (CBF). The list of “personal development” priorities includes “spiritual growth” along with “intellectual and personal” growth, and the pluralist paradigm is invoked with an ambiguous historical qualification: “avowing the College’s Christian heritage, while respecting all faiths and spiritual beliefs.”

Meredith’s contemporary self-presentation reflects the pluralism that Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen have argued has become ubiquitous in the contemporary “pluriform era,” including language reflecting more fluid conceptions of spirituality. But Meredith also frustrates their model, for this Baptist women’s college never really aligned with the “privatized era” of the 20th century. Consequently, the universal language of pluralism obscures how a particular trajectory continues to shape the campus culture while the ambivalent historical qualifier hints at the ambiguous nature of Meredith’s peculiar blend of Protestant privilege, pluralism, and secularism. What does it mean to “avow” something as “heritage?” This language could mean anything from a confession of the very faith of the college’s founders to a redefined progressive Baptist identity through a CBF affiliation to a frank acknowledgement of the now inconvenient fact of nearly a century of SBC affiliation. Indeed, such breadth of interpretative license is necessary to encompass the broad variety of experiences of Meredith today among its diverse constituents.

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88 “Mission and Values,” Meredith College, meredith.edu/about_meredith/mission_and_values/.
The decision to disaffiliate from the SBC was not so much a triumph of secular and pluralist forces over Protestant privilege as an expression of an abiding commitment to empower young women and the moderate, mainline-evangelical Baptist principles that had always governed the school. But once the denominational identity that had served to contain the secular and pluralist forces within and without the institution was lost, they were unleashed to powerfully shape the formation of a new institutional brand in an increasingly competitive academic marketplace. Consequently, the longstanding commitment to empowering young women was reframed in secular terms while the ambiguous language of pluralism finessed an awkward history of (dis)affiliation. There has been a dramatic shift in institutional identity, but one that is deeply rooted in the past and directly responsive to the patriarchal purging of the Southern Baptist Church that precipitated Meredith’s disaffiliation. Many of Meredith’s current leaders “remember what it was like to be here during that time and [recognize] the need to be free of it.”

Today, a strong majority of the Board of Trustees is female, and the vast majority of these are alumnae, dating back to the class of 1962. Jo Allen, the second woman and first alumna to be named president, launched the “Meredith College | Going Strong brand, which was key to enhancing the College’s visibility because it

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89 Donna Battle, Interview, November 8th, 2016.
clarified Meredith’s ‘critical essence’ as an institution where students become stronger.”

More than a mere marketing campaign, this is a reconstitution of a lost institutional identity that reclaims the original intention to empower young women through liberal arts education in secular terms. Through advertisements, campus banners, and the college’s website, Meredith distributes images of diverse students accompanied by the tagline “this is what strong looks like” and “strong stories” of their successes. And initiatives such as the comprehensive “StrongPoints” career advising program and “LEAD (leadership, ethics, and development) Strong” program seek to actualize this vision. But as we have seen throughout Meredith’s history, individuals’ and institutions’ images of a strong woman are inevitably shaped by their religious identities. Current Chaplain Donna Battle reflects “I don’t see [that] tension in leadership between a religious obligation and empowering women; [that’s] why we are no longer a part of the [SBC/BSCNC].” But, she continues, “you have individual [students] who because of their upbringing or what they believe or have been taught that need to press through that.” Meredith continues to draw a substantial number of young women from conservative SBC backgrounds with family ties to the school. “There is a place for [them] here,” says Battle, just as there is a place for critical masses of

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mainline Protestants, Muslims, and agnostics. But “in many ways, it is a very secular campus.”

We see this paradoxical blending of Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces in the evolution of the rechristened “Religious and Ethical Studies Department.” Like the Executive Committee of the late ‘90s, the department seems to have assumed that disaffiliation would free it to live more fully into its preexisting mainline evangelical identity. But questions immediately arose as to the rationale of requiring all students at an independent college to take a course of “historical and theological study of the central meaning of the Bible.” New department chair Julia O’Brien was given the difficult task of answering these questions from multiple quarters. O’Brien reported to the Meredith Herald that “she has seen a growing number of students who initially resent being forced to take a class that does not reflect their religious background. Some of these students have grown up Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish . . . Others are just apathetic . . . [and still others] have concrete ideas about Bible teachings and are defensive when alternative insight is offered.” O’Brien argued that these diverse students ultimately appreciated the historical and cultural value of the course.

Nonetheless, the required Bible course, present in one form or another since Meredith’s founding, was eventually nixed in favor of a broad distributive requirement.

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91 Battle, Interview.
Still, all students must take a course in the rechristened department, and Christianity retains a dominant position in the course catalog. All three current faculty members’ primary training and scholarship centers on western arenas where Christianity is the dominant religious force. And two of the department’s endowed lectureships—the Mary Stowe Gullick Lecture and the Mary Frances Preston Lecture in Biblical Studies—are explicitly designed to “enhance the Christian influence on the Meredith campus” and address the “intersection of faith, scholarship,” and Christian leadership, respectively.  

At the same time, there are no longer any Protestants in the department (two are Jewish and one is secular), an inconceivable possibility just a generation ago. And the department primarily promotes its instruction in terms of its facility to help students navigate a complex, pluralistic world. Departmental offerings have continued to diversify, and there has been a concerted effort to engage religious minorities. For example, one professor serves as faculty advisor to the Muslim Students Association. In contrast to the historical theological orientation of the Religion Department, today’s Religious and Ethical Studies Department reflects the more critical and multicultural disciplinary agenda of the American Academy of Religion. Thus, despite the continued privileging of Christianity in terms of content, it is conservative Christians, Battle says, who typically struggle the most with tensions between course material and preexisting beliefs. Whether students experience departmental instruction as primarily promoting

93 “Departmental Lecture Programs,” Religious and Ethical Studies Department, Meredith College Archives.
open-ended pluralism, reinforcing historic Protestant privilege, or forwarding secular critiques of religious traditions will largely depend on their personal perspective. “Class is a place where these things intersect very poignantly,” says Battle. The question is “how do we help [students] at these moments of intersection where it is very difficult?”

Within the Christian majority, one’s location on the ecumenical-evangelical spectrum conditions one’s perception of whether Meredith primarily reflects Protestant privilege or pluralism, but paradoxically, the relationship is typically inverse. While the administration distanced itself from the post-resurgence SBC, students have continued to express a sense that a fairly conservative form of Christianity remains normative among Meredith students. For example, in 2003, a new student group called Association for Understanding and Religious Awareness (AURA) was established to represent “non-traditional Christian students,” i.e. thoroughly ecumenical Christians rejecting evangelism and conservative boundaries while enthusiastically embracing religious pluralism. The group’s activities revolved around fostering spiritual dialogue and offering support for minority groups perceived to be marginalized and misunderstood, including Muslims and Wiccans. But the organization’s founding president explained that her primary motivation was to create community among those alienated by the evangelical mainstream, many of whom identify as Christian (but not that kind of Christian). “For many, going against the norm of the Meredith College community is...”

94 Battle, Interview.
hard when there are so many students on campus who are Christian and very vocal about their beliefs.” Stories about such proclamations and their varied reception abound in the Meredith Herald.

In many ways, evangelical students likely feel more at home at this post-Baptist women’s college than on a typical college campus. Evangelical parachurch ministries continue to thrive at Meredith. And an active, SBC-dominated alumnæ network affirms these young evangelical women as the primary torchbearers of a traditional Meredith identity. The lack of both male students and a major campus party scene offers insulation from palpable reminders of outsider status ubiquitous on large coed campuses. But the fact that male visitors are now permitted in the dorms signals to alumnae how much has changed. Moreover, the administration’s continued efforts to distance itself from the conservative evangelical Christianity that motivated its disaffiliation from the BSCNC can give evangelical students the sense that they are embattled even at this historic Baptist stronghold. In 2000, InterVarsity’s proposal for official recognition was rejected by the Student Association on the grounds that the ecumenical MCA “already filled the needs of students.” Around this time, a new rule was also passed prohibiting Bible studies in the “parlor” areas of dormitories due to alleged interference with others’ abilities to use these common spaces. The next year,

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96 Christy Sadler, “Christian Organizations on Campus Without Debate,” The Meredith Herald, January 30th, 2002. Note: InterVarsity was later recognized in the wake of Campus Crusade for Christ’s recognition.
Campus Crusade for Christ submitted its own bid for recognition. After twenty-five years operating on campus without official recognition, Crusade narrowly won official recognition through a 7-6 vote by the Student Association in March 2001, despite statements of opposition to the group by President Maureen Hartford, Religion Department chair Allen Page, and Campus Minister Sam Carothers. These leaders expressed pluralistic misgivings, citing “concerns that centered around whether the group would embrace the diverse atmosphere on campus.” Coverage reported that “there is a lot of student support for Crusade. Over 300 Meredith students attend Crusade meetings at [nearby North Carolina State University] and more than 100 students are involved in small group Bible studies sponsored by Crusade.97

The overcoming of broad opposition among the faculty and administration to such a popular group through a student vote represents the considerable tension that exists between leaders who have disavowed a conservative form of Christian faith and students who remain deeply committed to it. A prominent local family hosts a Bible study for Meredith students in their home in part because they perceive the campus to have become just as unfriendly to evangelical faith as any other secular college. But as Christian Smith has argued, these perceptions of embattlement have often helped evangelicals thrive.98 And they continue to thrive at Meredith. While the mainline MCA

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and Catholic Angels groups have practically disappeared, four evangelical parachurch groups continue to thrive, with a fifth, Reformed University Fellowship, applying for recognition. Meanwhile, the sense of embattlement is fed by initiatives like “religious diversity week” and “ally week” that affirm minority-support groups from the Muslim Students Association to Spectrum, an organization that works “to identity, support, and celebrate the members of the Meredith LGBTQIA community and the Allies that support and foster an inclusive and welcoming environment.”99 Of course, there is a widespread perception that these groups need special support in part because of the yet pervasive influence of conservative forms of Christianity on campus.

At times, prejudice against such minority groups has been made explicit in especially ugly ways. In 2007, “hate messages” were scrawled on the walls of “just about every building on campus. These messages attack people from every race, every religion, every sexual preference except for those of mainstream society . . . Everyone was targeted except white, straight, Christian women.”100 Spectrum organized in 2001 in order to support queer students subject to such prejudice. Leaders expressed their perception that “Meredith is not yet a community for everyone,” and that support for their community developed slowly through painstaking efforts, including a website

100 Meredith Beeman, “Ignorance and Hatred Are Not Welcome on Our Campus,” The Meredith Herald, March 14, 2007.
enabling anonymous dialogue for conversations that felt too difficult to have openly.101 Similarly, a growing community of Muslim students have struggled to foster awareness toward making more room for them in the campus culture. For Muslims embracing conservative norms around gender identity and interaction between the sexes, Meredith may be more comfortable than most college campuses in many ways. But there is also a tension felt through interactions with students who have never interacted with Muslims before coming to Meredith and who may have chosen the school because of perceptions that Southern culture and Christianity remain largely normative there.

In 2003, a Muslim student contributed an op-ed that recognized the college’s efforts to cultivate more diversity on campus while calling for additional actions, including acknowledging the holy month of Ramadan, to “make minority students feel more welcome and to help all students be better informed.”102 Other students have more boldly addressed what they perceive as inhospitable markers of Christian privilege. Sakenna Abdulraheem criticized the practice of distributing Bibles to all students at commencement, arguing that the gift bears an ignorant and insensitive assumption of Christian identity for those who are not Christian. “It can be taken as an insult, especially from someone who is educated,” Abdulraheem said. “People have to start thinking on an unbiased level. I’m not the only person who’s annoyed.”103 This criticism

placed administrators in an awkward position. They argued that the gift of a Bible is not intended “to signal that anyone should look towards this faith,” but rather is merely “a personalized gift that is connected with history and tradition.”

Herein lies the rub for leaders of this historically Baptist college: “avowing the College’s Christian heritage” through such traditions threatens to undermine the inclusivity it seeks, while disavowing it alienates its primary base.

Frequently, leaders look to the language of pluralism to provide the necessary leverage to achieve this delicate balancing act. Student reporters for *The Meredith Herald* have frequently characterized post-disaffiliation Meredith as “secular,” the college’s affirmation of religious pluralism and brief allusions to Baptist heritage notwithstanding. But results from the 2013 *Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey* (CRSCS) challenge such a simplistic representation. These data illustrate how the contemporary campus climate at Meredith reflects persistent Protestant privilege, pluralistic inclusion of religious minorities, and tensions with an increasingly secular institutional identity. Compared to the concurrent sample of 13,776 students drawn from 52 campuses, responses from a sample of 394 Meredith students revealed several statistically significant differences. They reported substantially higher levels of acceptance for Evangelicals, Muslims, and Mormons and substantially lower levels of

104 Ibid. The practice has since been discontinued quietly without major ado.
acceptance for non-religious students. Indeed, the acceptance hierarchy is flipped at Meredith; while secular students are reported to be the most accepted of these four groups in the overall sample, students report that they are the least accepted at Meredith. The remarkably high acceptance levels for both Evangelicals and Muslims suggest that the religious climate at Meredith is relatively friendly toward both the historic majority tradition and a minority tradition frequently subjected to prejudicial treatment in the United States. Indeed, another measure registering “appreciative attitudes” towards each of these groups indicated that Jews and Muslims are the two most appreciated groups on campus. Meredith students also reported significantly higher levels of “curricular religious and spiritual engagement” and “attitudes toward integration of religion and spirituality in higher education.” These results suggest that, although Meredith is much more secular today than it was just two decades ago, the legacy of the college’s long history of engaging faith inside and outside the classroom continues to distinguish it from other educational institutions.

Today, that engagement is no longer stridently Southern Baptist but rather self-consciously pluralist. The Interfaith Council, formed by the MCA in 1994 and now called Better Together, has since replaced the MCA as the official representative religious life organization on campus. In 2013, after another controversy concerning evangelical

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105 Alyssa Rockenbach and Matthew Mayhew. “Meredith College: The Campus Religious and Spiritual Climate Survey.” Interfaith Youth Core, 2014. Page 10. See section 2.4 above for descriptions of these factor scales.

106 Ibid. See section 2.4 above for descriptions of these factor scales.
messages scrawled on campus sidewalks, the Interfaith Council sponsored multiple discussions about how to achieve a more religiously tolerant environment on campus. Moreover, a small chapel was transformed into a “Meditation Room” through the removal of all Christian symbols, in order to send “the message that all are truly welcome at Meredith.” The Interfaith Council also launched the “Ravel Unravel” project, displaying video recordings of interviews with students representing diverse religious traditions aimed at dispelling misperceptions of these traditions through personal narratives. The Interfaith Council also sponsors occasional worship services and service activities involving representatives of multiple traditions, and stages celebrations of major holidays for religious groups who do not have their own student organizations (i.e. sponsoring an event celebrating the Hindu holiday Holi). Through all of these initiatives, the council wishes to communicate that “Interfaith is not just for people of certain religions—it’s for everyone. We want Christians and Muslims and Atheists and Pagans—everyone—to be involved.”¹⁰⁷ Battle echoes that sentiment as integral to Meredith’s mission today. “Meredith strives intentionally to be present with all people, to offer to all people regardless of background. We want you to have the space to believe what you believe.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Battle, Interview.
But CRSCS results also suggest a heightened degree of tension between this religious legacy and Meredith’s more secular contemporary identity. Compared to other colleges, Meredith students reported significantly higher levels of “divisive psychological climate” and “need to conceal worldview.”\(^{109}\) Given the highly appreciative attitudes towards minority traditions, we might surmise that this divisiveness primarily refers to tensions between secular and evangelical students, tempting students to conceal their secular or evangelical identities when these tensions become palpable. Meredith’s complex blend of Protestant privilege, secularism, and pluralism “is messy,” Battle laughs. “It’s a work in progress.”\(^{110}\)

### 3.6 Conclusion: Gains and Losses

Unpacking the puzzle of paradoxes surrounding Meredith College provides an opportunity to critically assess the categories and narratives used to chart religious, educational, and gendered realities in American history. Analyzing the relationship between religion and higher education from the perspective of Southern Baptist women challenges Marsden’s “trickle down academics” approach which assumes that the secularization of elite “trend-setting” institutions in the early 20\(^{th}\) century drove a uniform shift in the system writ large. Here, we see how the role that Protestant faith played in women’s struggle for educational equality helped preserve a culture of piety.
through the end of the century. And we perceive how this union of Baptist mission and women’s empowerment was undone not by pressure to conform to the secularity of the larger system, but by conflicts within the SBC over faith, gender, and patriarchy. In the same way, examining the history of constructions of gender from the vantage point of SBC-affiliated Meredith challenges assumptions about Southern femininity, patriarchy, and the role that evangelical faith played in reinforcing them. We see how such faith both reinforced gendered boundaries of propriety at Meredith and inspired expressions of boldness, confidence, and self-determination that challenged sectional gender stereotypes. And we can appreciate how, despite important blind spots and opposition from their brethren, generations of Baptist men worked to expand Southern women’s educational opportunities to the point of disaffiliating from their church when those gains were threatened. Finally, we see how Meredith’s history both calls into question the pivotal evangelical-mainline dichotomy in American Protestantism and reveals the destructive power of this polarity, which ultimately undermined a longstanding balance between fervent piety and progressive social engagement.

