What would society look like if, in a decade or so, there were no Christian colleges and universities? Or what if the Biolas, Wheatons and Gordons of the world were able to exist, but only in a secularized form that made them indistinguishable from the Claremonts, Kenyons and Amhersts? Would distinctly Christian institutions, whose faith infuses their curriculum and campus life, be missed?

These questions must be pondered because they are no longer hypothetical. Recent legislation proposed in California sought to chip away at the degree to which Christian colleges and universities can function Christianly. Thankfully, Senate Bill 1146 was amended (https://magazine.biola.edu/article/16-fall/religious-liberty-preserved/) due to the vocal opposition this summer from thousands who value Christian higher education and recognize the importance of its freedom to be distinct. But legislative challenges like this will no doubt persist.

One lesson from SB 1146, which was on the verge of seriously jeopardizing the very existence of places like Biola in California, is that the unique virtues of Christian higher education are insufficiently understood and valued in the broader society. Yet it is the broader society that benefits from these institutions’ presence. Preserving Christian higher education is not an endeavor that only benefits Christian higher education; it benefits everyone. And that is a story that needs to be told.

What follows are four things that make Christian higher education unique, and uniquely able to contribute to the common good of society.

1. Christian Higher Education has an Organizing Principle and Purpose

Many of the challenges we see in America today stem from the fact that there is less and less of a consensus on more and more issues. Few things seem to bind us together anymore, least of all a common vision for what makes life worth living. The challenge is especially pronounced in contemporary higher education, where a research focus has resulted in hyper-specialization and a fragmentation that undermines the unity of the disciplines.

With disciplines isolated from one another and increasingly narrow in their concerns, most universities today have little if any room for the exploration of “big questions” like the meaning of life and what constitutes goodness, truth and beauty.

In Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities Have Given Up on the Meaning of Life (https://www.amazon.com/Educations-End-Colleges-Universities-Meaning/dp/0300143141), Anthony Kronman of Yale Law School argues that higher education has become too specialized to care about such all-encompassing questions. He says the question of life’s meaning has been “pushed to the margins of professional respectability in the humanities, where it once occupied a central and honored place,” lamenting “the culture of political correctness that has undermined the legitimacy of the question itself and the authority of humanities teachers to ask it.”

Sadly, a fear of engaging potentially politically incorrect “big question” conversations leads many universities to stick to disciplinary training and vocational preparation. As former Harvard dean Harry Lewis writes in Excellence Without a Soul (https://www.amazon.com/Excellence-Without-Soul-Liberal-Education/dp/1586485016), “Reluctant to engage in political and moral controversies, [today’s universities] do not encourage their students to seek meaning in their studies and purpose in their lives.”

But what is higher education for if not to explore these “higher” questions of meaning in study and purpose in life?


“[University training] aims at raising the intellectual tone of society, at cultivating the public mind, at purifying the national taste, at supplying true principles to popular enthusiasm and fixed aims to popular aspiration, at giving enlargement and sobriety to the ideas of the age, at facilitating the exercise of political power, and refining the intercourse of private life. It is the education which gives a man a clear conscious view of his own opinions and judgments, a truth in developing them, an eloquence in expressing them and a force in urging them.”

Higher education is at its best when it is connected to a purpose beyond getting a degree or a job and mobilized by a principle that unifies its many disciplines.

Secular higher education has little consensus on questions of purpose or unifying principles. Why? Because in postmodernity the assertion of one ideal or vision as superior to all others is distasteful. The new orthodoxy of academia is unbriddled openness. The new unorthodoxy is the offense of holding sincere and confident beliefs.
As Allan Bloom writes in *The Closing of the American Mind* (https://www.amazon.com/Closing-American-Mind-Education-Impoverished/dp/1451683200), “the recent education of openness” is “open to all kinds of men, all kinds of lifestyles, all ideologies. There is no enemy other than the man who is not open to everything.”

The logic of openness, Bloom argues, necessarily frames education as a smattering of disconnected disciplines and ideas — of which none are more or less viable or important than another.

The “democracy of the disciplines” one finds in the contemporary university “is really an anarchy,” argues Bloom, “because there are no recognized rules for citizenship and no legitimate titles to rule. In short there is no vision, nor is there a set of competing visions, of what an educated human being is.”

The result is that secular college students are a bit aimless, “drifting through college without a clear sense of purpose,” to quote sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa in *Academically Adrift* (https://www.amazon.com/Academically-Adrift-Limited-Learning-Campuses/dp/02266028569), based on an analysis of more than 2,300 undergraduates at 24 institutions.

