In 1924 James B. Duke, tobacco and electric-power magnate, created the Duke Endowment worth approximately $40 million, designating a major portion of its income for the successor institution to Trinity College, a Methodist school in North Carolina, to be known as Duke University. As suggested by the school motto, "Erudition et Religio," Duke University's mission was to consummate the marriage of knowledge and religion. More completely, as the bylaws of the infant university declared, Duke had a duty to "assert a faith in the eternal union of knowledge and religion set forth in the character of Jesus Christ . . . and to render the largest permanent service to the individual, the state, the nation, and the church."

This explicitly Christian declaration of Duke's calling belies the traditional picture painted by historians of higher education, based almost exclusively on northern examples, that sees religious influences on higher education waning, if not extinguished, by the first World War. While aspiring to academic excellence and national prominence, Duke's southern setting encouraged its founders to hold to a distinctively Christian mission more tightly and more persistently than did many schools north of the Mason-Dixon line. This is not to say that Duke was immune to the secularizing influences of the era. But the persistence of religious concerns at Duke indicates the continued influence of Christianity on some segments of university education in the United States well into the twentieth century.

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2 The motto was written by Braxton Craven, president of Trinity from 1842–1882. See Seal of Duke University File, Duke University Archives, Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC. [hereafter Duke University Archives]


4 On the secularization of higher education in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries see e.g. Richard Hofstadter and C. DeWitt Hardy, *The Development and Scope of*
century and gives cause to question the reputed demise of Christian influences on higher education in America in the years before World War I.

No individual was more instrumental in actualizing Duke's vision than William Preston Few, president of Trinity College and then Duke University from 1910 to 1940. At the heart of Few's vision of higher education was a concern for the advance of the south and the nation in particular, and western Christian civilization in general. Colleges, at their best, he held, were Christian institutions. But the religion Few sought to propagate was a broad Christianity concerned primarily with ethics, not doctrine. He praised modernizing tendencies in theology that shifted "the emphasis from correctness of creed to soundness of life." Such a faith could undergird a "Christian America" and "lift the race from the low ground of intellectual miasma into the uplands of the liberty of the true sons of God."

The creation of the Duke endowment in 1924 gave Few the resources to build a university that embodied his commitment to Christianity and education. The atmosphere at Duke, Few insisted, would be "perfectly free and at the same time whole-heartedly Christian." Indeed, in the newfound university, which would necessarily reflect the trend of increasing academic


On this theme see George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield, eds., The Secularization of the Academy (New York, 1992).

diversification and specialization, religion’s unifying force would hold a more important place than ever. “If Duke University is to have this unity and all-round completeness it must ever cherish some galvanizing central principle that will hold it from disintegration,” Few wrote. “On this campus the Chapel . . . will dominate the place. This is intended to be symbolical of the truth that the spiritual is the central and dominant thing in the life of man.”

Duke, seeking to join religion and knowledge in the cause of righteousness, would strive for national service, training leaders devoted to freedom and democracy. The university’s private endowment and commitment to Christianity notwithstanding, Duke was, Few claimed, a “public institution,” that sought to “promote the public good . . . in the service of the Republic.”

Ultimately, Few dreamed that Duke’s influence would extend even beyond the nation to the world. Few nurtured a millennial vision of earthly peace and fellowship that would result from the successful union of religion and education. Rising to unusual heights of oratory in 1931 he predicted:

> When the forces of religion and education . . . create an atmosphere and climate of opinion in which the true, the beautiful, and the good can easily grow, then we may expect a steadiness in the progress of the race. . . . Then goodness and beauty, righteousness and truth, gentleness and strength can live together and, living together, can make a world that will sustain a really great and enduring civilization. And when that far glad day arrives, religion and education will have a program for their combined activities in which . . . the two will work together, each giving its all in whole-hearted cooperation for a completely redeemed humanity.

Duke’s mission, in sum, was to advance the Kingdom of God on earth.

One key component in fulfilling Duke’s religious calling was a Bible requirement for all undergraduates. When Few took over the helm of Trinity College in 1910 all students were required to take a one-hour course in scripture each semester. In 1919 the biblical requirement was changed from a one-hour course each semester to one six-hour course in English Bible. The course, which was designed to improve the teaching

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4Alumni Register 17 (June 1931): 196. See also Alumni Register 18 (May 1932): 120.
5Alumni Register 18 (May 1932): 120. See also Chronicle, March 19, 1930, 3; Woody, Few, 351; Chronicle, Nov. 1, 1933, 2. For earlier statements along this same line see Chronicle, Nov. 27, 1912, 4; and Sept. 23, 1914, 4.
7Alumni Register 17 (June 1931): 197. See also Alumni Register, 17 (Dec. 1931): 358–59.
8Chronicle, Nov. 1, 1933, 2. See also Chronicle, Sept. 21, 1932, 4 for Few’s impassioned appeal for the students to become missionaries “in the cause of humanity.”
10Annual Catalogue, 1918–19, 83, 86.
of the Bible, was essentially an in-depth study of Bible content in which undergraduates read most of the Scriptures.