Plumbing these paradoxes helps to humanize those of the past and recover a sense of how they wrestled with realities as challenging as those confronting us, making difficult choices that shaped an institution seeking to equip young women with intellectual and theological tools to safely navigate and transcend the limitations placed upon them. While we have taken a critical look at some of Meredith’s leaders’
problematic compromises, this should be balanced with appreciation for the progressive impact of the institution they served upon a particular population—Southern Baptist women. What then has been gained and lost in the rupture of the institution originally known as “Baptist Female University” from the church body that birthed it? Today’s Meredith is more inclusive of religious minorities and women with alternative gender identities and sexual orientations, reflecting gains in the independence and autonomy prized by progressive Baptists and feminists alike. But productive interactions between these ideologies have largely been lost. Meredith’s history demonstrates how it both mobilized resources from the Baptist tradition for promoting and clarifying feminine freedoms and witnessed to Baptists regarding women’s equal developmental capacity as learners and leaders. More broadly, Meredith presented to the American Church and the system of higher education compelling alternatives to predominant polarities, a combination of committed faith and open engagement drowned out by the divisive din. The Meredith College produced by this history remains a paradox, one that illuminates both the promise of pluralism and the cost of polarization.

In 2009, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) established its first formal structure devoted to religious life since university chapel services were discontinued in the early 20th century. In contrast to the Protestant religious life structures that shaped life at UNC-CH for its first century and a half, the “Office of Religious Diversity and Interfaith Pluralism (ORDIP)” doubly emphasized its alignment with the pluralism paradigm that Rhonda and Douglas Jacobsen have argued defines the religious climate of the 21st century university campus. The ORDIP connected students to “local religious, spiritual, or philosophical groups” and national and global resources in a self-consciously inclusive fashion. Its website provided access to an alphabetical list of all religious organizations on campus, an e-library including online versions of scriptures of the world’s major religious traditions, and a page of “resources” featuring organizations advocating for a robust, interactive pluralism, including the Interfaith Youth Core, the Interfaith Alliance, the Interfaith Council for Social Service, the Institute for Interfaith Dialogue, as well as religioustop.org. It also included links to the Pluralism Project’s list of minority organizations in the

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1 Jacobsen and Jacobsen.
surrounding area, including a broken link entitled “churches in the Triangle area,”
which actually led to Google’s homepage. Thus, the user was effectively connected to all
local congregations outside of the Christian mainstream that continues to enjoy a large
majority in North Carolina.⁵

This “office” was in fact just a website created by Jenny Ofstein, who was hired
to establish an interfaith housing option as part of the “Living and Learning
Community” program. Neither Ofstein, nor her supervisor, Dean Blackburn, then
Assistant Dean of Student Affairs (now Associate Dean and Director of the new Student
Wellness Center) who had been responsible for overseeing religious life on campus
(among other duties), nor any other UNC-CH employee was ever officially granted a
title in association with ORDIP, nor was there a physical location for students to visit.
The irony of this symbolic display is not lost on Blackburn. He allows that “it should
have probably been more like the ‘programs of’ or the ‘resources of’ interfaith stuff; I
think ‘office’ is a bit misleading. That was probably more her clever aspirations than the
actuality.”⁶ Nonetheless, this digital “office” made an elaborate display of UNC-CH’s
alignment with the ascendant pluralism paradigm.

In 2013, a very different kind of religious life structure was established just 11
miles away at North Carolina Central University (NCCU or “Central”), a historically

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⁶ Dean Blackburn, Interview, November 8, 2012.
black public university and part of the same UNC system. The title of the “Office of Spiritual Development and Dialogue (OSDD)” similarly announces its alignment with the predominant pluralism paradigm; “spiritual” is often taken to be inclusive of the full range of religious (and secular) diversity, while “dialogue” carries connotations of pluralistic exchange across faith traditions. And like UNC-CH’s ORDIP, Central’s OSDD website forefronts links to Interfaith Youth Core materials on religious pluralism on contemporary college campuses. But in contrast, OSDD is led by a highly active director, Gloria Winston-Harris, who was brought on in addition to Michael Page, who has served as Campus Minister since 1999 (simultaneously pastoring a congregation for most of that time). Each holds a recognized office (both physical and symbolic) within the university, but external Protestant ministries pay their salaries.

Once a month, Winston-Harris brings in local pastors for highly participatory worship services in the Student Union grounded in the embodied practices and extemporaneous Biblical preaching traditionally associated with the “Black Church.” I attended such a service the Sunday after Donald Trump was elected President. Frustrating the stereotype of the Black Church as inherently politically engaged, I heard no direct references to the election. Instead, I experienced an enthusiastic service on the

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7 There is a lively debate about the value of the concept of the “Black Church.” Eddie Glaude has controversially argued that the “the Black Church is dead,” and the debate continues. I reference the concept here not to support either side but simply to acknowledge that many of the practices observed in the OSDD service have been associated with the concept of the “Black Church” since W.E.B. DuBois’ The Souls of Black Folk.
theme of “gratitude” that focused on experiences of grace amidst challenges in the individual lives of the 80+ participants in attendance. A praise band led energetic gospel songs and several students offered heartfelt testimonies of God’s work in their lives.

There was a strong evangelical and charismatic thrust throughout these proclamations; Winston-Harris, students, and guest pastors all expressed gratitude for the opportunity to “share publicly what God has done for us” and solidarity in “not being ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ.” A call was issued from the pulpit to “take this campus…and all the campuses in the region…for Jesus Christ” that included a reminder that the “only way to do that it is to be a holy witness” and advice about how to explicitly share God’s love with others. The energy of the two-hour service continued to build, culminating with an altar call, speaking in tongues, and prayers for God to meet the financial and intellectual needs of both the students and the institution.

While the titles of both offices align them with the pluralism paradigm, the Sunday Service at NCCU reinforces the Christian (more precisely, Protestant) privilege that a number of scholars contest continues to undermine inclusivity and equity in American higher education, while UNC-CH’s hollow digital “office” can be seen as tacitly reinforcing the “privatization” that Marsden and Sommerville argue has exiled confessional faith from the academy. At the same time, both of these universities’ religious structures challenge charges of an exclusive secularism, just as they frustrate widespread assumptions of religious neutrality on supposedly secular state-sponsored
university campuses. Indeed, comparing religious organization at these two public universities in North Carolina’s “research triangle” demonstrates how particular historical trajectories can produce markedly distinct religious dynamics within a common institutional type and shared geographic context, challenging all three monolithic representations of the relationship between religion and higher education as either secularist, pluralist, or reflecting Protestant privilege.

To help make sense of this striking contrast, I employ sociologists John Meyer and Brian Rowan’s “Institutionalized Organizations: Formal Structure as Myth and Ceremony.” This classic article helps us understand how and why NCCU and UNC-CH have decoupled the actual work activities of ORDIP (virtually none) and OSDD (Protestant ministry) from the pluralistic myths embedded in the names of their ceremonial structures. Both are textbook cases of “activities…crea[ting] conflicts and inconsistencies with an institutionalized organization’s efforts to conform to the ceremonial rules of production”\(^8\) operative within the larger system of higher education. Meyer and Rowan present a continuum: “at one end, are production organizations…whose success depends on the management of relational networks. At the other end are institutionalized organizations whose success depends on the confidence and stability achieved by isomorphism with institutional rules.”\(^9\)


\(^9\) Ibid., 354.
Contemporary universities lie at the institutionalized end of Meyer and Rowan’s continuum, since their output, education, is thoroughly socially defined and notoriously difficult to appraise. But as the authors point out, “all organizations, to one degree or another, are embedded in both relational and institutionalized contexts and are therefore concerned both with coordinating and controlling their activities while prudently accounting for them.”\(^\text{10}\) Thus, both Central and UNC-CH must balance the (religious) priorities of their various constituents and the institutional rules governing the public university.

We see both institutions employing institutional “myth” and “ceremony” grounded in the language of pluralism to demonstrate their compliance with both the pluralism paradigm and the institutional myth of religious neutrality of the public university. This performance enables the decoupling of structures from activities necessary to either engage in (NCCU’s OSDD) or avoid engaging in (UNC-CH’s ORDIP) actual religious work based on the perceived needs and priorities of the relational networks within and without the university. In other words, both NCCU and UNC-CH are responding to institutional demands in fashioning pluralistic structures that perform their compliance with a prevailing pluralism paradigm, while the decoupling of actual religious activities from these institutional myths achieves greater organizational efficiency. ORDIP helps UNC-CH to devote minimal resources to religious life.

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 353.
administration and avoid problematic entanglements, while OSDD enables NCCU to serve perceived relational demands for community, student support, Christian worship, and pastoral care through external partners that cover the costs of these services.

This chapter employs Meyer and Rowan’s theory to illustrate how these schools’ peculiar histories—shaped by crucial institutional identity factors, including racial composition, socioeconomic status, educational mission, geographical reach, and relative prestige—produced religious life structures grounded in similar pluralistic institutional myths but pursuing quite different ends on the ground. What follows is not a comprehensive account of both institutions’ religious histories, but rather a selective, theory-driven, chronological comparison of their respective transformations from explicitly Protestant communities engaged in collective practices to large, state-sponsored universities performing a progressive pluralism through mythical institutional structures that belie divergent relationships to these Protestant roots.

First, I compare these institutions’ origins and analyze their respective struggles for institutional survival through progressive integration with both Protestant networks and state systems. In their early phases, both institutions were more dependent on Protestant relational networks than the broader institutional demands of either the academy or the state, while racial and economic inequality significantly shaped the nature of these dependent relationships. Next, I analyze how dramatic cultural and institutional changes in the middle of the 20th century created new conflicts between the
Protestant and secular paradigms, local and national networks, and competing institutional myths. Both institutions responded by outsourcing the funding of substantial Protestant structures to conform to ascendant secular institutional myths governing public universities. Tensions emerged quickly at UNC-CH between this compartmentalized Protestant privilege reflecting a white Southern Protestant heritage and the secular national academic orientation pursued by the majority of faculty and administrators. In contrast, NCCU accommodated this secular institutional culture more reluctantly, secularizing much more gradually and partially while preserving its Southern Protestant African-American culture through a vibrant public theological discourse and pious ceremonial culture.

These distinct histories help explain the distinct decoupling strategies taken by the OSDD and ORDIP. We see how the “logic of confidence and good faith” and the ambiguities of pluralism and secularism give the individuals vested with authority over these decoupled religious life structures considerable leeway to use them toward widely divergent theological and political ends, creating religious undercurrents within these supposedly secular institutions. Through this dialogue between theory and these historical trajectories, we gain insight into the distinct ways these institutions have negotiated the Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces, relational networks, and institutional rules confronting them, and we better understand their opposite relationships to the Protestant communities that nurtured them.
4.1 The Protestant Establishment of Segregated Public Liberal Arts Education in North Carolina

The histories of UNC-CH and NCCU are part of a larger story of the gradual emergence of a state-sponsored system of education in the context of slavery and segregation, from the chartering of “the nation’s oldest state university”\(^{11}\) in 1789 to Central’s formal incorporation into the consolidated University of North Carolina system in 1972. Today, through its website and promotional materials, UNC-CH presents its foundational narrative—the historic first venture in state-supported education in America—in secular terms that obscure the institutions’ strong Presbyterian roots, as well as the massive gap between our contemporary notion of public education and the insufficient and irregular support the state offered the university during its first century. The foundational story currently told by Central, in contrast, more frankly reflects parallel realities regarding the pivotal support of Protestant faith communities during early decades of financial instability and the gradual emergence of state-supported status. For while UNC-CH’s original name is fully compatible with contemporary institutional myths regarding the secular public university, Central’s various names—from the National Religious Training School and Chautauqua (1910) to Durham State Normal School (1923) to North Carolina College for Negroes (1925)—testify to dramatic changes in the religious and racial dimensions of the

\(^{11}\) “First Public University in the United States,” The Carolina Story: A Virtual Museum of University History, Museum.unc.edu, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. This source acknowledges the competing claim of the University of Georgia, which was chartered first (in 1785) but opened later (1801).
“institutional rules which [universities] incorporate [to] gain legitimacy, resources, and enhanced survival prospects.”\textsuperscript{12} Still, the religious impetus behind Dr. Shepard’s school is somewhat downplayed in Central’s contemporary self-presentation, as is the complicated racial context surrounding Shepard’s resourceful acquisition of sustenance from wealthy white Protestant benefactors and the General Assembly of a solidly segregated state. A comparative review of the theological underpinnings and complex religious and racial dynamics surrounding these institutions’ early histories in light of organizational theory and contemporary constructions of their identities as public universities illuminates historical trajectories that remain crucial for understanding contemporary religious climates.

In the overwhelmingly Protestant milieu that both institutions emerged out of, ecclesial support was often more reliable than the state, and secular, proto-pluralist, and Protestant forces all reinforced one another under the seamless banner of “non-sectarian” Christian civilization. In this context, Protestant establishments—including mandatory chapel services, required religious instruction, and the enforcement of strict Protestant mores—can be seen as “ceremonial production functions” which “legitimize[d] organizations with internal participants, stockholders, the public, and the state” and “demonstrated the social fitness of an organization.”\textsuperscript{13} This is not to say that

\textsuperscript{12} Meyer and Rowan, 340.
\textsuperscript{13} Meyer and Rowan, 351.
the faith practiced within these institutions was merely formal or spiritually empty, only that it served important integrative and stabilizing functions during a period when institutional survival was constantly threatened. Pious “activity…had ritual significance…maintaining appearances and validating these organizations.”

It operated on three levels, bonding the relational networks that sustained these fledgling institutions, “stabilizing” them by connected them to “a wider collective system,” and motivating and sanctifying individual involvement.

UNC-CH survived its first century by balancing the demands of the diverse relational networks that sustained the school in lieu of reliable income from the state, particularly the Presbyterians who took a “propriety interest” in the institution. The university was founded in 1795 by an awkward alliance between freethinking Federalist aristocrat planters from the Eastern part of the state and dyed-in-the-wool Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who had migrated from the northern colonies to the western region near Charlotte. “Whether [higher] education should be state supported as well as church related became a hotly disputed question [which] profoundly shook the university over the next two centuries.”

Controversy erupted within the first year, when Presiding Professor (then title of the university’s executive office) David Ker renounced the

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14 Meyer and Rowan, 355.
15 Ibid.
16 George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University*, 322.
Presbyterian faith and was forced to resign. These substantial freethinking, Jeffersonian, and Masonic influences waned following the retirement of principal founder William Davie to South Carolina in 1803. The Presbyterian faction assumed control of the Board of Trustees, the presidency, and the faculty for the next four generations.