Christian higher education, however, has a clear unifying core: Jesus Christ, the source of all knowledge and the end of all inquiry; he is the cornerstone who holds it all together.

The purpose of education is thus also clear: to understand all disciplines through the lens of Christ and to advance a Christian vision of human flourishing.

Rick Langer, a biblical and theological studies professor at Biola who specializes in the integration of faith and learning, believes Christian institutions offer a holistic cohesion that is largely missing in higher education today, where the “multiversity” prevails.

“We offer an institution that actually has a ‘uni’ in its university,” Langer said. “And we didn’t just come up with this way of educating. Christian universities have been educating this way for centuries.”

Christian colleges have a guiding principle that helps illuminate and connect all aspects of learning and life. Throughout Christian history this unifying raison d’être for education has motivated research and discovery and application of knowledge in every discipline, from astronomy to biophysics, philosophy, psychology, medicine, law, literature, music and the arts. Christian colleges and universities proudly continue in this tradition.

2. Christian Higher Education Teaches Character and Produces Good Citizens

One key way Christian higher education serves the common good is by emphasizing moral formation and virtue as an integral part of its educational mission. This is something most secular colleges and universities struggle to do because they cannot find consensus on what morality is and who best models it.

Christian colleges have a model in Jesus Christ, however, which provides a framework not only for what students learn but who they become (that is, Jesus-like).

Institutions like these, which produce citizens with good character, are crucial to the common good of the larger society. This is the argument of a recent paper given by Derek Halvorson, president of Covenant College, at a Heritage Foundation event (http://www.heritage.org/events/2016/04/why-the-future-of-religious-freedom-in-higher-education-matters-for-all-americans) on “Why the Future of Religious Freedom in Higher Education Matters for All Americans.”

“American democracy depends on the existence of a virtuous citizenry,” he writes. “Christian colleges and universities maintain a commitment to the cultivation of virtue in their students that other educational institutions have abandoned. Therefore, Christian colleges and universities ought to be protected as a valuable contributor to the common good.”

For most of its history, higher education (as well as primary and secondary education) was about the cultivation of virtue alongside education in the arts and sciences. Only recently has higher education veered away from this, emphasizing right knowledge over right living.


“Most universities have gotten out of the business of spiritual and character development, and they’ve adopted a research ideal,” he said, noting that this sort of education teaches students “how to do things but less why they should do them and less how to think about what is their highest and best life.”

There are many great institutions of higher education, Brooks noted, but most of them don’t have what Christian colleges have, which is “a recipe to nurture human beings who have a devoted heart, a courageous mind and a purposeful soul.”
Even the best secular institutions like Yale University, where Brooks teaches, "nurture an overdeveloped self and an underdeveloped soul," he argued. Many graduates of these schools "assume that the culture of expressive individualism is the eternal order of the universe and that meaning comes from being authentic to self. They have a combination of academic and career competitiveness and a lack of a moral and romantic vocabulary that has created a culture that is professional and not poetic, pragmatic and not romantic. The head is large, and the heart and soul are backstage."

But just as character formation is being downplayed or abandoned in secular education, the critical need for it is as clear as ever. In a recent article (http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/07/students-broken-moral-compasses/492866/) in The Atlantic, educator Paul Barnwell laments that America's education system, in focusing on standardization and quantifying benchmarks, has de-emphasized character education.

"Talking with my students about ethics and gauging their response served as a wakeup call for me to consider my own role as an educator and just how low character development, ethics and helping students develop a moral identity have fallen with regard to debate over what schools should teach," he says.

Barnwell cites alarming statistics from the 2012 Josephson Report Card on the Ethics of American Youth. Fifty-seven percent of surveyed teens, for example, stated that successful people do what they have to do to win, even if it involves cheating. Fifty-two percent reported cheating at least once on an exam.

Meanwhile, data has shown that narcissism is on the rise while empathy is on the decline among millennials. In her book Generation Me (https://www.amazon.com/Generation-Americans-Confident-Assertive-Entitled/dp/1476755566), Jean Twenge reported that in the 1950s, only 12 percent of teenagers identified with the statement, "I am an important person," while a half-century later that number grew to 80 percent. A 2010 University of Michigan study (http://ns.umich.edu/new/releases/7724) showed that college students today are about 40 percent lower in empathy than their counterparts were two or three decades ago.

Sadly, these tendencies are rarely challenged and often amplified in today's secular universities. At institutions like Biola, however, it's a given that nurturing the soul and nurturing the mind are both essential for a meaningful education. As Biola professor David Horner points out in his book Mind Your Faith (https://www.amazon.com/Mind-Your-Faith-Students-Thinking/dp/0830839321), Christian higher education starts from the assumption that "[o]ur mind, our faith and our character are essentially bound together."