During the 1910s the offerings in religion burgeoned, with twenty-two courses offered in 1920, including History of the Reformation, American Church History, and History of Methodism. Moreover, in the 1920s, Social Gospel concerns became increasingly prominent in the curriculum. Courses such as “The Church and Society” and “The Church and Modern Social Problems” sought to inspire a passion for the advance of social Christianity in Trinity’s graduates.

The metamorphosis of Trinity College into Duke University, and the consequent founding of a School of Religion, amplified the prominence of the study of religion on campus, furthering Few’s efforts to “plant educational training in religious living and thinking in the very heart of the undergraduate body of the college.” The religion department, which had counted three faculty members in 1924, numbered ten by 1927 and fifteen by 1939, resulting largely from faculty appointments in the School of Religion.

Religion, particularly Christianity, continued to be studied not simply as an historical phenomenon, but for its existential import. As such, in a course on the “Teachings of Jesus,” the catalogue announced, “A constant effort will be made to relate this teaching to the problems and life of the present,” and a course on the “History and Practice of Religious Education” considered “problems that are connected with the modern home life and training of children.”

Nevertheless, some religion courses at Duke manifested the changes transforming the academic study of religion in the United States. After 1926, courses in comparative religions modified their earlier apologetic emphasis. Such a move hardly indicated an abandonment of the department’s Christian orientation. Edmund Soper, who taught world religions to undergraduates from 1926–1928 while dean of the School of Religion, exemplified the new approach to comparative studies. In *The Religions of Mankind* he insisted that all of the world’s faiths merited a “scientific” and “fair-minded” examination. But this did not mean surrendering one’s Christian convictions. Rather, the study of comparative religions in the true spirit of Christian tolerance, he believed, would cultivate not only an
appreciation for the "good to be found in every faith" but also inspire a desire to share the message of Jesus Christ with those who have not heard.\(^{22}\) At Duke, a scientific approach to world religions, while cultivating openness to other faiths, sought also to encourage Christian missions.

While the biblical requirement was altered in 1932 to allow students a choice of courses to fulfill a general religion requirement, the bulk of the courses offered throughout the 1930s manifested distinctly Christian concerns and efforts to instill Christian values in the students continued unabated.\(^{23}\) By keeping abreast of the latest developments in the study of religion and offering practical courses on Christian living, Duke's faculty and administrators sought to increase the school's contribution to the development of Christian civilization.

The opening of the School of Religion in 1926, which would eventually take its place at the center of the new university beside an immense gothic chapel, gave William Few another arena in which to advance his vision of a broadly Christian university. In fact, Few took a special interest in the development of the School of Religion, playing a major role in faculty hiring, and frequently even chairing its faculty meetings.\(^{24}\)

The appointment of Edmund Soper as the first dean of the School of Religion buttressed Duke's mission to God and country.\(^{25}\) In his opening address at Duke, Soper argued that Christianity, if it was to maintain its influence in the world, would have to "come to terms" with current intellectual developments and insisted that if the church was to be the "Soul of America" the School of Religion had to produce religious leaders concerned with the great moral issues of the day—"race, industrial justice, international relations, and peace and war." "The church cannot hope to be a leader in American life," Soper warned, "if she does not fearlessly speak out on questions which are hers simply because they involve the relationships of men." Though ministers could not be expected to master the intricacies of business, Soper declared, they must become "experts on moral issues and bold preachers of righteousness, not only in private life, but in the broader reaches of human relationships."\(^{26}\) In short, the School of Religion would work to cultivate prophets of the Social Gospel.

Soper, in close consultation with Few, built the School of Religion faculty largely in his own image. The formation of the School of Religion

at Duke hard upon the heels of the Scope's trial in Tennessee made
Duke's religious mission in and to the South more important than ever.
The Christian Century, for one, praised Duke's choice of Soper as evi-
dence that "Tennessee is not all the south." 27 Soper did not disappoint the
editors of the Century, and helped to create a faculty in the early years
that promoted an "evangelical liberalism." 28

Perhaps no individual exemplifies the School of Religion faculty of
this era better than Gilbert T. Rowe, who was named Professor of Chris-
tian Doctrine in 1928. 29 An enthusiastic liberal, Rowe insisted on the pro-
gressive nature of theology and the need for continual doctrinal revision. 30

The aim of Christianity, for Rowe, was the advance of the Kingdom
of God. Only when religion was applied to the problems of industry, race,
and war would peace and brotherhood become realities. Inasmuch as the
"whole point of the religion of Jesus" was to make good men and women,
Rowe averred, Christianity gave hope to a troubled world. It could, in
fact, become "the religion of the world" uniting all people in love of God
and service to humanity. 31

Like Rowe, the majority of School of Religion students at Duke in the
1930s married liberal theological and social views in an effort to promote
God's Kingdom. 32 Supported by Few, the School of Religion faculty and
students stood as a powerful witness of the religious mission of the entire
university.