With the elevation of Presiding Professor Joseph Caldwell as the university’s first president in 1804, Presbyterians established a pattern of installing Princeton-educated preacher-schoolmasters into the executive office. Caldwell, “remembered for his seriousness, discipline, and piety,” would retain the position for all but four years of the next three decades. He and his successors kept the faculty, and thus the educational culture, strongly Presbyterian. Rev. Samuel McCorkle, a staunch Calvinist, became the first campus minister. He established a rigorous rhythm regulating campus life: each day began with the first of three mandatory daily prayer services at sunrise, and each week concluded with oral exams on “principles of morality and religion.” The theological particulars undergirding this prescribed piety were elucidated through regular chapel services and the required Bible study instituted by Caldwell’s successor, David Swain. These exacting establishments “stirred criticism around North Carolina about the [university’s] strong Presbyterian flavor.” On the other hand, the institution

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20 Snider, 61.
was not Presbyterian enough for the faction that defected to found Davidson College in 1837 because of a perceived dearth of clergymen on the Board of Trustees.

In light of such controversies, the campus culture was presented as “non-sectarian” on the basis that “disrespectful remarks about religion or any religious denomination (emphasis mine)” were strictly prohibited. And indeed, pan-Protestant associations flourished. The Temperance Club was organized in 1829, followed by the YMCA in 1860, and “religious revivals were held, encouraging many student conversions.” On the other hand, UNC-CH faced criticism for the secularizing influence of its progressive curriculum, which elevated study of the sciences, history, and English over the classical model that yet reigned at most colleges. And students repeatedly rebelled against the imposition of Protestant moralism, flaunting rules prohibiting fighting and drinking and even physically assaulting their taskmasters during periodic revolts. From our perspective, early UNC-CH appears distinctly Protestant, even peculiarly Presbyterian, but it was also indelibly shaped by the nascent secular and proto-pluralist forces of the era.

The heated political debate over public and Christian education towards the end of the 19th century illustrates how crucial ceremonial performances of institutional identity were to gaining the resources and legitimacy necessary to survive. Competitors like Trinity College president John Kilgo attacked the presumed theological neutrality of

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21 Ibid.
state-funded education in a principled political grab for scarce resources. Kilgo repeatedly appeared before the state General Assembly to contest the recently awarded annual appropriations to UNC-CH, denouncing godless secular education and campaigning for equal allocation of public funds to the major denominational colleges.\textsuperscript{22} UNC-CH generally responded by arguing that "Christian education is the rule at Chapel Hill, but denominationalism is avoided." Their Protestant \textit{bona fides} at the dawn of the “privatized” 20\textsuperscript{th} century were defended with the following facts: fifteen of the university’s twenty-nine faculty members in the 1898-1899 school year were Sunday school teachers and twelve out of seventeen full professors held offices in their congregations.\textsuperscript{23} During this period of rapid institutional elaboration, UNC-CH sought to maintain dual conformity to both Protestant and emerging secular institutional myths. Its leaders garnered legitimacy and resources by maintaining a segregated status quo and trumpeting the university’s commitment pan-evangelical “Christian education.” They walked a tight-rope regarding gender as well. They demonstrated conformity to conservative Victorian norms through gendered regulations, while aligning with the emerging movement for coeducation \textit{gradually}. Women continued to be a small minority for decades to come, and they were initially restricted to academic programs deemed befitting their sex and isolated through thoroughly gendered student

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\textsuperscript{22} Gallagher, 23-24. \\
\textsuperscript{23} Kemp Battle, \textit{History of the University of North Carolina}, (Raleigh: Edwards & Broughton, 1912), 569.
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organizations. Francis Venable, the first president of the 20th century, brought Christian credentials as a presiding Presbyterian elder and former president of the campus YMCA consistent with the Presbyterian predominance of the preceding century, but the sermons he preached in chapel aligned him with the emerging liberal interdenominational ethos that would (temporarily) integrate Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces in the decades to come.

The institution that would become NCCU was founded in the context of this emerging interdenominational mainline culture and the stark racial caste system of Jim Crow. The “National Religious Training School and Chautauqua for the Colored Race, Inc.” was founded near Durham’s “black wall street” in 1910 through the hard work, charisma, and resourcefulness of a pharmacist and minister named Dr. James Shepard. As a black Republican son of a local Baptist preacher, Shepard was an enormously effective builder of bridges across thick racial, political, sectional, and denominational lines, bringing together diverse networks of supporters by appealing to a shared faith and pan-evangelical social mission grounded in the interdenominational training of ministers. He would lead the institution until his death in 1947, navigating it safely through multiple near failures through his skillful solicitation of support from whites and blacks, missionaries and politicians, Methodists and Congregationalists. The

25 See the latter portion of section 2.3 above
Institute was “national” insofar as Shepard’s relational network of benefactors was national; he raised much of the money from the wealthy white northern philanthropists he had impressed through his work with the International Sunday School Union. When Shepard was forced to sell the property in 1915 to cover the school’s debts, he successfully convinced “a Mrs. Russell Sage of New York” to supply the funds necessary to re-purchase the land.  

Shepard also worked to connect the school to larger institutional networks like the Methodist Chautauqua movement and Dwight Moody’s educational missions to acquire sustenance by endearing his school to those connected with them.

But the institute was also very much a local phenomenon sustained by both white and black benefactors. Central was nurtured by the White Rock Baptist congregation that had reared Shepard. The two were located in close proximity, and mutual support flowed between them. Shepard had been highly motivated to locate his school within this recognized center for exceptional economic opportunity for African-Americans. He refused a much larger land grant in South Carolina in favor of a twenty-five-acre tract in the heart of Durham’s black community “that was a gift largely of the white people of Durham,” first and foremost Brodie Duke. Again, in 1925, when a fire destroyed three major buildings, Shepard convinced Benjamin Duke to give $42,000, a

27 Ibid.
substantial portion of the money needed to rebuild the campus. These benefactors were sway by appeals grounded in Shepard’s stoic Christian ethos: “the fundamental idea being that young men and women will be taught to work, and that religion and work go hand in hand.”

Shepard prophesied that the “racial uplift” W.E.B. DuBois exhorted in The Souls of Black Folk would be achieved through the education of future pastors. “Negro ministers will be the most powerful leaders of the race,” Shepard asserted, adding that “the people cannot go higher than [untrained] leaders.” Shepard also prioritized secular conceptions of “real service to the nation” through a hybrid of the industrial and agricultural training advocated by George Washington Carver and the liberal arts education championed by DuBois. These religious, racial, and civic missions reinforced one another, legitimating the institution internally and externally—including in the state General Assembly dominated by white segregationist Democrats.

In the financial depression that followed World War I, the school’s survival was threatened again. Shepard considered turning it over to “one of several interested denominational boards” but decided instead to give the property to the state and reorganize as Durham State Normal School, thus reorienting toward the training of

30 Thorpe, 5.
teachers for black public schools. In 1925, Shepard spearheaded a “successful legislative campaign to make the school the first state-supported negro liberal arts college, North Carolina College for Negroes,” garnering a $100,000 appropriation from the state. Shepard even managed to continue this expansion through the Depression by winning additional federal and state grants. We thus see in NCCU’s early decades echoes of themes from UNC-CH’s first century in a condensed and delayed time frame. Central survived by deftly pivoting to present its mission in terms sympathetic to distinct networks of supporters. But the racial inequality confronting NCCU complicated this process enormously, making Protestant piety an even more critical resource for bridging daunting racial, political, and sectional divides.

Central’s transformation into a public institution in no way dampened the pervasively pious culture on campus. At a ceremony celebrating the school’s rechristening in 1925, Shepard emphasized both the institution’s Christian identity and commitment to making good on the unfulfilled promise of “separate but equal” education. “What sort of education are we to have for the American negro? Exactly the kind given to the white fellow…which furnishes the commonwealth the kind of citizens that democracy and civilization require…which seeks the supremely precious good of the soul wrapped up in the Christian tradition.” The college would employ a campus

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32 Ibid.
33 Thorpe, 8-9.
minister and require attendance at weekly chapel services for decades to come, and students were strongly encouraged to attend Sunday School and Vespers services. The pages of The Campus Echo are replete with references to highly active YMCA and YWCA chapters, supplementary sermons and lectures on religious themes, and a vibrant, sophisticated, and ubiquitous theological discourse. This Protestant orientation gave Shepard and his followers a powerful sense of pious purpose that sustained them and their institution through enormous obstacles and significant setbacks.

Under the specter of Jim Crow, this interweaving of realism and idealism, blending the rhetoric of racial uplift, missionary zeal, and an undergirding stoic philosophy, empowered heroic striving on behalf of the race in the name of God. Shepard preached this black Protestant stoicism regularly,\textsuperscript{34} reminding the students through chapel sermons and student paper articles that “you cannot have everything the way you might wish, but with patience day by day, you will walk into new paths of truth...even if the search for it leads over roads of thorns and the mount of crucifixion.”\textsuperscript{35} The Campus Echo offers ample evidence that this black Protestant stoicism inspired students to give their all to realize Shepard’s vision. Multiple students cited the example of the “strong faith and self-confidence” of their president in guiding the

\textsuperscript{34} Proverbs by stoics such as Marcus Aurelius were actually printed in The Campus Echo in the 1930s alongside exhortations to disciplined Christian living.

\textsuperscript{35} James Shepard, Untitled, The Eagle, November 1936.
college through challenges that put “the very life of this institution at stake,”\(^{36}\) exhorting others to a heightened sense of responsibility in light of racial and educational inequality. “Because of its struggles and later development, we as students at North Carolina College have a great challenge hurled before us…Let us…rise up…and strive day and night unceasingly to carry on the dream of our leader…to higher and nobler heights than ever dreamed of.”\(^{37}\) Just as UNC-CH may not have survived its tumultuous first century before securing reliable state support without the zealous Presbyterians who sustained the institution, one wonders whether NCCU could have surmounted so many obstacles without the motivating force of this black Protestant stoicism and the broad appeal of its pious presentation with diverse networks of supporters.

### 4.2 Midcentury Polarization: Preserving Protestant Cultures and Accommodating Secular Institutional Rules

Meyer and Rowan assume that “in modern societies, the elements of rationalized formal structure are deeply ingrained in, and reflect, widespread understandings of social reality.”\(^{38}\) But their ahistorical theory obscures the fact that this process of institutionalization occurred gradually over time. The system of higher education that existed in 1925 was still quite modest by today’s standards, reaching a much smaller

\(^{36}\) V.V. Oak, “Looking Forward with the North Carolina College,” *The Campus Echo*, October 25, 1937.


\(^{38}\) Meyer and Rowan, 343.
proportion of a much smaller population. Over the course of the 20th century, it would be utterly transformed from a traditional process of acculturation for elites to an elaborate system of professional preparation and provisional adulthood patronized by more than half the college-aged population. This process involved both internal elaboration of and systematic expansion of structures, and was part of a larger historical trend distributing the bureaucratic form of organization throughout American institutions. During this era of rapid institutionalization and growth at both UNC and NCCU, the locus of legitimization began to shift from relational networks to institutional rules, though, as we will see, to varying degrees and at different rates. Compliance with prevailing bureaucratic forms became an increasingly essential way of demonstrating to important constituents that the organization is acting “on collectively valued purposes in a proper and adequate manner,” thus “protect[ing] the organization from having its conduct questioned.”

Meyer and Rowan highlight the mythic quality of this rational bureaucratic system, noting that “norms of rationality are not simply general values. They exist in much more specific and powerful ways in the rules, understandings, and meanings

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39 Susan Dynarski, “Building the Stock of College-Educated Labor,” The Journal of Human Resources, (43:3, 576-610), 576. While graduation rates remain closer to one third of the population, enrollment rates have risen in recent years to nearly to two thirds, as roughly half of those who enroll in college do not earn a bachelor’s degree.
41 Meyer and Rowan, 349.
attached to institutionalized social structures.”⁴² The authors acknowledge that because “institutional environments are often pluralistic and societies promulgate sharply inconsistent myths,” “ceremonial rules...transmitted by myths that arise from different parts of the environment...may conflict with one another.”⁴³ During this period, incongruences between Protestant, secular, and pluralist myths began to become apparent, but they appeared two generations earlier and were more conspicuous at UNC-CH than at Central.

UNC-CH tried to balance these conflicting myths by “maintaining standard, legitimate formal structure” associated with both Protestant and secular paradigms while “[varying] activities in response to practical considerations.”⁴⁴ Well into the middle decades of the 20th century, UNC-CH preserved its Southern white Protestant heritage through ceremonies, such as university chapel services and the distribution of Bibles to graduates at commencement, and also through increasingly compartmentalized Protestant structures. Meanwhile, the university accommodated and displayed allegiance to competing secular and pluralist myths in its efforts to enter the national academic elite. In the mid-1920s, President Harry Chase invoked secular principles of free inquiry to defend controversial star scholar Howard Odum, who helped lift the university’s academic reputation through his Journal of Social Forces, while

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⁴² Ibid.
⁴³ Meyer and Rowan, 355-356.
⁴⁴ Meyer and Rowan, 357.
incensing conservative constituents with provocative articles highlighting the backwardness of Southern society and “implying that the Bible was a myth and Christianity a superstition.”\textsuperscript{45} Meanwhile, benefactors charged that the university was using the McNair endowed lecture on science and theology to bring speakers “contrary to the evangelical Christianity [stipulated] in the McNair bequest.”\textsuperscript{46} These emerging tensions between national and local interests erupted into a full-scale culture war over the teaching of evolution that revealed the degree to which political and religious commitments were intimately interwoven.

Ironically, the progeny of the Presbyterians who had nurtured the university throughout the first century became its most belligerent critics. Rev. William McCorkle, descendent of university founding father Samuel McCorkle, led the charge to indict the university as a center of atheism and infidelity.\textsuperscript{47} In 1925, D. Scott Poole, a Presbyterian elder and state representative submitted a joint resolution to the General Assembly prohibiting the teaching of Darwinian evolution “or any other evolutionary hypotheses that link man…with any lower form of life” in all state-supported institutions on the basis that “it is injurious to the welfare of the people of the State.”\textsuperscript{48} Again, Harry Chase took a strong stance for free inquiry, “ask[ing] if the constitution meant to say that

\textsuperscript{45} Snider, 189.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 190.
everybody should have the right of free speech except school teachers. Dr. Chase was asked if he thought teachers had the right to teach atheism and to this he replied that this was a matter of conscience.”49 Chase’s local reputation was damaged by the controversy while his academic credentials were enhanced, precipitating his departure in 1930 for the presidency of the University of Illinois. Future UNC-CH President Frank Graham, who would later meet opposition from the conservative members of the Board of Trustees, also published an op-ed decrying the bill.50 Graham learned from the experience to better moderate his tone to avoid inciting the wrath of conservative constituents, more deftly balancing UNC-CH’s dual institutional myths as a rising national research university and flagship institution of a conservative and overwhelmingly Protestant state. By accommodating the norms of elite institutions in the North and West, UNC-CH in 1922 became one of the first southern universities to enter the prestigious Association of American Universities.

Meanwhile, university leaders learned they could simultaneously appease Protestant constituents by preserving Protestant establishments through compartmentalized structures sustained by outsourced funding. “Because integration [was] avoided, disputes and conflicts [were] minimized, and [the] organization [could] mobilize support from a broader range of external constituents,”51 from secular

51 Ibid.
endowments like the Carnegie Foundation to local benefactors like R.J. Reynolds’ James Gray, who bankrolled the establishment of a Religion Department to institute piety-promoting instruction in the late 1940s. Both UNC-CH Chancellor Robert House and UNC system President Frank Graham had proved more than willing to “[cast] their desires for an expanded religious curriculum in pious phrasing, at least in some circles.” But they were also well aware of the need to tread lightly and avoid a misstep on either the left or the right that might leave them vulnerable to attack.

James Gray stepped up and effectively resolved the issue of state funding in 1946 by offering $250,000 to endow “religious instruction” at UNC-CH. A “theological conservative at heart…Gray hoped to stem the erosion of faith” at UNC-CH by funding “life-changing Bible instruction” for undergraduates. After expressing disappointment with the initial hiring of the liberal British theologian Arnold Nash, Gray’s wish was finally granted through the hiring of the charismatic and mission-minded Bernard Boyd as James Gray Professor of Biblical Literature in 1950. Boyd quickly became a campus favorite and, in time, a state-wide sensation as a travelling lecturer and star of a popular public television program. His introductory Bible class became one of the university’s largest courses through the hiring of teaching assistants and graders using the Gray fund. By 1954, three quarters of the endowment was devoted to Boyd’s Bible instruction.