This integration allows for real, quantifiable growth in not only knowledge but spiritual and moral formation.

Todd Hall, a professor of psychology at Biola's Rosemead School of Psychology (http://www.rosemead.edu/), has done research into the spiritual growth of students at Christian colleges. Results from his survey of 9,608 students from 22 Christian schools were recently reported (http://advance.ccac.org/stories/the-spiritual-lives-of-ccac-students) by the Council for Christian College & Universities (CCCU). The data showed that 82 percent of these students reported that their Christian college had a moderately or very positive impact on "a sense of meaning and purpose in something bigger than myself," while 66 percent reported growing moderately or rapidly in their spiritual lives because of their college education.

The 2015 National Survey of Student Engagement showed (https://www.biola.edu/outcomes/survey-research/asse-results) that Biola scored 22 percent higher than peer institutions when students rated their institution's "emphasis on providing support for your overall well-being."

The whole-person development that happens at schools like Biola leads to students who are healthier and safer than their secular counterparts. While drug and alcohol usage and sexual assault are by no means absent at religious colleges, they exist at much lower rates than at non-religious schools. Twenty percent of CCCU schools reported a sexual assault offense in 2014, compared with 44 percent of private four-year schools and 66 percent of public four-year schools. Meanwhile, the Princeton Review's annual "Stone-Cold Sober Schools" and "Don't Inhale" lists are dominated each year by religious schools, where binge-drinking is far less of a problem than at secular schools. A 2013 study (http://search.proquest.com/docview/1468461064) comparing National College Health Assessment (NCHA) data from faith-based institutions (FBIs) versus non-faith-based institutions found that "a significantly larger proportion of students at FBIs abstain from alcohol use and early sexual activity, and those students who do engage in these behaviors do so more responsibly than students at non-FBIs."

When it comes to loan default rates, CCCU schools also fare better than other schools: 5.9 percent, versus 6.3 percent for all private schools and 7.6 percent for all public schools, according to 2012 data.

In a world as fragile and fragmented as ours, virtuous leaders and responsible citizens are desperately needed. This means that the few institutions with a vocabulary and paradigm for moral formation have an essential role to play. Christian colleges now occupy this small but vital niche, but if they give up this task too, who will be left to cultivate a virtuous citizenry?

3. Christian Higher Education Cultivates Compassion, Selflessness and Discipline in Students

As part of the character formation that happens in Christian higher education, graduates are inspired to follow the example of Jesus, who "came not to be served, but to serve" (Mark 10:45).
The Christian college is not a place of insularity and isolation from the world, but of service for the world. This is an orientation consistent with 2,000 years of hospitals and humanitarian organizations and homeless shelters and refugee relief agencies and low-income housing inspired by the teachings of Jesus to love the neighbor and care for the suffering.


“We really do view it as if our founder said, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ And under the category of neighbor we include not just those who share our religious or political or citizenry affiliations, but literally everyone. Literally our enemies. The example of Christ forbids us from conditioning our love to only those who think like us.”

This approach led early Christians to be the ones who stayed in plague-ridden Rome, tending to victims dying in the streets, when everyone else fled. It’s the approach that leads Biola students to serve people all over the world, whether the homeless on the streets of Los Angeles’ Skid Row (Andy Bales, ’78), orphans in Ukraine (Melissa Keane, ’05) or the rural poor in Africa (Jared White, ’05).

Biola has sent out hundreds of students to organizations like Compassion International, KidWorks, 31 Bits, Plant With Purpose, Joni and Friends, The Justice Conference, Samaritan’s Purse, World Vision, World Relief, Los Angeles’ Union Rescue Mission and the New York City Rescue Mission, to name just a few.

According to LinkedIn data, the No. 2 most common sector of employment for Biola University graduates is “community and social services.” This sector also ranks high for similar Christian schools such as Azusa Pacific (second), Westmont College (fourth) and California Baptist University (second). Compared with other Southern California schools, “community and social services” ranks much lower as a sector of alumni employment: 12th for UCLA, ninth for USC, eighth for Cal State Long Beach. In the 2015 Washington Monthly college guide rankings (http://washingtonmonthly.com/college-guide/college-guide-rankings-2015-bachelors/), which rates schools “based on their contribution to the public good,” Christian schools are disproportionately represented in the top tier of baccalaureate colleges.

