

DAVID P. SETRAN, *The College 'Y.' Student Religion in the Era of Secularization*. Palgrave, Basingstoke/New York 2007, x + 315 pp. ISBN 9781403961259. £ 16.99; US\$ 28.95.

David Setran, an associate professor of Christian Formation and Ministry at Wheaton College, a leading evangelical college in Illinois, returned to the phase in the late nineteenth century when many universities lost their Christian bearings. His book is as much part of history of education as of religious history. It makes a valuable contribution to the history of responses to the secularization of the academy in this period through the little-known student activities of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA or 'Y'). This approach fits into the recent trend in scholarship, which sees secularization not as a frontal attack on religion by science, but as an almost self-inflicted wound. This injury was caused by well-meaning liberal religious leaders who had hoped to keep religion on stage in the curriculum, but adapted its contents to such general ethical instruction, that colleges failed to see its relevance and moved it to the margins of campus life. But this defeat was dressed up as a victory.

Once religion had been moved to extracurricular activities, it made a phenomenal come-back. The number of YMCA college groups skyrocketed from a modest 40 chapters with 1,320 members in 1877 to 764 groups and 80,000 members in 1920, engaging a third of the male student population.

Previous YMCA histories concentrated on the internal operations of the national organization. This book underscores the Y's importance by showing its deep roots in local educational activities, which passed through three phases. In the pioneering period between 1858 and 1888 the Y had a strong evangelistic orientation and absorbed many other groups in the process. The Y's missionary urge came from the realization that less than half of the student population was considered a confessing Christian and that nobody took notice, while the conditions for evangelism in a college setting were promising. The YMCA became a part of a global missionary enterprise. Despite the positive results, the Y carried the seed of its own demise: its emphasis on practicality and action as an antidote to dry learning neglected intellectual exploration of the Bible. One understands this priority only in the context of American higher education: successful students were not defined by their impressive academic achievements, but by excellence in extracurricular activities, such as sports and fraternities. The Y had to enter a popularity contest and took on a heavy load of social and building activities, which gradually took over the spiritual programs.

During the second phase, between 1888 and 1915, the emphasis shifted definitively from salvation to service. This change in priority was a result of the widespread fear for the feminization of religion in the U.S. To counter this process the Y emphasized male qualities: that its members should serve the community, build character, improve morality and the purity of the body. Thinking was considered a weak feature prodding Bible reading to be more devotional than analytical, separating the truth question from spirituality.

The result of emphasizing the practical usefulness of the Bible and its therapeutic function pushed apologetics aside and opened the Y up to non-churchmembers. Bodily discipline, active service, character building, and moral reform replaced personal conversion. The initial numerical success was soon followed by a dramatic decline from 33 to eight per cent of the total male student body twenty years later. This drop was a result of the continuous growth of universities, the diversification of the student population (adding many more non-Protestants) and the end of the Protestant consensus in the culture war of the 1920s. The universities took over many of the services the Y once provided and the Y was left with expensive buildings and declining funds. In the meantime churches discovered the campus and began their own student groups, while the traditional students felt alienated.

The sum of these six developments was a severe identity crisis for the Y which characterized the third phase of the movement between 1915 and 1934. The Y leadership responded by placing its direction in the hands of the young generation. It expected rejuvenation from a fight against the tradition of external religion. It also tried to correct its previous individualistic approach by joining liberal organizations. Both moves alienated its orthodox constituency even further. The Y optimistically hoped to solve the present and most pressing social problems with answers from pluralistic science. This emphasis discouraged missions and evangelism. In its place political internationalism emerged as the main activity. In some cases the organization of local YMCA chapters fell into radical leftist hands and had to leave the campus. Meanwhile an orthodox competitor entered the field: the Intersociety Christian Fellowship. Even though this organization was student-led the Y could not accept its partnership. The Y reinvented itself as a successful health organization, but that is a different story.

The pervasive conclusion of the book is that willy-nilly the YMCA advanced the secularization of the university. The author's creative and careful use of a great variety of (local) sources, the conceptual clarity, the insightful connections between local activities and larger cultural trends, the lucid structure, and elegant style all add up to a most valuable book. It explains the enduring tension

between Christian world view and academic teaching, creative solutions, and unintended consequences of idealistic innovators.

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