53 Ibid.
“Letters from his students confirmed” Boyd’s claims of missionary success “and testified to his brilliance as a lecturer. ‘Your class . . . led me to commit myself to Christ,’ wrote one student. ‘Even an atheist would have to come out of that class believing the Bible,’ effused another.”

Boyd beamed to the Charlotte Observer, "If I can get the student interested in the Bible, he will continue to read it for the rest of his life.”

While the longstanding tradition of university chapel was dismantled and the rapid integration with national academic structures and norms continued apace, The YMCA and YWCA (The Campus “Y”), with an impressive facility at the heart of the campus, continued to hold a dominant position in extracurricular life. The “Y” had been central to campus life since 1860, but the organization dialed up its evangelical theological orientation in the 1930s and 1940s, shifting from a Victorian civil conception of “Christian leadership” to a commitment to “win [students] to Jesus Christ…and to help them to discover and to accept the full meaning of Christian discipleship.” These evangelistic aims were presented seamlessly with a broadened range of non-religious programming, increased diversity in terms of “heritage, opportunity, and outlook,” and express commitments to “value the sincere faith of men of other names and creeds” and cooperate with any and all “working to help one another in the spirit of good will.”

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54 Ibid., 408.
55 Ibid.
56 “Statement of Purpose as Revised in 1931,” Campus Y Collection, Box 2, Series 1, Subseries 2: History and Constitutions, University of North Carolina Archives.
57 Ibid.
This remarkable, self-conscious synthesis of social gospel liberalism, proto-pluralism, and evangelistic zeal demonstrates the persistent integrative power of mainline Protestantism, but the self-conscious tone suggests an awareness of competing impulses. In light of “the development of science and…the increasingly complicated relationships of modern life, our understanding of what it means to live as Jesus would have us live has widened.” Nevertheless, the statement concludes with a testimony to persistent faith that Protestant piety, secular service, and global consciousness might reinforce one another through a shared faith: “[I]n this time of moral confusion and religious uncertainty, we reaffirm our conviction that Jesus Christ is the Savior we would trust, the Leader we would follow, and the Master we would serve…We rededicate ourselves to him and to the service of our age and of the world.”  

The 1948-1949 Constitution affirmed an even more seamless vision of Christian service to the world without qualification, reflecting the enhanced comfort and confidence regarding Christian commitments in the post-war era. The organization’s purpose was restated in a straightforward and succinct sentence: “by taking Christ as its example and Christianity as its incentive, to engage in Christian service in the fields of worship, study, and action.” The YWCA revised its statement of purpose shortly thereafter: “to realize full and creative lives through a growing knowledge of God

58 Ibid.
[and]...to have a part in making this life possible for all people. In this task we seek to understand Jesus and to follow him.”

Through the “Y,” a substantial, Protestant-based religious life program was outsourced to a massive organization with extensive resources and credibility. It is important to note that the Protestant culture that persisted on campus was a racially specific one that interacted with a sectional civic pride manifested in the “Silent Sam” statue installed in 1913 by the United Daughters of the Confederacy. Despite progressive political pretensions of the administration and faculty in the early decades of the 20th century and increasing pressure from the northern academic elite UNC-CH inspired to join, the undergraduate college would remain segregated until the late 1950s.

At NCCU, tensions between cultural preservation and accommodation were doubly complicated by systemic racial inequality. But throughout the 1930s and 1940s, these tensions remained primarily implicit. In retrospect, we can observe how Protestant faith played important roles in both preserving African American culture and reinforcing accommodations to the majority white culture. Students were subjected to a much stricter code of conduct than their peers at white institutions, reflecting a paternalistic racialized hierarchy and black preoccupation with countering prevalent racist stereotypes. This code disciplined students in accordance with what Evelyn

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“Constitution of the YWCA, UNC” Campus Y Collection, Box 2, Series 1, Subseries 2: History and Constitutions, University of North Carolina Archives.
Brooks Higginbotham calls “the politics of respectability.”\textsuperscript{61} Shepard himself kept a close eye on students’ behavior from his home on the campus and from his office in the Hoey Administration Building—which has come to represent a fraught history of accommodation of segregationists like the infamous Governor Clyde Hoey, for whom it was named. “Failure to attend mandatory chapel services or respect the strict Protestant mores regulating dress, behavior, and relations between the sexes resulted in swift and severe discipline, even expulsion.”\textsuperscript{62}

The black Protestant stoicism undergirding this coercive respectability culture was reinforced through extensive religious life programming and the theological and philosophical discourse at the heart of \textit{The Campus Echo}. In hindsight, student articles from this era reflect adaptive accommodations to a disembodied and moralistic white Protestant culture. Through a 1928 article entitled “Right Thinking Is the Foundation of Moral Character,” a student asserted “thought and self-control are the two most important factors in life achievement…[while] every bad mental habit lowers the ideal and weakens the moral nature and our power of resistance.” The payoff of such mental discipline is invulnerability to the suffering imposed by a society that devalues one based on one’s skin color. “No matter how great [one’s] suffering, [one] can possess moral strength and clearness of vision unknown to his prosperous brother that he has


\textsuperscript{62} Thorpe, 8-9.
mental peace that gives contentment, even in suffering. His life is in a world of pure thought.” Such stoicism is also promised to “bring us more into the harmony and likeness of the Father who is divine.” Another student presented a similar brand of exacting, self-critical moralism in the dualistic terms of premillenial theology: “The main trouble with the world today is that too many so-called Christians have gone back into the world…It is our duty to prepare ourselves, for Jesus is coming soon. Therefore, we the younger people, should consider the question of religion more seriously than ever before.” Examples of an elevated sense of duty to represent the race through impeccable carriage abound in The Campus Echo. “Seriousness among students is one of the finer qualities that we all can possess,” asserted another student. We should “ever strive to improve our character, our carriage, and our general appearance…[for] we who are in college are a fortunate few [and] our lot is to set the pace.”

Students heard a variety of religious authorities in chapel and supplemental sermons and lectures, including pastors of local white churches, liberal white clergy and theological educators from the northeast, as well as black church leaders across the political and theological spectra. There were explicit and implicit reminders to mind one’s place and stay out of trouble. One student complained of a discouraging accommodationist orientation in an anonymous editorial in The Campus Echo: “Negro

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63 William King, “Right Thinking Is the Foundation of Moral Character,” The Campus Echo, February 1, 1928.
64 Flora King, Untitled, The Campus Echo, March 8, 1939.
leaders encourage the youth…but at the same time they discourage youth. ‘Be a leader,’ they say, ‘but don’t think you are as good as those in power because you’re not. Don’t be a weakling, but yield to the majority group. Be original in your ideas, but never exceed the originalities of the majority.’”

Occasionally, the rhetoric of the black Protestant stoicism explicitly reinforced such messages of inferiority. Another student reported Dr. Nathanial Tross, a secretary of the American Bible Society and member of Charlotte’s black elite, preached to students in 1939 that “amidst all of the difficulties of the present day, one should have the mind that was in Christ Jesus. The mind of Christ is not sought seriously today by our group, whereas the mind of Christ is sought more and more by whites.”

On the other hand, religious programming at NCCU also presented students with tools to preserve the integrity of African American communities and resist the operative racial hierarchy. In the same year, 1939, Dr. Clayton Powell of Abyssinia Baptist Church of New York preached a sermon debunking racist stereotypes regarding “efficiency” and cultivating a sense of what would later come to be called black consciousness: “The very fact that we exist today on the level which we do is because of a revolutionary character and a spirit which will not accept the age in which we live.” Just as college chaplain R. Albert Smith preached in 1928—“we need the church—its

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67 “Dr. Nathaniel Tross Preaches at NCC,” The Campus Echo, March 8th, 1939.
atmosphere, its contacts, its instruction, and its inspiration…One cannot afford to ignore this source of power,” 68 Powell “pleaded” that students support the church as the most powerful force for racial uplift and cultural preservation: “the salvation of the race depends on the church…the mecca of Negroes everywhere. It has always been the foundation of hopes and actions which have done more than any other factors to put us where we are today…[and is] a haven from which we seek refuge in times of need.” 69 Despite state-supported status NCCU would continue to be imbued with a strong black church culture for decades to come.

The G.I. Bill, baby boom, and post-war economic growth precipitated the exponential expansion of the system of higher education, particularly public universities like UNC-CH and NCCU, which enrolled an increasing proportion of college students as expanded public funding widened tuition gaps between public and private institutions. Consequently, UNC-CH and NCCU were increasingly shaped by broader institutional rules transmitted throughout expanded systems of public higher education.

As Meyer and Rowan argue, “organizations which exist in highly elaborated institutional environments that succeed in becoming isomorphic with these environments gain the legitimacy and resources needed to survive.” 70 DiMaggio and Powell elaborated this theory by outlining three distinct kinds of “isomorphic forces:”

70 Meyer and Rowan, 352.
“coercive” (legal precedents, state regulations, and formal accreditation standards), “mimetic” (imitating other universities) and “normative” (prevailing politicized ideals). By the 1960s, increased domestic migration brought more religious minorities to the “Bible Belt,” and 1965 immigration reform would bring more and more international and first-generation students from Asia, Africa, and Latin America, leading to increased concern for protecting the first amendment rights of religious minorities. This concern was less immediate at NCCU—an institution serving a racial minority that remained overwhelmingly Protestant—and secondary to the priority to protect the right to freely exercise a majority religious tradition that had empowered adaptive strategies of both resistance and accommodation in the face of oppression. In contrast, creating distance from the traditional Protestant establishment would serve UNC-CH’s institutional goal of transcending sectional status to compete as a national research institution. When we compare how these institutions negotiated this shifting terrain, we see how distinct mimetic and normative isomorphic forces conditioned the ways they accommodated and resisted the secularization of the academy described by Marsden.

UNC-CH secularized steadily throughout the second half of the 20th century through three parallel processes: the “mimetic” imitation of more secular elite R-1 peers with which it wished to compete, and two processes that DiMaggio and Powell would

call “normative,” meaning that they proceeded through the ascendance of particular “politicized ideals” within the institution. First, a substantial portion of the white mainline Protestant stock who continued to dominate the institution secularized and therefore embraced more secular norms within the university. Second, growing populations of religious minorities had to be accommodated. The result was fragmentation, as UNC-CH became defined by an institutional culture that increasingly conflicted with the white Southern Protestant networks that had nurtured it. This was not simply a top-down institutional shift; it was furthered in the 1960s by a secular shift in the student body similar to the one documented at Duke in the second chapter.

The secularization of the Campus “Y” illustrates this dramatic generational turn. In stark contrast to the deeply theological mission statements of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, Excelsior, the paper the “Y” launched in 1964, explained its purpose in humanistic terms. It talked of “devotion to the best possibilities of the human community,” with only vague reference to “our birth in the Christian movement, whose Judaic roots provide it with the nourishment of the prophetic tradition, [and] whose humility provides it with the willingness to serve in the background.” This language clearly reflects an accommodating attitude toward secular and pluralist forces characteristic of the postwar interfaith movement. This “humility” seems to have utterly neutralized the organization’s evangelistic thrust: “It is hoped [that] persons sympathetic with our
purpose and interested in joining our work will find us and bring themselves to us.”\textsuperscript{72}

This is a far cry from a “primary purpose to win [students] to Jesus Christ…and to accept the full meaning of Christian discipleship for their own lives.”\textsuperscript{73} Within a decade, the organization would formally separate from the larger YMCA and YWCA bodies as an “independent campus organization,” espousing secularized forms of “ethical values consistent with the best values of the religious, academic, and political roots which have shaped and nourished us.”\textsuperscript{74}

This disaffiliated “Campus Y” was religious only in terms of an interfaith-friendly conception of heritage and insofar as it provided a secular outlet for religiously motivated service: “[F]rom its Judeo-Christian tradition, it gives individuals opportunities to act on their faith and their convictions through volunteer work, the supporting of national and international causes, and the striving for social, political and personal freedom and justice.”\textsuperscript{75} By disavowing the now apparent divisions embedded in its historic religious commitments, the Y sought to transcend its particularity and “serve as a crossroad, bringing together townspeople, administrators, and students.”\textsuperscript{76}

The Protestant ties that had bound the Y for so long dissolved as the white Protestant

\textsuperscript{72} “What is Excelsior?,” \textit{Excelsior}, December 17, 1964.
\textsuperscript{73} “Statement of Purpose as Revised in 1931,” Campus Y Collection, Box 2, Series 1, Subseries 2: History and Constitutions. University of North Carolina Archives
\textsuperscript{74} “Constitution, Young Men’s and Young Women’s Christian Association, UNC,” February 7\textsuperscript{th}, 1973, Campus Y Collection, Box 2, Series 1, Subseries 2: History and Constitutions, University of North Carolina Archives.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
population that had sustained it secularized and welcomed others across the religious spectrum to share in secular social service work.

In stark contrast, Central secularized structurally in response to coercive forces, while Protestantism remained quite powerful normatively. As the university gradually became incorporated into the consolidated UNC system amidst a protracted integration struggle, increased conformity with recently clarified secular institutional myths surrounding the public university was required. As a result, the use of university funds to support a campus ministry came under scrutiny. Dr. Neal Hughley, who had assumed the titles of Director of Religious Education in 1948 and Campus Minister in 1955, had simultaneously served as professor of economics in the Social Sciences department since 1941 (while also somehow finding time to pastor a congregation). Consequently, his salary could be justified on secular educational grounds. But in 1962, several majority-white mainline denominational bodies—including the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, the local conference of the United Methodist Church, the Episcopal Diocese of Raleigh, the Presbyterian Church of the United States, the Diocese of Raleigh – Roman Catholic, the United Church of Christ, and the local Lutheran Council—pooled resources to create a state-wide body called the United Christian Campus Ministries in an effort to reinstitute the collective Protestant worship that had been dismantled at many institutions. A progressive white Lutheran pastor named Hank Elkins became director in 1965 and took a special interest in supporting the
campus ministry at NCCU, arranging to hire ministry interns to serve the campus through the university’s work-study program. Officials representing State Governor Dan Moore caught wind of this and demanded that the university return the work-study funds used to support the ministry to the state government. From this point onward, NCCU was careful to ensure that all religious activity on campus was externally funded to avoid violating the newly enforced rules mandating the secularity of state universities.

At the same time, Central’s HBCU identity entailed embeddedness in networks and normative contexts that blunted the forces of secularization that transformed UNC-CH. Indeed, part of the project of cultural preservation was to resist the secularization and theological liberalism making inroads among white Protestants. College chaplain Preston Williams wrote in the Campus Echo: “The church is guilty of leaning over too far backward when it fails to proclaim the all-sufficiency of Christ…Christian faith [is] a God-given standard by which he can test the truth and falsity of every aspect of society…working to alter its basic disorientation…and shatter the pagan patterns of life and recreate everything in and under Christ.” Rev. Williams also conducted a fairly substantial survey of several hundred students in the mid-1950s. These data showed that students preserved high levels of private devotional practices both before and during

78 Preston Williams, “Christians Shouldn’t Overdo it,” The Campus Echo, April 29th, 1955.
college: about 85% said grace at meals, two-thirds prayed regularly, and a tenth read religious books regularly. While the survey did show the declines in participation in collective religious practices that other surveys of college students have shown, the substantial minority who continued to attend such services “indicated that they do so for spiritual growth and not from a sense of obligation.”