The positive impact of Christian colleges is also felt on the local level. The towns where Christian colleges are located tend to rank high in safety, education and volunteerism, and their economies are generally better than surrounding areas. Biola University is the largest employer in the city of La Mirada, Calif., a city that WalletHub recently ranked 34th out of 250 California cities in terms of socioeconomic environment. La Mirada also consistently earns recognition for its safety, including a 2016 list of the 50 safest cities in California (http://www.safewise.com/blog/safest-cities-california-2016/).

The positive economic impact of Christian colleges on their communities is one example of the significant uplift religion in general provides to a nation’s economy. A recent report (http://www.religionjournal.com/pdf/jrr12003.pdf) in the Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion estimated that religion in the U.S. contributes $1.2 trillion annually to the nation’s economy and society, including billions spent on philanthropic programs, educational institutions and healthcare services.

Provost Deborah Taylor observes that students from Biola tend to be compassionate coworkers and respected leaders in the workplaces and communities they enter.

“Being deeply grounded in the belief that we are to do our daily work as unto the Lord results in alumni who demonstrate integrity, loyalty and ethical decision-making,” she said. “Invariably, employers tell us that graduates from Biola are among their most devoted, trustworthy and exemplary employees.”

The strong faith commitments that define places like Biola are also correlated with generosity. Data shows that churchgoing and religiously devout Americans are the most generous with their money and their time, giving to charity and volunteering more than secular Americans.

“By many different measures religiously observant Americans are better neighbors and better citizens than secular Americans,” write Robert Putnam and David Campbell in American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us (https://www.amazon.com/American-Grace-Religion-Divides-Unites/dp/1416566732). This is consistent with what Arthur C. Brooks found in his 2006 study (Who Really Cares (https://www.amazon.com/Who-Really-Cares-Compassionate-Conservatism/dp/0465008232)) on charitable giving: not only that religious people are more generous than nonreligious people, but that they “are more charitable in every measurable nonreligious way — including secular donations, informal giving and even acts of kindness and honesty — than secularists.”

Prominent secularists do not dispute these facts. In a Guardian article (https://www.theguardian.com/world/2005/sep/12/religion.uk) reflecting on the the presence of faith-based charities in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, atheist Roy Hattersley wrote, “it is impossible to doubt that faith and charity go hand in hand.”

But why are people of faith better givers, volunteers, neighbors and citizens? Putnam and Campbell’s research found that what correlated most with “good neighborliness” was not religious belief as much as religious belonging. It is friendship and connectedness in religious social networks like churches and small groups that most profoundly inspires good neighborliness, they found.
The way that strong religious communities uniquely contribute to the common good is something New York University’s Jonathan Haidt explores in his book *The Righteous Mind* (https://www.amazon.com/Righteous-Mind-Divided-Politics-Religion/dp/0307455777). Haidt argues that the particularity and clear boundaries of faith communities allow them to produce “moral capital” for the broader society, though these voluntary, non-kinship-bound communities are also quite fragile.

Referencing anthropologist Richard Sosis’ studies of communes, Haidt observes that the best predictor of a religious community’s endurance is the number of costly sacrifices (e.g. giving up alcohol and tobacco, dress codes, prohibited behaviors, etc.) it demands from its members. For religious communities, Haidt writes, “the more sacrifice a commune demanded, the longer it lasted.”

This is why things like community standards and covenants are so important for voluntary religious communities. Not only do they delineate a group’s boundaries and distinct convictions, contributing to its ability to endure changing cultures and the inertia of mission drift, but they also cultivate a “for the good of the group” selflessness that fosters good neighborliness, as Putnam and Campbell found.

Some might look at the behavioral standards of Christian colleges and see them as stifling and legalistic. But more than just minimizing alcohol-fueled mischief on campus, community “contracts” cultivate in students a healthy ability to abstain for a couple of years from certain behaviors for the sake of the group, even if they disagree with the restriction. Christianity is not just a “me and Jesus” religion, after all, but has always been a faith worked out in community. In a society as thoroughly individualistic as ours, this notion is quite countercultural. As Brooks noted in his address to CCCU presidents:

“You have a way of being that is not all about self. You have a counterculture to the excessive individualism of our age. You offer an ideal more fulfilling and more true and higher than the ideal of individual autonomy.”

What is the countercultural ideal which Brooks says Christian colleges have? Covenant. “For most of us, our inner nature is formed by that kind of covenant in which the good of the relationship takes place and precedence over the good of the individual,” he said. “For all of us, religious or secular, life doesn’t come from how well you keep your options open but how well you close them off and realize a higher freedom.”

Brooks says Christian colleges help students think well about commitments and “ways to discipline their longings.”

In an age whose mantra is “be true to yourself,” submitting oneself to the boundaries of covenant certainly goes against the grain. Making and keeping commitments is also anathema in the age of FOMO (“fear of missing out”). But these things cultivate the virtues of discipline and selflessness in an undisciplined and self-obsessed time, and they are hallmarks of a Christian higher education.