The Campus Echo provides even stronger evidence that students at NCCU did not so much secularize as diversify their religious views in light of the challenging issues of the day. A vibrant, sophisticated, and wide-ranging theological debate ensued in the 1960s about how to best engage the Civil Rights struggle, intellectual breakthroughs, and cultural upheaval of the times. Protestant piety was mobilized to support the desegregation effort while complicities were interrogated, purging Protestantism of its accommodationist associations to preserve it as a critical resource. For example, a Christmas season article in 1961 entitled “Participate for Real ‘Peace on Earth’” echoed the NAACP in exhorting readers to refrain from materialistic festivities and instead “take part in picketing, boycotting, and protesting the injustices to Negroes in your community.” A few months later, students employed church attendance as a form of resistance to segregation, attempting to integrate white churches in Durham, with mixed results. The Campus Echo offered a sophisticated theological analysis of the event: “the

79 “Students Give Religious Views in Recent Poll,” The Campus Echo, April 29th, 1955.
80 “Participate in Real ‘Peace on Earth,’” The Campus Echo, December 20, 1961.
students who participated were really idealists who mistakenly thought that these people were worshipping a God as described by Paul Tillich, a thing of ultimate concern…Pseudo-Christians who worship in churches that have discriminatory practices are not interested in the universal and impersonal God but rather in god—the glorified man.”81 In contrast with the more deferential and self-critical tone of NCCU’s early decades, such attacks on the spiritual and theological integrity of segregationists became increasingly common. Another student author charged that “the anti-integration factions in the United States have no moral, religious, social, or economic grounds on which to stand. For…a group…to assert their belief in the teachings of Christian religion and…condone the suppression of a race is the ultimate in hypocrisy,” the student contested, citing incompatible Christian teachings such as “Love they Neighbor’ [and] ‘do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’”82

Some students employed religious rhetoric to transcend tensions between accommodation and resistance by intertwining the two. Jeanette Shaw’s 1964 article juxtaposed a King-esque, non-violent struggle for both “the liberation of the Negro and the redemption of the white man” through “suffering, freely sought and accepted in the spirit of Christ” with a prophecy of an “awakened Negro” who “will pull the pillars of white society crashing down” so that “a new world (a black world) will one day arise.”

The two perspectives are integrated through a kind of applied atonement theology in which “the sin of the white man is to be expiated, through a genuine response to the redemptive love of the Negro for him.” Shaw asserted that “the Negro is ready to suffer, if necessary to die, if this will make the white man understand his sin, repent of it, and atone for it,” while open-endedly questioning “whether a white man is even capable of grasping the words, let alone believing them.” As the 1960s progressed, the assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, race riots, and entrenched regional resistance to federal court rulings and Civil Rights legislation left little middle ground on which to stand.

By the late 1960s, the religiously empowered struggle for racial justice precipitated a distinct process of fragmentation and polarization regarding the roles Protestantism had played in both resisting and accommodating the white majority. In the context of Malcolm X Day, which was held on the fourth anniversary of his assassination, February 21, 1969, and included a seminar on “Black Awareness and the Black Experience” and a march downtown involving 200 students, one student activist threw down the gauntlet to his conservative critics: “Some of y’all better decide where you stand—either you are black or you are white—neutrality for blacks is a non-reality.” In this context, the Baptist Student Union published an apology for its track

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record of accommodation and committed to reorienting toward revolutionary action. A student reporter wrote that “even the BSU, with its religious and moderate origins, sees a need for black unity, black brotherhood, black perspective, and black self-determination...We invite all Brothers and Sisters to join the BSU in the struggle for survival and liberation.” To demonstrate its commitment, the organization sponsored discussion forums, including “Malcolm X, and the Role of the Black Women in the Revolution,” “The Revolution,” “the Third World,” “Black Jesus,” and “The Role of the Black Church,” while the BSU president prayed, “Oh Lord, I pray that my brothers and sisters here at NCC will work hard to promote black self-determination. Give us strength to save America from its due fate.”

By disavowing a history of accommodations to the white majority grounded in stoic Protestant piety, and by ramping up the rhetoric of resistance, these student leaders worked to conserve a Protestant campus culture that would continue to preserve African-American culture. This cultural preservation function became all the more pivotal as North Carolina College for Negroes became NCCU, a comprehensive regional university in the UNC system subject to the same laws enforcing integration at white institutions.

From 1967 to 1972, a period of exceptional racial turmoil as well as institutional incorporation into the UNC system, the charismatic civil rights activist Herbert Eaton served as Campus Minister under University Chancellor Albert Whiting. In these days

85 “BSU to Serve NCC Students,” The Campus Echo, March 31, 1969.
of intense political polarization, Whiting was widely critiqued as an “Uncle Tom” who excessively accommodated the white-dominated political system in which he was forced to operate. Like many conservative African-Americans, Whiting expressed opposition to what he perceived to be the more extreme manifestations of the Civil Rights movement. Consequently, he encountered significant blowback from student activists on campus whom Eaton, a proponent of the new liberation theology, supported wholeheartedly.

After crossing Whiting on several occasions, the chancellor insisted

“that the Campus Ministry must be responsive to the Chancellor and to the University. The Campus Ministry Board responded by stating that the Campus Ministry could not be restrained by the administration; it had to be free and independent. As a result of this impasse, President Whiting placed the ministry in an off-campus location, two blocks from the campus on Lincoln Street.”

Thus, the polarization within the African-American community in the latter stages of the Civil Rights Movement helped precipitate the full separation of the United Campus Ministry from the administrative structures of the university, which ironically helped preserve it within an institution undergoing parallel processes of institutional and racial integration.

4.3 Protestant Privilege, Pluralism, and the Public University: Racial and Economic Disparities

We can see how the structural separation of Protestant structures into externally funded units enabled UNC-CH and NCCU to perform compliance with both Protestant

86 Jones and Fitts, 49.
and secular paradigms and thus engender support from diverse local networks, the state government, and national academic agencies. But tensions between these dual processes of legitimation would widen in the decades to come. At UNC-CH, Protestant dominance of compartmentalized academic and extracurricular structures increasingly presented problems to the secularized faculty and administration, inviting interventions designed to counter this persistent privilege. At Central, Protestant privilege remained strong and secularization proceeded slowly through gradually increasing self-consciousness regarding its Protestant ceremonial culture and growing preoccupation with performing conformity with secular institutional myths. As pluralism emerged as the dominant religious discourse, each institution adapted its highly fungible rhetoric toward divergent goals explained by their historical trajectories, demographic differences, and substantial resource disparities.

What Meyer and Rowan called the “logic of confidence and good faith” allowed Central to use pluralistic institutional myths to expand a minimalist campus ministry to offer more support to an underserved student population in the terms of the majority religious tradition. Meanwhile, pluralism enabled UNC-CH to use inclusive language and sympathetic orientation toward religious others to counter Protestant dominance of campus religious discourse and even the playing field, however slightly. Meyer and Rowan argue that such decoupling strategies are in “no way fraudulent. [They] may even be the most reasonable way[s] to get participants to make their best efforts in
situations that are made problematic by institutionalized myths that are odds with immediate technical demands.”\textsuperscript{87} In this way, decoupling activities from structures helps increase efficiency despite apparent incongruences, so long as “participants not only commit themselves to supporting an organization’s ceremonial façade but also commit themselves to making things work out backstage.”\textsuperscript{88}

But herein lies the risk for high profile public institutions: they must “maintain the appearance that the myths actually work” to diverse “internal participants and their external constituents.”\textsuperscript{89} Fine lines are easily crossed, particularly when the demands are not so much “technical,” as interpersonal and ideological and thus up to the interpretation of the individuals entrusted with oversight of these structures. Consequently, we see an inherent instability in the pluralistic structures of these public universities, for “internal participants and external constituents may soon become disillusioned with their ability to manage boundary-spanning exchanges”\textsuperscript{90} across secular, pluralist, and Protestant paradigms. And, unlike private institutions, critics have recourse to the first amendment and judicial precedents mandating an elusive religious neutrality with which to justify lawsuits with staggering social capital costs, not to mention legal fees.

\textsuperscript{87} Meyer and Rowan, 359.
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 358.
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 356.
The secularization and pluralization of the Religious Studies Department illustrates normative shifts among the faculty and demonstrates the role mimetic forces play in evolving norms of academic respectability befitting an “R-1” institution. The individuals who comprised UNC-CH’s original Religion Department (Bernard Boyd and Arnold Nash) used theological tools to serve students’ perceived spiritual demands as well as intellectual aims. The department’s mid-1950s mission statement had plainly asserted that the "first function of the department is to further an understanding of the . . . . Judaic-Christian tradition."91 By the time of Boyd’s death in 1975, the Department had come to see its purpose to be studying religion as a “historical and cultural phenomenon”92 and the confessional orientation taken by the departments’ founders as an embarrassment (as well as the notion of a singular Judaic-Christian tradition). It had shifted toward a more critical approach to Christian traditions and enhanced attention to non-western traditions.

Departmental records reflect mere traces of the politics involved in the transformation of the department; oral history is required to bring them to light. Peter Kaufman came to the department in 1978, when “colleagues at the helm were already steering away” from the confessional Christian instruction that Boyd and Nash had spearheaded through the 1950s and 1960s. Kaufman observed that “the normative was

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91 Weaver-Zercher, 413.
92 Ibid.
He acknowledged that this was the “right direction for an R-1,” an “intentional move” toward what most members of the department considered “academic respectability,” i.e. the norms derived from guild organizations like the American Academy of Religion and the activities of parallel departments at competing institutions. But he noted that “there’s also a degree of academic respectability that comes with debunking the received wisdom,” referencing Bart Ehrman, the star New Testament scholar and former evangelical who arrived in 1988 and who has published thirty books systematically deconstructing the evangelical orthodoxy he espoused in his youth. Similarly, Kaufman recalled how “one of my colleagues confided that they had hired me to disabuse students of their Bible-beltish ways. That’s why they hired a Jew to teach Christianity.” But, instead, Kaufman’s courses “became popular…with the evangelicals [because]…I use my students’ beliefs, whether I agree with them or disagree with them, as a way into my teaching.”

Kaufman said he has great respect for the teaching and scholarship of Ehrman and others taking critical approaches to Christianity and understands why “religious studies has drift[ed] away from the history of Christianity” toward “more methodologically astute” approaches and a “much larger role for non-western traditions.” But over thirty years in the department, he grew embittered by a perceived

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93 Ehrman’s influence is perceived to be so strong that various evangelical ministries have facilitated discussion groups for his students in order to debunk the debunking of traditional theological positions.
hypocrisy: the marginalization of scholars approaching Christianity with some degree of sympathy while Jewish and Islamic Studies programs that “out-Boyded Boyd” by “preach[ing] the centrality of understanding” these traditions flourished. Kaufman cited his own grievances as the “lowest paid tenured professor in the university” and the failed tenure battle of a colleague who was perceived to be “too Catholic” for the department. He also cited the rejection of a six-figure grant for a “Christianity and Culture” program won by former sociology professor Christian Smith before left for Notre Dame as the ultimate evidence of a general “animus against Christianity” in the department, while acknowledging exceptions. Similarly, in 2004, the department forfeited to the Presbyterian Church the John Calvin McNair endowment for a lecture series on the relationship between science and theology after the McNair family objected to the speaker selected. Apparently, the department was willing to sacrifice many thousands in funding to sever the Protestant strings attached by James Gray when he bankrolled the department in the late 1940s to provide pious instruction in the Bible.

There is a parallel pattern in extracurricular religious life, where the Protestant dominance of what had become a free market led administrators to introduce regulatory controls to even the playing field. In the wake of the 1960s secularization of the campus culture and the resurgence of evangelical Christianity in the late 1970s and 1980s, externally funded Protestant groups have proliferated on UNC-CH’s campus. Today,

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94 Peter Kaufman, Interview, March 7th, 2016.
UNC-CH has 53 recognized student religious groups on campus. Thirty-eight of these are Protestant, and over three quarters of these have a decidedly evangelical flavor. Moreover, a Christian Study Center was recently founded in a prime location on the border of the campus surrounded by dormitories. The Center offers support and space to all of these Christian student organizations while sponsoring substantial programming of its own, including discussion groups, lectures, dinners, and an annual Wilberforce Conference.

In the context of this Protestant proliferation, it is understandable why administrators charged with oversight of religious life would want to do what they can to keep what they might perceive as excessive influence in check. But as a state university charged with the (perhaps impossible) task of maintaining religious neutrality, such efforts run the risk of inciting legal challenges. In the early years of the 21st century, the conservative Alliance Defense Fund and the American Family Association Center for Law and Policy (AFACL) initiated lawsuits against the university alleging that they had illegally (a) used the non-discrimination policy to discriminate against Christian groups and (b) promoted an excessively sympathetic understanding of Islam in the name of pluralism through a summer reading program for incoming freshmen.

95 “Organizations-Faith & Religion,” Heel Life, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Heellife.unc.edu/organizations.
96 “Events,” Christian Study Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Ncstudycenter.org/events.
According to Professor of Computer Science Fred Brooks, longtime faculty advisor to InterVarsity, the non-discrimination controversy began in 2002 when Jonathan Curtis, then Assistant Director of Student Activities for the Student Union, who identifies as homosexual, wrote a letter to InterVarsity alleging that their by-laws violated the university's non-discrimination policy by stipulating that student leaders must affirm the organization's statement of faith.97 For several years, InterVarsity leaders had signed the annual application for official recognition that required “openness to full membership: participation must be available to all members of the University community without regard to race, religion, national origin, disability, age, veteran status, sexual orientation or gender (where applicable).”98 InterVarsity submitted a formal objection to Curtis' judgment, arguing that while all are welcome to participate, the purpose and integrity of the organization depended upon its ability to restrict leadership to those committed to upholding its theological commitments. This objection was rejected by Curtis, prompting InterVarsity to appeal to the Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, who “stood by [Curtis], more out of managerial principle than any other.”99 Doubly rebuffed, InterVarsity appealed to then-University Chancellor James Moeser. By this time, the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE), an organization founded in 1999 to “defend and sustain individual rights at America’s

97 Fred Brooks, Interview, August 9th, 2017.
98 “Recognition Application 1994-95, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship,” The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Copy provided by Frederick Brooks (signatory).
99 Brooks, Interview.
colleges and universities,“¹⁰⁰ had rallied to InterVarsity’s defense, lobbying the chancellor and threatening a lawsuit if the university did not allow InterVarsity to retain official recognition with its Statement of Faith policy intact. Moeser and the university quickly rescinded their allegation of policy violation in early 2003, allowing InterVarsity to retain its leadership requirement.¹⁰¹

Later that year, Alpha Iota Omega Christian (AIO) fraternity further challenged the policy through an addendum to its recognition application contesting that the organization should be able to limit membership (as opposed to leadership) according to religious affiliation. According to FIRE, “Curtis refused, informing [student representative Segun] Olangunju that the addendum would be unacceptable and that AIO would be required to agree to the clause or face refusal of recognition.” AIO refused in turn, and “the university subsequently withdrew the group’s recognition and froze its university account and web access.”¹⁰² FIRE once again argued that “it is tyranny, not tolerance, to prohibit such voluntary associations.” “Forbidding a religious group the right to limit its membership to those who share its religious identity denies its members the rights of freedom of association, freedom of expression, and the free exercise of religion—all of which are constitutional rights that UNC[-CH], as a state

¹⁰² Ibid.
institution, is legally obligated to uphold.”¹⁰³ Included was a copy of a policy allowing religious groups the opportunity to request limited exemptions from the university’s non-discrimination policy that FIRE had successfully negotiated in a similar case at Purdue University.

Chancellor Moeser responded by first asserting that “at this University, we encourage students to nurture their moral, spiritual, and religious lives...we have 42 recognized student religious groups, the overwhelming majority of them being Christian, with student membership totaling nearly 5,000.”¹⁰⁴ Moeser defended the decision to refuse recognition for AIO, arguing that requiring members to be male Christians violates Title IX. He explained that the university had tried to work with AIO to “strike a proper balance between the interests of nondiscrimination and free association,” but the group had thus far proved unwilling to accept proposed compromises. The Campus Ministers’ Association issued a statement—signed by five mainline Protestant campus ministers and representatives of the Catholic Newman Center and Hillel—expressing “its support of Chancellor Moeser’s position” and its opposition to such “exclusive clauses.” They testified that “none of our groups have experienced discrimination” and “encourage[d] the University to protect the right of all students to participate in organizations of their choosing.”¹⁰⁵ The non-discrimination

¹⁰³ Ibid.
¹⁰⁵ “Statement from Campus Ministers’ Associations, Approved Monday, August 23, 2004.”
policy thus became the most recent polarizing point in the ongoing feud between mainline and evangelical Protestants.

The Alliance Defense Fund (ADF) subsequently filed a lawsuit against Moeser that resulted in a court injunction preventing the university from using the non-discrimination policy to prohibit AIO from “limiting membership and participation in their organization to students who, upon individual inquiry, affirm that they support [the organization’s] goals, agree with [its] beliefs, and agree to conform their behavior to [its] tenets and standards of conduct.” As a result, a second clause was added to UNC-CH’s non-discrimination policy which made the allowance indicated in the injunction while upholding the university’s Title IX-derived prohibition against limiting membership on the basis of identity or “status.” The ADF and AIO celebrated the decision as a victory that resulted in a more just non-discrimination policy, while Moeser claimed that the decision vindicated the university’s original position that had been “repeatedly misinterpreted or misunderstood by the plaintiffs—a fact duly noted by the court.” Either way, both parties expressed satisfaction with the compromise.

But in 2011, controversy erupted again, when a Christian a capella group named Psalm 100 dismissed a homosexual senior member on the basis that his views on homosexuality violated the group’s stipulation that members must uphold the teachings

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of the Bible. A task force comprised of administrators, faculty, and students was organized to reconsider the non-discrimination policy. After considering reverting back to the kind of “all comers” policy that led to the original threat to derecognize InterVarsity, the task force instead recommended to “alter the policy to create a clearer procedure for outlining an organization’s core beliefs and values,” a proposal that Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs Winston Crisp accepted.

The interpretation of each twist and turn throughout this decade-long controversy has been hotly contested, but two things of relevance to the argument at hand are clear. First, although there are other religious groups on campus representing traditions generally recognized to share these evangelical groups’ conservative views regarding the permissibility of homosexuality, only Protestant groups’ policies have been scrutinized in this way. Each paradigm suggests distinct explanations for this fact (which are by no means mutually exclusive). Critics of Christian privilege might say that, as the majority group, Protestants are the ones capable of throwing their weight around in such a way that marginalizes sexual and religious others, that’s exactly what the discriminatory policies of these evangelical groups do, and thus should be stopped. George Marsden might argue that the emergence of the academic secular paradigm out of liberal Protestantism singles out conservative Protestants for special scrutiny, which is

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109 Emily Overcash, “Non-Discrimination task force finalizes plan to create clearer policy for campus groups,” The Daily Tar Heel, April 23, 2012.
why InterVarsity’s by-laws were investigated despite the lack of a student complaint of discrimination or InterVarsity objection to the non-discrimination policy. Proponents of pluralism might argue that vulnerable, underrepresented minorities should be supported rather than scrutinized, so Muslims, for example, who are subject to widespread prejudice, should be affirmed rather than challenged, while the power of the majority to dominate religious discourse should be checked.

Secondly, the protests of these various evangelical groups resulted in a revised non-discrimination policy that accommodates InterVarsity’s Statement of Faith policy that ignited the controversy. However “em battled” these Protestants groups may be, they are thriving. And they are clearly capable of defending themselves and dismantling regulations that hamper their ability to dominate the free marketplace. The long arc of the non-discrimination policy suggests that efforts to constrain them are counter-productive. One the one hand, InterVarsity may well have benefitted from its national campaign to defend its right to select leaders who affirm its interpretation of Christianity while retaining official recognition. On the other hand, simply insisting that

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111 InterVarsity’s Statement of Faith policy and status as a recognized student organization have been challenged elsewhere—including the Bowdoin College, the California State University system, Rollins College, the State University of New York at Buffalo, Tufts University, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin-Superior, and Vanderbilt University—due to alleged violation of these institutions’ non-discrimination policies. InterVarsity has responded with a robust legal and media campaign. See “Campus Access Issues,” InterVarsity.org, https://intervarsity.org/campus-access-issues.
Psalm 100 clarify the beliefs that led the group to dismiss a homosexual member puts evangelicals on the defensive.

In light of these complex dynamics at the nexus of Protestant privilege and secular scrutiny, forwarding a progressive pluralism promoting sympathetic understanding of minority traditions is arguably a more effective and less problematic strategy for evening a playing field persistently dominated by Protestants. Just a few months before the non-discrimination policy case began, UNC-CH experienced another major controversy that pitted the university against conservative Protestants in court. In the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, Professor of Islamic Studies Carl Ernst suggested using Michael Sells’ *Approaching the Qur’an, a book which offers a sympathetic introduction to Islam through poetic translations of the brief suras near the end of the Qur’an, as the summer reading text for the incoming freshmen of the class of 2006. Major backlash ensued reminiscent of the evolution controversy of the 1920s. The North Carolina House Appropriations Committee initially passed a budget including an amendment barring the use of public funds for summer reading programs including assignments devoted to one particular religion unless equal time was given to “all known religions.”

The university responded by amending the assignment to allow “students opposed to reading parts of the Qur’an…to complete a one-page writing assignment on

why they choose not to read the book.” Nonetheless, the AFACLP filed a lawsuit against the university, arguing that the assignment violated first amendment guarantees of free exercise of religion and government non-establishment. A federal district judge and the 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals both ruled on behalf of the university, allowing discussions of the book to proceed as planned. Though the controversy created some bad press in conservative circles, the university and its interpretation of academic freedom were ultimately vindicated, just as they were in the evolution controversy. And in many eyes, including Ernst’s, “considerable hypocrisy” was revealed among conservative Protestants who attacked the assignment while admitting they would welcome one focused on sympathetic understanding of the Bible. In contrast to the protracted non-discrimination controversy, the hullabaloo over the *Approaching the Qur’an* assignment did not effectively feed the sense of embattlement on which many evangelical communities thrive. Instead, it served to relativize the dominant position of Protestantism by facilitating sympathetic engagement with a minority religious tradition against conservative Protestant opposition.

Similarly, the “Office of Religious Diversity and Interfaith Pluralism” serves to relativize the dominant religious tradition by placing it in the context of a postmodern conception of individual “identity development: supporting and providing resources for

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113 Ibid.
our students, faculty, and staff as they gain an understanding of themselves and others while learning about religions and philosophies of the world.”

The “office” presents pluralistic ideals of inclusiveness, neutrality, and self-determination that counter conservative Protestantism. As a result, Christianity is relativized as one of many “religious, spiritual, faith, or philosophical identity” options, and the Counseling Center is presented as an alternative to campus ministers.

In my interview with Jenny Ofstein about her construction of the ORDIP website, she made clear that leveling the playing field was a primary motivation for this pluralistic ceremonial display. She drew a diagram depicting a wall that several religious groups are trying to see over. Then she drew a big box representing the massive resources that Protestants bring to boost them over the wall. The minority groups, on the other hand, lack such resources and thus need a boost to help them see over the wall as well. In this view, the public university should promote equality of religious opportunity by lending support to those with fewer resources. But these perceived immediate demands are at odds with secular institutional myths mandating that public universities remain neutral between religious traditions and between “religion and no religion.”

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116 Jenny Ofstein, “Need to talk to someone about your religious, spiritual, faith or philosophical identity?” UNC.edu, Accessed October 12th, 2012.
Consequently, the small pool of university funds available for religious life is strictly limited to “interfaith programming.” In practice, this means that a university sponsored event must involve two or more religious groups representing distinct traditions, including a group for atheists and agnostics. The three types of possible events Blackburn cited were all modified by a legitimizing moniker: “It could be an interfaith *educational* program, an interfaith *social* program, or an interfaith *service* opportunity [emphases mine].” And, while funds are available, the burden of organizing and facilitating such pluralistic events generally falls on the students. Both of the religious life events bringing together a wide variety of student religious groups that I attended were entirely student led. Administrators are generally involved insofar as they approve the distribution of university funds according to bureaucratic procedure and alignment with the categories of acceptable events Blackburn cites. The policy is designed to protect the university from being charged with violating secular institutional rules by restricting funding to student-initiated extracurricular activities that have identifiable secular purposes that simply involve religious groups. But “interfaith pluralism” is not religiously neutral; it emerges out of a particular ecumenical Protestant history shaped by polemics against conservative evangelicals who rejected its allegedly relativizing agenda. Still, in the context of this broader history, these campus controversies, and the strictures of secular institutional norms, ORDIP’s hollow

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117 Blackburn, Interview.
pluralistic performance is arguably the best option available to symbolically check the
inordinate power of Protestants to dominate religious discourse, and to try to level the
playing field for religious minorities without risking another costly lawsuit.

Protestantism enjoys even greater dominance at Central. And in light of the role
that Protestant faith has played in the long struggle of the African-American public the
university serves for equal economic and educational opportunity, motivations to
preserve Protestant privilege have proved stronger than the will to counter it. The
separate spheres strategy used in the middle decades of the 20th century at UNC-CH has
continued to enable NCCU’s dual compliance with secular and Protestant norms.
Through the end of the century, a widely shared Protestant faith continued to be
invoked through a robust ceremonial culture, including convocation, Founder’s Day,
and commencement. For example, commencement clearly resembled a Protestant
worship service throughout the 1970s, 1980s and into the 1990s, opening with an
invocation and closing with a benediction given by the campus minister. A scripture
reading was included through the early 1990s118 and traditional hymns, African-
American spirituals (such as “My Soul’s Been Anchored in De Lord”), and
contemporary gospel music (such as “Ride On, King Jesus”) were all performed
regularly as part of commencement proceedings into the 21st century.119

118 Based on a comprehensive review of commencement programs from 1960 through 2005.
But under Chancellor Ammons, a former civil rights lawyer and judge, this ceremonial culture was secularized and pluralized to some extent. By 2005, the “benediction” had become a “meditation,” or even simply, a “reflection,” though still delivered by Baptist Michael Page, who has served as Campus Minister since 1999.\footnote{Based on a comprehensive review of commencement programs from 1960 through 2005.}

This is arguably more of a formal shift than a substantive one, an example of the decoupling of Protestant ministerial functions from secular and pluralist symbolic display, a decoupling that allows the institution to “maintain standard, legitimate formal structure while activities vary in response to practical considerations.”\footnote{Meyer and Rowan, 357.} In this case, the practical considerations include the ceremonial expectations of a majority Protestant audience. Still, it reflects the Commencement Committee’s genuine attempt to ensure that the blessing offered is appropriately “ecumenical” for audiences who are increasingly diverse as the school draws more white and Latino students as well as non-Protestant African-Americans. The diversification of this HBCU has led to increasing self-consciousness regarding compliance with secular institutional displays.

Nonetheless, the persistent power of a Black Church culture for the school’s traditional constituency tempts some members to boldly proclaim this faith, invoking its power to unify and sanctify the educational community that proved so crucial through its first half century. But the contemporary context breeds uneasiness regarding such
proclamations, even among those who share this African-American Protestant faith. For example, one member of the Commencement Committee reported that they had to “reign in” the Interim Campus Minister who filled in for Michael Page during a recent sabbatical because they took excessive license with such ceremonial opportunities, offering prayers more befitting a “holiness convention.” The committee member explained that such prayers were unacceptable not because of their theological particularity but because of the way they exposed the public institution to risk. For decades, a Protestant culture of piety helped legitimate Central to diverse networks, but contemporary constructions of secular institutional myths surrounding the public university have rendered it more of a liability than a legitimating force.

Still, in the eyes of many devout Protestants within the institution, these secular institutional myths are at odds with the immediate demands of students in light of the persistent Protestant majority and stark resource disparities regarding religious life programming. Compared to UNC-CH, there is relatively little campus ministry activity at Central. Charlene Brown arrived in late 2012 to plant an InterVarsity ministry at Central and found herself to be the only full-time campus minister. She framed her arrival in the context of a history of neglect of HBCUs by parachurch ministries that pour extensive resources into higher-profile, majority-white institutions like UNC-CH. Brown observed that “none of the HBCUs in the Research Triangle have vibrant campus
ministries, because the historically white institutions are where people invest.”

Similarly, UNC-CH’s secular administrative structures geared toward supporting students (i.e. Student Affairs, Student Wellness) dwarf NCCU’s. Brown said this reality gives students at Central and other HBCUs the sense that “no one cares about us” and has left them “hungry” for the ministries that she and Gloria Winston-Harris founded. She described how she had to start from scratch given the lack of a culture of student organizations and the minimal time that part-time denominational appointees, including Campus Minister Michael Page, have been able to devote. On the other hand, she says that a great many students are “well-connected to the Black Church. They know the tradition and scripture, they’ve been immersed.” Thus, the response to her and Winston-Harris’ outreach efforts has been enthusiastic. In this context, it can be argued that Winston-Harris and the OSDD are simply filling a void that has been consistently filled by external bodies at white majority institutions that attract more resources.

In the OSDD, we see how the language of pluralism enables the creation of structures which perform Central’s conformity with the institutional rules surrounding the public university while serving the perceived immediate demands of a majority Protestant student body. The institution’s historic cultural identity and the reality of resource disparities help us understand why Interim Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs

123 Ibid.
Gary Brown (who has a background in ministry), has provided these women with platforms to minister to an underserved population. Brown created the OSDD in 2013, choosing a name\textsuperscript{124} that invokes pluralistic myths surrounding “spirituality” to help protect the institution from having its religious activity questioned. He brought on Gloria Winston-Harris, graduate of Duke Divinity School and co-pastor of The CityWell, a racially diverse progressive evangelical congregation sponsored by the United Methodist Church, as Director of the new office. This institutional innovation uses the language of pluralism to expand the nearly half-century-old practice of outsourcing a Protestant campus ministry by effectively adding a second minister under an alternative title. Much like the longstanding position of Campus Minister, Director of OSDD Winston-Harris’s salary is paid by CityWell, while Central provides a physical and symbolic office and access to university facilities. As a result of this decoupling, the university increases its efficiency while “protecting it from having its conduct questioned.”\textsuperscript{125} For example, Charlene Brown recalls how Gary Brown leaned on her and Winston-Harris particularly heavily during the suicide crisis of 2015 that claimed three students’ lives in rapid succession. For her part, Winston-Harris gains a flock to serve and a platform from which to diagnose their needs in terms of her evangelical theology.

\textsuperscript{124} Charlene Brown reports that students generally find the name of the OSDD to be somewhat opaque, indicating that it was chosen more on the basis of “institutional myths” than “practical considerations.”

\textsuperscript{125} Meyer and Rowan, 349.
The lack of investment by external Protestant parties is compounded by the personal economic and educational disadvantages experienced by many students—the more immediate context for their “hunger” for the ministry provided by the OSDD. Brown describes Central as a “commuter hybrid,” where most students live on campus, work part-time, and return home on weekends. Many students must surmount greater financial and logistical obstacles than the average college student. Testimonies shared at the OSDD service I attended reflected disturbing experiences of violence, poverty, and parental loss while expressing gratitude for grace and educational opportunity, and acknowledging the “people who cannot go to school who would love to be here.” Echoes of the foundational black Protestant stoicism abounded, including claims of responsibility for navigating these difficult trials and confessions that “we can’t get by without God.”

We see OSDD participants drawing upon some of the same practices and theological resources that many Central students throughout the generations have found to be powerful boons for navigating college from disadvantaged positions, as well as a unifying and motivating force for the collective struggle for equal educational, economic, and political opportunity.

But the OSDD also incorporates the “word of faith” theology that has become increasingly prevalent in contemporary African-American churches. Participants named their concrete individual needs—including the financial aid and academic support

126 Brown, Interview.
needed to earn their degrees—and claimed their victory in Jesus Christ. As the service I attended reached its climax, the content of prayers shifted from expressions of gratitude, confessions of sin, commitments to evangelism, and pleas for the lost to requests for healing from depression, “increased intellect and strength,” “career paths, loans being paid off,” “finances to bless the community,” and even research participants for a senior thesis project. Just as a public Protestant faith helped founder James Shepard and his flock navigate enormous obstacles to gather the necessary resources to found and sustain this institution, many contemporary NCCU students facing their own daunting challenges feel that “they can’t do this without faith.”