### 4. Christian Higher Education Strengthens a Pluralistic Society

Perhaps the most important contribution of Christian higher education is that it preserves a way of thinking and living that might otherwise be lost in a culture as rapidly moving as ours.

But why is distinctly Christian thought — the sort that is cultivated at Biola’s John Templeton Foundation-funded [Center for Christian Thought](http://cct.biola.edu/), for example — worth preserving?

One argument has to do with pluralism. The idea is that a diverse society is made stronger when it protects itself against the dangers of homogeneity and groupthink by celebrating a plurality of distinct visions of the good life. The value for society comes not in spite of but because of the fundamental differences these traditions and communities represent.

This principle applies especially in academia, which has in Western culture been on a long trajectory toward a homogeneity where liberal and secular perspectives are the de facto acceptable orthodoxy. Liberal columnist Nicholas Kristof [lamented](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/08/opinion/sunday/a-confession-of-liberal-intolerance.html) this recently in the *New York Times*, writing, “When perspectives are unrepresented in discussions, when some kinds of thinkers aren’t at the table, classrooms become echo chambers rather than sounding boards — and we all lose.”

Homogenization leads to an intolerance of minority viewpoints that is dangerous in a democracy where checks and balances are essential to overall health.

A healthy democratic society makes room for universities that choose to educate in a thoroughly secular and politically liberal way, but also universities that choose to educate in a particularly religious way.

The Rev. Theodore Hesburgh, who led the University of Notre Dame from 1952 to 1987 and strongly defended the value of a distinctly Christian higher education, wrote about this in *Notre Dame in 1977:* "We have no problem with other universities choosing to do their discussing in what might well be a more restrictive context, more secular, less religious, more purely or exclusively scientific and technological. So be it. But we need not be defensive in placing the same discussion in a different context, more universal (which is the meaning of catholic), more Christian, more moral, more spiritual, more open to God, but no less intellectual. We do what we do freely, and in the conviction that the times, and especially the future, will need such an approach.”
George Marsden, scholar of the role of Christianity in American higher education, says something similar when he distinguishes between the common good contributions of secular institutions ("uniting diverse people around the shared goals of teaching and learning") and that of religious universities and colleges, who "serve the common good by forming young people in a confessional tradition and providing an intellectually sophisticated context for the deepening of that tradition." Writing in First Things, Marsden said (https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/02/a-more-inclusive-pluralism) these schools provide the wider society with "a vital body of citizens who are united by a coherent set of principles and moral imperatives that empower them to address the challenges facing society as a whole."

*Preserving space for minority viewpoints is critical* in a pluralistic society. As soon as one minority community is forced to give up its counter-cultural beliefs and behaviors, every minority community is at risk.

Certainly Christian institutions, oriented as they are around the worship of an invisible and all-powerful being, are minority communities in today's secular Western culture. And Christian communities who still believe and practice traditionally Christian sexual ethics are even more marginalized. Yet a healthy society should, within limits, tolerate the institutions that choose to preserve and live according to these beliefs, however marginal they might be. As Marsden notes:

"Religious communities should not be discriminated against just because of the peculiarity of their religiously based views. ... Of course that does not mean that anything goes, but it does mean that, except in extreme cases, religious differences should be honored along with other differences."

For many Christian students, a school like Biola offers a place for their faith to not merely survive but to thrive, to not be in a perpetual defensive posture but to be proactively pursuing the deepening of faith and its application in business and science and music and more.

"I don't know if people realize how toxic and oppressive, particularly graduate but also undergraduate [secular] higher education can be for a person of faith," said Langer, who received a B.S. from Colorado State and an M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of California, Riverside. "It takes pretty strong people to do that successfully. I'm grateful that people do that, but I'm also grateful for institutions like Biola who say, 'You don't have to go into a combat zone to get an education.'"

Ultimately the boundaries that mark off a place like Biola are not so much about protecting Christian students from the outside world as they are about preserving the coherence of faith from the inside so that it can be effective beyond itself.

Christian higher education is for the world. But its contributions to the world are only possible, and will only continue, to the extent that it can remain distinctly Christian.

Boundaries are for flourishing. Unifying covenants create coherent visions for education. Consensus on moral ideals allow for character formation alongside intellectual formation.

As Biola presses forward in a turbulent and secular age, these arguments will need to be part of our witness. In humility and love we must make the case for our common good impact. We must preach what we practice in terms of loving and serving the world in Christ's name, and we must never grow weary of practicing it.