4.4 Conclusion: The Complex, Vulnerable Nature of Religious Structures at Public Universities

This comparison of the religious trajectories of NCCU and UNC-CH in light of Meyer and Rowan’s theory reveals how complex, dynamic interactions between Protestant, pluralist, and secularist paradigms are powerfully conditioned by institutional identity factors and racial and economic disparities. Consequently, ascendant institutional myths of pluralism are performed at both institutions, while at the same time on-the-ground structures and activities that are only loosely coupled to these symbolic displays pursue quite different ends—constraining Protestant privilege at UNC-CH and preserving it at Central. The loose coupling protects these activities

127 Ibid.
from being questioned on the basis of secularist institutional myths mandating an elusive religious neutrality. A deep instability inheres in such awkward arrangements, and they are thus always subject to change. Shortly after my interviews with Dean Blackburn and Jenny Ofstein in 2012 and 2013, the ORDIP site vanished with no fanfare or explanation, with only the alphabetical list of student religious organizations found on the generic Heel Life site replacing it.\footnote{“Organizations-Faith & Religion,” Heel Life, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Heellife.unc.edu/organizations.} As the creation of an Interim Vice Chancellor of Student Affairs, OSDD might be terminated or reorganized in a more religiously inclusive direction as soon as a new permanent Vice Chancellor is installed. The realities of decoupling (or loose coupling) and the “logic of confidence and good faith” that Meyer and Rowan highlighted enable individuals entrusted with oversight of religious life structures to alter institutional realities substantially. The vulnerability and subjective realities surrounding these structures reinforce the importance of studying the histories that produce them. Religious dynamics are constantly changing through contingent interactions between Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces. Every individual who steps into the complex religious worlds of public universities must negotiate these forces, not in the abstract, but as they are manifested in the relational networks of specific institutional communities.
Comparing the historical context for these divergent developments affords opportunities to think critically about the contexts that shape Protestant, pluralist, and secular forces at public universities, and their religious, moral, and political implications. This comparison of case studies challenges the religious and racial neutrality of secularism, questions the possibility of true conformity with prevailing institutional myths regarding religion, and highlights the problematic implications of the religious power dynamics that produced these myths. Meyer and Rowan help us to appreciate how processes of secularization can be understood as accommodation of expanding institutional structures at the expense of preserving the particular cultures of the networks that had nurtured these institutions. We better understand the context for Protestant privilege at public institutions founded and sustained by confessing Protestant communities, we perceive wide variations among contemporary manifestations of Protestant privilege, and we better appreciate the importance of understanding how Protestant privilege interacts with other forms of privilege.

At UNC-CH, we see how Protestant privilege compounded by white privilege and class privilege precipitated imperialist pretensions. Powerful Protestant constituencies have more than once sought to constrain academic freedom at the institution, using the state legislature and the courts to attempt to prevent the university from teaching Darwinian evolution and a sympathetic approach to Islam. Meanwhile, white Protestants used their power and resources to establish departments, lectures, and
religious life structures promoting their own theological perspectives. The picture muddies further when we consider how this white Protestant culture was invoked to justify slavery and segregation. Turning to NCCU, where Protestant privilege existed without accompanying class and race privilege, we see how its imperialistic overtones are decidedly muted. Indeed, we can see how a religious life structure cast in the language of pluralism but preaching a conservative theology— one that strongly resembles that of the parachurch ministries implicated in UNC-CH’s non-discrimination controversy— helps students navigate persistent economic, educational, and racial disparities. Overall, we see how the language of pluralism does not so much resolve or transcend tensions between Protestant privilege and secularism as offer a new institutional myth for working out the balance between them, as well as the inclusion of minority traditions. Finally, we see how state-supported status does not simplify religious dynamics on campus but rather complicates them enormously. Public universities do not inherit a straightforward secular status that guarantees a stable religious neutrality. They instead are caught in the crosshairs of an institutional myth that leaves them vulnerable to attacks on all sides.
5. Conclusion: Towards a Flexible, Interactive Account of Religion in Higher Education

5.1 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Three Scholarly Representations of the Relationship Between Religion and Higher Education as Illuminated by Comparative Case Studies

5.1.1 Revisiting George Marsden and John Sommerville’s Critiques of Exclusive Secularism

All four of these institutions illustrate the reality of secularization illuminated by George Marsden and John Sommerville. When we compare their contemporary campus religious climates to those of their earliest decades, when rhythms of Protestant practice were thoroughly embedded in the daily lives of students, the contrast is indeed stark. All four schools were founded by Protestants for Protestants and marked by “hard” establishments—including mandatory chapel and required confessional biblical instruction—that were all gradually eroded over the course of the 20th century. The closest thing to a hard establishment that remains is Meredith’s required Religious and Ethical Studies course, but even this has been broadened to include “world religions” and philosophical ethics alternatives, and the biblical survey is no longer conducted in a confessional manner. The pious religious instruction once offered at all four schools has been completely dismantled, excepting Duke Divinity School. And the practice of distributing Bibles to all graduates of these four schools now strikes contemporaries as rather quaint. While all four institutions originally trumpeted Protestant orientations at their outset, only Duke has retained an explicit affiliation, one that has been
compartimentalized to the point of being largely nominal. Indeed, if we bracket out the Divinity School, Duke has arguably secularized more completely in “normative” terms\(^1\) than Central or Meredith. But even on these minority-centered campuses, Protestant presence has been challenged at times. The Governor’s office mobilized to deconstruct Central’s publicly funded ministry in the mid-1960s, while Meredith’s President, Chaplain, and faculty members opposed the official recognition of the evangelical parachurch group Campus Crusade for Christ despite its popularity with students. Such evangelical parachurch ministries have been threatened with derecognition repeatedly at UNC-CH because of alleged violations of the university’s non-discrimination policy. And we observed a pendulum swing in the orientation of UNC-CH’s Religious Studies Department from its original function of preserving Protestant piety to an alleged contemporary “animus against Christianity.” Not only have Protestants forfeited their “hard” establishments, they can expect to have the footholds they retain challenged.

The cases of Duke and UNC-CH illustrate the specific mechanisms of secularization that Marsden identified. Their histories demonstrate the important role that their desire to compete with secular elite institutions in the North and West played in precipitating and accelerating this process of disestablishment. Trinity College steadily ramped up its Protestant establishments until the 1920s, when it began to transform into Duke University and fashion itself an emerging “Harvard of the South.”

\(^1\) See reference to DiMaggio and Powell in section 4.2, note 71.
In hindsight, the seeds of secularization were sown from that pivotal turning point, even if they did not bear substantial fruit until the 1960s. Similarly, we see how UNC-CH’s leaders aligned its academic operations with the priorities of the secular academic elite against the sectional sentiments and pious priorities of its traditional Southern white Protestant constituency in the 1920s and 1930s—even as they continued to perform their fidelity to them through compartmentalized structures facilitating Protestant worship and confessional study of the Bible, as well as segregationist policies and symbolic tributes to the lost cause of the Confederacy. In these interim eras at Duke and UNC-CH, the ironic self-secularizing function of an expansionist liberal Protestantism Marsden identified is also apparent. In the Duke University Church of the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, we see how ecumenical Protestantism embraced “Judeo-Christian” pluralism and structural secularization, repudiating evangelical missions to religious others and scorning conservative Protestants who resisted secular and pluralist forces in the name of preserving traditional theological commitments. And in the secularization of the UNC-CH “Y” in the 1960s and 1970s, we see this expansionist impulse taken to its logical conclusion.

On the other hand, the timing of these gradual, piecemeal processes at Duke and UNC-CH qualifies Marsden’s claim that religious perspectives were marginalized from leading universities from the early decades of the 20th century. Moreover, Central and Meredith challenge his assertion that such processes precipitated the secularization of
the system of higher education writ large. When *The Soul of the American University* was published in 1994, Meredith was neither secular nor marginal. It may not have been a “trend-setting” institution, but it was a highly respected liberal arts college thoroughly embedded in the mainstream academic system. Since then, it has disaffiliated and secularized to some extent, but for highly particular (and gendered) religious reasons that are largely unrelated to the mechanisms of secularization Marsden identified. The same can be said of Central, except that its motivations were economic and political. It can be argued that Central never really secularized in the sense that Marsden asserts. One would be hard-pressed to argue that “non-belief” is “established” at Central; indeed, “soft” Protestant establishments persist. Central gradually secularized structurally primarily because it became a state-supported institution and thus had to conform to shifting political norms and evolving interpretations of the “non-establishment” clause of the United States Constitution. In different ways, all four institutions challenge the representativeness of Marsden’s narrative, revealing that it may be more particular—in terms of gender, race, class, prestige, and region—than universal.

Similarly, these case studies challenge Marsden’s and Sommerville’s assertions that *all* religious perspectives are universally marginalized on contemporary college campuses. This pattern of marginalization again may be more localized among and within institutions than their globalized characterizations suggest. The rash of
substantial pluralistic initiatives, such as the assigning of *Approaching the Qur’an* to all incoming UNC-CH freshmen in 2002 and the Duke Chapel *adhan* controversy of 2015, illustrates how certain conversations about religion have been at the very center of campus life. The conservative Protestant views held by Marsden and Sommerville—once normative at all four institutions—may indeed be relatively unpopular among academics today, but the position that religion writ large has been marginalized seems untenable. Indeed, these case studies illustrate that it is difficult to sustain this indictment even in terms of historically privileged Protestantism. The case of Central is most provocative, where public university facilities and offices are used for Protestant ministries. But even at UNC-CH, the institution of the four that has secularized the most intentionally and confronted Protestant privilege most aggressively, the charge of marginalization clearly holds only in the realm of research and teaching. Confessional Christian arguments may not be generally afforded a serious hearing in academic discourse at UNC-CH, but, from a student-life perspective, Protestant presence remains ubiquitous. Protestant ministries, especially evangelical ones, utterly dominate extracurricular religious life structures at UNC-CH. They enjoy massive (external) funding and exceptional facilities, and they have demonstrated their ability to retain official recognition and the privileges it affords on their own terms. At Duke, where the university generously funds numerous religious life positions and programs, and at Meredith, where students are required to study religion, the case for the marginalization
of religious perspectives is even weaker. Clearly, religion, particularly Protestantism, does not enjoy the privileged place in campus life it once did, but it certainly has not vanished.

5.1.2 Revisiting Critics of Persistent Christian or Religious Privilege

Obviously, the evidence just presented to challenge Marsden’s claim of marginalization can be used to support the assertion that Christian and religious privilege persist on America’s campuses. We have seen clear instances in which Christianity is indeed privileged over minority religious and non-religious perspectives, including in the recent past. For example, Franklin Graham and other conservative Protestants successfully thwarted plans to issue a Muslim adhan from the Duke Chapel bell tower. Moreover, soft Protestant establishments persist at all of these institutions, except perhaps UNC-CH. Central, Duke, and Meredith all continue to hold regular, markedly Protestant worship services promoted to the campus community at large. Even at UNC-CH, a soft curricular establishment persisted in the form of Bernard Boyd’s and Arnold Nash’s confessional instruction into the early 1970s. Symbolic privilege—represented in university seals, campus architecture, and ceremonial proceedings—is strongest at Duke, weakest at UNC-CH, and attenuated but still present in distinct forms at Central (in its ceremonial culture of piety) and Meredith (in its seal, mascot and understated CBF affiliation). Finally, there are varying degrees of demographic privilege in terms of persistent Protestant predominance among the
student bodies and alumni/ae networks, if not among the faculty and administration. Distinguishing between these distinct forms helps illustrate how all four campuses reflect persistent Protestant privilege, albeit in different ways.

Critics of Christian privilege helpfully highlight these vestiges of more robust Protestant establishments, as well as more subtle and ubiquitous privileges, such as month-long vacations centered around Christmas between the fall and spring semesters. Calling attention to such privileges provides an instructive check on evangelical historians Marsden’s and Sommerville’s claims of marginalization, highlights a persistent obstacle to achieving a fully equitable pluralism, and disputes the inclusivity of the discourse grounded in fluid conceptions of spirituality and post-ecumenical constructions of pluralism that bear the imprint of disproportionate (liberal) Protestant influence.

At the same time, these case studies challenge blanket assertions of ubiquitous Christian privilege and demonstrate the need for critics to be more precise in clarifying which Christians and which forms of Christianity are privileged, as well as when and how they are privileged. Charges of a generalized privileging of religion over non-religion are even more dubious. As these analyses have shown, institutions, confessional communities, and individuals straddle the blurry line between the religious and the secular. Privilege is always a highly contested question of position and perspective. For example, while Duke’s mid-century religious life structures, symbolic culture, and
demographic composition clearly continued to privilege ecumenical Protestantism, conservative evangelicals experienced this very form as replete with implicit polemics against them. And indeed, recent CRSCS data collected from Duke students raises questions about where conservative forms of Christianity (which, recall, were the least accepted and appreciated identities on campus) fall on the privilege hierarchy, particularly in relation to non-religious perspectives (which, recall, were the most accepted and appreciated identities on campus). In the cases of Central, Meredith, and in the incident of the female African-American resident advisor at Duke asked to terminate her Bible study, we see how problems emerge when Christians with marginalized identities come into the crosshairs of the movement to deconstruct Christian privilege—particularly in light of the important roles that Protestant faith played in African-Americans’ and women’s struggle for educational, economic, and political equality. This dissertation demonstrates the necessity of assessing relative degrees of privilege in the context of particular forms of Christianity, intersecting identities (such as race, gender, and class), and specific institutional contexts with peculiar historical trajectories. Protestant privilege is an enormously complex and highly interactive phenomenon best studied in specific relational and institutional contexts.

5.1.3 Revisiting the Literature Promoting a New Paradigm Characterized by Religious Pluralism and Fluid Spirituality

Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen’s work asserting the 21st century ascendance of a fuzzy, fluid, and inclusive religious pluralism over Protestant and “privatized”
paradigms calls into question whether these critics of exclusive secularism and Christian privilege overstate their case by invoking outdated paradigms whose historic hegemonies have been transcended. Their historical model helpfully highlights clear shifts in the predominant paradigms of the 19th, 20th, and 21st century, which are particularly instructive in the cases of Duke and UNC-CH. We see how deeply entrenched Protestant practice was at both institutions in the 19th century, how they secularized steadily over most of the course of the 20th century, and the recent turn to a more robust conversation about religion on these campuses involving a far more diverse array of participants. More broadly, we see how the vestiges of Protestant establishments described above have been relativized through the broader secularization of structures at all four institutions. And the proliferation of minority student religious organizations and pluralistic initiatives (at all four institutions except Central) undermines Marsden’s and Sommerville’s claims that an exclusive secularism persists. Even the adhan controversy, if we consider the large demonstration of solidarity for Duke’s Muslim students on the chapel steps and the interactive dialogue among Muslims, Protestants, and secular humanists that followed, can be seen as a formidable (though compromised) challenge to Protestant privilege in order to achieve a more robust pluralism. Clearly, neither Protestants nor secularists are able to fully dominate the contemporary religious discourse on any of these campuses, and religious minorities play a much bigger role than in the past.
On the other hand, these manifestations of Christian privilege and secularism suggest that the Jacobsens overstate the degree to which the Protestant and privatized paradigms have been transcended. Furthermore, all four case studies challenge the tidy timeline of successive Protestant, privatized, and pluriform centuries in multiple ways. First, this approach not only obscures persistent Protestant privilege and contemporary secularist forces, but how 19th century Protestants prioritized secular service and the inclusion of the more limited range of religious others in their midst. More broadly, comparison of these four case studies challenges the very notion that there have been uniform paradigmatic shifts in the relative balance of power between Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces. At all four institutions, the “Protestant era” persisted well into the 20th century. And at Central and Meredith, we see how the important role that Protestant faith played in African-Americans’ and women’s struggles for educational opportunity delayed and attenuated processes of privatization and pluralization.

Finally, these case studies reveal limitations in constructions of pluralism and spirituality that remain obscure in the literature that simultaneously asserts and promotes their ascendance. Chapter 2 illustrates the long arc and liberal Protestant roots of pluralism—as Duke’s identity gradually evolved from “non-sectarian” to “interdenominational” to “interfaith” to “pluralist” as the ecumenical project expanded and religious minorities challenged its limitations. And in Chapter 4, we saw how fungible pluralistic rhetoric is. While Central has used terms like “spiritual
development” and “dialogue” to create structures that preserve Protestant privilege, UNC-CH has used “religious diversity” and “interfaith pluralism” toward opposite ends. And the jury is still out regarding how successfully the contemporary pluralism paradigm includes non-religious students, those exhibiting non-traditional forms of fluid spirituality, and Asian religions in a conversation that remains dominated by dialogue amongst the “Abrahamic” faiths.

5.2 Comparing Distinct Forms of Protestant Privilege, Secularism, and Pluralism and Their Conditioning Interactions

In contrast to the universal representations of American higher education critiqued above, this dissertation forwards a more flexible, interactive model that accounts for diversity among and within institutions by representing variation (a) in the prevailing forms of Protestant privilege, secularism, and pluralism and (b) in the interactions and relative balance among these forces. Through these historical case studies of four distinct institutions, we have seen how contingent interactions among these forces throughout these institutions’ histories have been conditioned by their peculiar institutional identities, producing particular forms of secularism, pluralism, and Protestant privilege.

These particular institutional trajectories have powerfully conditioned the form and degree of Protestant privilege on each campus. The relative pacing and extent of Protestant disestablishment—first and most completely at UNC-CH, followed by later
and less thoroughgoing processes at Duke and Central, and, finally, the most delayed
and accelerated case of Meredith—illustrate how geographical location, denominational
affiliation, regional status, and service toward particularly pious minority communities
all enabled varying degrees of resistance to an institutional trend of disestablishment
that began at elite northern and western universities in the late 19th century. This
conditioned process has produced substantial variations in the forms of Protestant
privilege on contemporary college campuses, even within the same locale and category
of institutional affiliation. Duke is characterized by strong symbolic privilege and
considerable funding for soft establishments (such as Duke Chapel and its Dean), but
relatively low demographic dominance by Protestants, while, at UNC-CH, Protestants
still predominate numerically, but the institution retains virtually no remaining
symbolic privilege or soft establishments. Herein lies the primary difference that
emerges from their respective statuses as Methodist-affiliated and state-supported R-1
universities.

In contrast, Central and Meredith display distinct yet similar patterns. Both of
these regional institutions exhibit considerable Protestant demographic dominance as a
result of the persistence of Protestant faith among the particular networks that have
sustained them. The important role that Protestantism has played in the lives of African-
Americans and women and their struggles for equality of educational and economic
opportunity has helped preserve symbolic and soft privileges at both schools. Ironically,
cultural Protestant privilege is much stronger at public NCCU and independent Meredith than at Duke, the one college in this comparison that retains its denominational affiliation.

Similarly, distinct forms of secularism prevail on each campus. As we saw in chapter 4, Meyer’s and Rowan’s theory of institutional myths and DiMaggio’s and Powell’s theory of isomorphism help to explain how and why these institutions have secularized at different rates, challenging widespread assumptions about the relative secularity of public and private institutions. The dramatic changes around prevailing conceptions of “non-establishment” over the course of the 20th century proceeded more through mimetic and normative isomorphic processes than coercive forces, which are invoked infrequently. This helps explain why the secularization of higher education was gradual, piecemeal, and decidedly non-uniform. All of these institutions secularized more slowly than the elite institutions of the North and West that dominate Marsden’s account, because the state of North Carolina has diversified religiously relatively slowly and the networks that sustained these institutions, including the state representatives who control state funds for public universities, remained overwhelmingly Protestant. Consequently, at least until the 1960s, state-supported status is less predictive of relative degrees of secularization among these institutions than the will to emulate elite universities (mimetic forces) and the prevailing politics within the institution (normative forces). Thus, we see Duke—which was powerfully shaped by mimetic secularizing
forces—secularizing culturally more rapidly and thoroughly than Central, where structural secularization began only in response to state coercion. Similarly, we can contrast UNC-CH’s self-conscious secularization driven by academic ambition and the incidental secularization of Meredith, an unintended consequence of a grab for independence motivated by a confluence of progressive Baptist principles, feminist commitments, and the threat of a conservative takeover.

Finally, we see markedly different dynamics of religious diversity on each campus masked by the common currency of “pluralism.” Today, all four institutions embrace pluralistic rhetoric, but each employs it to markedly different ends. Religious life structures at Central illustrate how the university serves a particular public that remains overwhelmingly Protestant. Here, the language of pluralism functions to preserve historic Protestant privilege, evangelical Protestant worship is sponsored by the “Office of Spiritual Development and Dialogue,” and multiple campus ministers are outsourced to the external ministries who pay their salaries. The most active non-Christian tradition represented on campus, the Nation of Islam, has implicitly indicated its preference for operating outside of official university structures, thus apparently eliminating the need for the Protestant majority to operate in a manner inclusive to religious others.

In stark contrast, UNC-CH has self-consciously sought to contain the substantial influence of conservative Protestantism amongst its 82%-in-state undergraduate population through pluralistic initiatives, including assigning all incoming freshmen *Approaching the Qur’an* in 2002 and establishing a digital “Office of Religious Diversity and Interfaith Pluralism.” The court battle that ensued in response to the Qu’ran controversy highlights the highly contentious dynamics of pluralism and involvement of external parties in the struggle for the flagship university of a state embroiled in a heated culture war. This surrounding culture war has occasionally grown quite heated and engulfed the campus. It has even resulted in deadly violence, as in the case of the murder of three Muslim UNC-CH students by a militantly secularist Chapel Hill resident in 2015, which precipitated a large-scale vigil and numerous discussions concerning Islamophobia on campus. In this highly contentious context, UNC-CH takes a decidedly hands-off approach concerning day-to-day religious life administration, creating a “laissez-faire” religious marketplace that enables massively funded evangelical ministries to dominate, while pluralistic events are typically initiated by students. Through comparison, we see how pluralism reinforces Protestant privilege at one state-sponsored institution while it counteracts it at another just 11 miles away.

When we compare dynamics of pluralism at Duke and Meredith, we observe wide divergences in terms of funding and politics. At Duke, pluralistic initiatives are well funded and highly politicized. Duke’s vast resources and liberal mainline affiliation
enable a markedly hands-on approach to promoting a robust pluralism on campus. The university funds multiple full-time Jewish and Muslim life staff and a team to support other minorities and facilitate interreligious cooperation and dialogue. The adhan controversy represents this religious life administration’s failed attempt to privilege proactive pluralism over a prevailing academic secularism and the persistent Protestant privilege represented in prominent university symbols, including the seal, motto, and the Methodist seminary and conspicuous cathedral at the heart of the cruciform campus. In light of its history, we can perceive pluralism at Duke as an ongoing extension of the liberal mainline ecumenical project to harmonize Protestant faith, religious diversity, and secular social structures—with decidedly mixed results. The result of this particular history is the privileging of progressive forms of faith over conservative ones across traditions, thus limiting pluralism politically and theologically.

In contrast, Meredith’s Southern Baptist heritage and all-female student body continue to draw substantial numbers of conservative evangelicals and Muslims. Evangelical ministries continue to dominate religious life at Meredith and an active conservative alumnae network continues to recruit students reared in fundamentalist circles. On the other hand, CRSCS results suggest that Meredith has a higher than average proportion of religious minorities, and the Muslims Students Association is particularly active. But with only one full-time religious life position in the budget, the

3 Rockenbach and Mayhew, “Meredith College,” 6.
role is predictably filled by a progressive Baptist. The administration, many of whom are alumnae themselves, have embraced pluralism and progressivism, celebrating diversity and a mission to empower women. Meanwhile, they have downplayed the school’s Southern Baptist heritage while quietly establishing a loose relationship with the progressive Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. At the same time, they recognize the need to be genuinely inclusive to an important conservative constituency. Thus, their financial and political context produces a markedly distinct politics of pluralism compared to Duke.

Particular institutional factors also condition the way Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces interact with one another and the balance among them that results. As the state’s flagship public university, UNC-CH’s dynamics are the most complex and contentious. While the university remains minimally involved regarding day-to-day religious life administration, their interventions have consistently aimed to erode the soft vestiges of a historic Protestant establishment to more fully include religious and non-religious minorities. Conservative Protestants have responded in kind, shoring up their numeric and economic privilege by funding numerous ministries and establishing an independent Christian Studies Center, while fighting initiatives to derecognize conservative ministries on the basis of violation of the non-discrimination policy and require incoming freshmen to read a sympathetic treatment of the Qur’an. The university’s elite faculty are disproportionately secular, while the 82% in-state student
body continues to reflect North Carolina’s strong Protestant majority. Meanwhile, religious minority groups on campus continue to grow. Thus, we can perceive UNC-CH as a free market with minimal regulatory oversight where Protestant, pluralist, and secular forces engage in heated competition.

Like UNC-CH, Duke possesses highly contested symbolic cultural capital, a typically secular R-1 faculty, and a pluralism promoting administration. The *adhan* controversy illustrates how its status as an internationally recognized university invites similar controversy and contention over such symbolic displays. But in contrast, Duke extends considerable institutional resources to support minority groups and promote interreligious dialogue along lines consistent with its ecumenical Protestant heritage, enabling Duke to more actively promote proactive pluralism in its extracurricular programming. Meanwhile, the United Methodist Church retains its institutional affiliation and arguably the most conservative divinity school housed within an elite R-1 university, while an institutional priority of knowledge production maintains a pervasive academic secularism. At Duke, all three paradigms are powerfully represented in their own particular ways, with secularism prevailing in the classroom, pluralism permeating extracurricular life, and Protestantism looming largest symbolically.

Meyer and Rowan’s theory of institutional myths helps explain these distinct patterns. While ambitiously expansionist Duke and UNC-CH enhanced their national
academic legitimacy by conforming to institutional rules of free inquiry and inclusion perceived to be incompatible with Protestant establishments, Protestants have continued to enjoy a significant degree of privilege at Central and Meredith—where moderated establishments legitimated the institutions within regional networks that remained overwhelmingly Protestant. Indeed, in light of their relative homogeneity and the crucial role that Protestant faith has played in both communities’ struggles for educational, economic, and political equity, it is worth asking whether the gains of religious inclusivity from deconstructing such privilege are worth the costs in terms of cultural preservation, cohesion, and solidarity.

Central’s status as a public HBCU conditions a paradoxical blend of secularism and pervasive Protestant privilege. Coercive forces (both actual and potential) have secularized Central structurally in a manner analogous to its racial integration. Just as Central remains culturally African-American while welcoming students from all ethnic backgrounds, religious life structures promote traditional evangelical theology and outreach decried as imperialistic at majority white institutions. Within this cultural context where Protestant privilege is decoupled from class and white privilege, conservative Protestantism manifests in a decidedly interpersonal form that mutes imperialistic overtones. But pluralism is clearly weakest at Central, where small religious minorities lack representative organizations and must navigate an overwhelmingly Protestant milieu. This is perhaps best understood as an unintended
side effect that demonstrates how normative, descriptive, and legal models of the
relationship between religion and higher education derived from majority-white
institutions break down when applied to a historically black university with a distinct
history and cultural identity.

Similarly, Meredith’s dual historic identity as a Southern Baptist women’s
college has powerfully shaped the interaction of Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces.
Southern constructions of gender and an “evangelical mainline” SBC identity long
insulated it from secular and pluralist forces. Still, these forces were engaged directly
and openly when compared to more conservative evangelical and fundamentalist
institutions. Ironically, Meredith’s dual identity would precipitate its sudden
disaffiliation from the BSCNC in the late 20th century amidst the patriarchal
“conservative resurgence” within the SBC. Secularization and pluralization proceeded
not so much through conformity to institutional norms or broad cultural forces, but
were rather unintended consequences of fidelity to progressive Baptist principles and a
longstanding commitment to empower young women. Today, Meredith presents this
empowerment mission in secular terms and uses the language of pluralism to attract
growing populations of religious minorities and retain a traditional conservative
Protestant constituency, thus finessing an awkward history of disaffiliation and
dramatic shift in institutional identity.
5.3 Future Directions and Final Reflections

I conclude with some comments about the most promising future directions for this project and normative reflections concerning the applications of this research for religious life administration on college campuses.

First, work remains to be done in terms of excavating the ideological underpinnings of the various perspectives analyzed here. For example, while I have focused on particularly relevant “fruits” of conservative and liberal forms of Protestantism, the theological “roots” undergirding these perspectives warrant more thorough examination. This is doubly true for minority communities on campus.

Second, the complexities of secularization, Protestant privilege, and religious pluralism on college campuses could be explored through more participant observations. Prior to the adhan controversy, I conducted ethnographic work among the Muslim Students Association as a participant observer in their Halaqa Qur’an reading group that powerfully informed this project. But I was unable to cite these data explicitly in light of the intimate nature of the observations and interviews conducted therein and the lack of Institutional Review Board oversight.\(^4\) I only managed to fit a brief reference to my ethnographic observations of student-led pluralistic events at UNC-CH into chapter 4. And I still hope to attend a meeting of the off-campus Bible study referenced

\(^4\) My participant observations in the Halaqa were conducted in conjunction with Glen Hinson’s “The Art of Ethnography” practicum. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is not required for non-published projects that are part of a course, and the semester-length pace of this course regrettably did not allow sufficient time to obtain IRB approval.
in chapter 3 to better understand the current relationship between Meredith College and its historically privileged evangelical constituency. The historical narrative I have presented could be further enriched with more thick descriptions of public religious life events wherein diverse individuals and communities negotiate interacting Protestant, secular, and pluralist forces in the present.

Finally, there are fruitful avenues for theoretical elaboration, particularly regarding the intersection of religious, racial, ethnic, gender, sexual, and political identities. While the results of intersections between racial, gender, and religious identities are highlighted in chapters 3 and 4, the intersectional dynamics at play could be fruitfully probed further, as well as comparable intersections between white, male, and regional identities that remain primarily implicit. I also hope to engage the burgeoning subfield of scholars forwarding critical theoretical accounts of secularism and secularity. While beyond the scope of the current project, I believe that pursuing these theoretical, theological, and ethnographic avenues from the comparative historical foundation established here will further expand and enhance its contributions to several important scholarly conversations.

All in all, I hope that this work has shown the usefulness of assessing Protestant privilege, secularism, and pluralism in American higher education in specific historical and institutional contexts. These distinct case studies suggest that all three of these forces coexist on college campuses, but the form they take and the relative strength of
each vary significantly according to a number of institutional identity factors—including religious affiliation, geographical location and reach, relative prestige, and the composition of the student body in terms of race, class, and gender.

Whether public or private, institutions originally built by Protestants for Protestants inevitably reflect peculiar proclivities that privilege Protestant forms of faith, subtly and explicitly. Interrogating such biases is a crucial part of realizing a fully inclusive religious community on campus. At the same time, the emergence of the secularist paradigm out of this predominantly Protestant context often subjects the dominant religious tradition to exceptional scrutiny, resulting in feelings of marginalization among conservative Christians exacerbated by a sense of lost privilege. Similarly, the powerful influence of ecumenical Protestantism on the pluralism paradigm may result in limits to inclusion regarding those perceived to be exclusive—not only the evangelicals that ecumenical Protestants defined themselves against, but also adherents to minority traditions maintaining conservative boundaries around gender, sexuality, and authority. The more fundamental point is that whether one’s perspective aligns primarily with the Protestant, secular, or pluralist paradigms or manifests as a complex blend of all three, they all bring legitimate priorities to bear that must be engaged if we are to achieve a substantive and inclusive conversation about meaning and values on diverse college campuses—one in which all are both welcomed
as they are and challenged to reach a little further to incorporate more of our complex world into their faith perspectives.
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Biography

Scott Muir was born in Atlanta, Georgia on July 10, 1985, and raised there through his matriculation at Dartmouth College in September of 2004. He graduated with a B.A. in Psychology and Religious Studies in June of 2008. Scott enrolled at the Candler School of Theology at Emory University in 2010 and graduated with a Master’s in the Theological Studies in May of 2012. He entered Duke’s Graduate Program in Religion the following Fall, pursuing majors in American Religion and Religion and Higher Education and minors in Comparative Religion and Psychology. Scott published an earlier draft of the 2nd chapter of this dissertation in the *Journal of Religion & Society* as “The Adhan Controversy in Historical Perspective: Interpenetrating Protestant, Secular, and Pluralist Paradigms at Duke University, 1839-2016” in June of 2017. He has presented the research represented in this dissertation at the Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Southeastern Commission for the Study of Religion. He has also presented his other major research project—a sociological study of religion and spirituality at camping music festivals—at both of these conferences and published four brief articles on the topic in *Sacred Matters* magazine. Scott has earned two generous Summer Research Fellowships supporting each of these projects from the Gurney Harriss Kearns Foundation for Graduate Study in Religion Fund. He lives in Durham, North Carolina with his wife Sarah and daughter Eloise.