The faculty of the Religion Department and School of Religion were
not alone in their efforts to advance liberal Christian ideals and values in
the university. Though opposed to creedal tests for faculty, Few desired
instructors who were "sincerely in sympathy with . . . the Christian church." 33

(Spring 1967): 162; Robert E. Cushman, "Fifty Years of Theology and Theological Education
at Duke; Retrospect and Prospect," Duke Divinity School Review 42 (Winter 1977), 16; Duke
Divinity School Bulletin (May 1949), 19. On the history of the School of Religion see also the
very helpful chapter, "Theological Education at Duke University, 1925–1950," in Durden,
29 See O. L. Brown, Gilbert T. Rowe (Greensboro, NC: Piedmont Press, 1971) for Rowe's
background. See also Cushman, "Fifty Years," 15, and Spence, I Remember, 252.
30 Gilbert T. Rowe, The Meaning of Methodism (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1926), 11, 214;
idem, Reality in Religion (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1927), 84, 115, 133, 140, 189. See also
Thomas Langford, Practical Divinity: Theology in the Wesleyan Tradition (Nashville: Abingdon,
1983), 191. Rowe was not seriously influenced by the rise of neo-orthodoxy. See Gilbert Rowe,
31 Rowe, Reality in Religion, 232, 247, 268–70, 276, 309, 293, 311.
32 Christian Horizons 1.3:11, 2.3:8–10, 4.1:14–16, Duke University Archives.
33 Few to W. A. Neilson, Jan. 28, 1913, Few Papers, quoted in Earl W. Porter, Trinity and Duke,
On Few's opposition to creedal tests for faculty see Spence, I Remember, 80–81. On his con-
cern for faculty sympathetic to the Duke mission see Alumni Register (April 1927): 103.
The social sciences and philosophy were fertile fields for the cultivation of religious themes and Howard Jensen and Hornell Hart in Sociology, William McDougall in Psychology, and Alban Widgery in Philosophy all brought distinctly religious concerns to their subjects.34 Probably no member of Duke's faculty, however, was a more prolific spokesman for Duke's vision of service to God and country than the chair of the sociology department, Charles A. Ellwood.

Charles Ellwood came to Duke in 1930 to reorganize and expand the sociology department. Ellwood, who had a reputation as "the foremost American student of religion from the sociological standpoint," sought to join sociology and religion to advance Christianity and democracy.35 Heir to the modernist impulse in American Protestantism, he subscribed to an evolutionary view of religion that emphasized ethics more than doctrine. The task of all Christians, Ellwood argued, was to follow the teachings of Jesus to establish "a humanitarian civilization, a Christian state of society."36

The union of religion and sociology would advance not simply Christianity but democracy for, to Ellwood, Christianity was "the religion of democracy," and Jesus the "great teacher of democracy in our western
Ellwood did not confine his efforts to promote religion and democracy to print and podium. A frequent speaker at chapel services at the university, he used the pulpit to encourage Duke students to further the cause of Christianity. "If Duke University could combine scholarship with religion," he told the undergraduates in 1930, "it could become the most outstanding university in Christendom." Mourning the sorry state of world leadership, he challenged Duke's students to live out their faith and build a "Christian civilization." 40

Despite the presence of faculty like Ellwood on Duke's campus and despite Few's desire to employ faculty sympathetic to Christianity, Duke was not immune from the secularizing pressures that were influencing universities and colleges in other parts of the country. By at least one account, though almost all of Duke's professors in this era were personally religious, the faculty as a whole lacked fervor for prosecuting Duke's religious mission. Elbert Russell, reflecting on his years as university preacher in the early 1930s, allowed that, despite the faculty's Christian character, most professors "had no deep interest in . . . the problem of a strong religious atmosphere." 41 Apparently an increasing number of Duke's faculty in this era, ever more concerned with specialized research and teaching, did not see it as their particular calling to concern themselves with the integration of religion and knowledge. While several faculty such as Ellwood made a point of addressing religious issues in and outside of the classroom, Few clearly had a difficult time finding Christian scholars who linked their faith and academic discipline in consistent and explicit ways. As such, religion came to be seen, more and more, as the exclusive domain of the chaplain and the religious organizations.

In 1925, the Chronicle, noting the vast array of student religious groups on campus, claimed that the religious organizations at Duke were "probably stronger than at any other college in the state." 42 Fifteen years later the director of religious activities on campus was able to boast that more students participated in religious groups than any other extracurricular activity. 43 Supported by the administration and many of the faculty and students, voluntary

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38 Ellwood, Reconstruction of Religion, 262, 248; Ellwood, World's Need of Christi, 170.
Religious groups gave religion a high profile in the first years of the new university.44

While the denominational composition of the Duke student body changed in the years between the world wars, Protestant Christianity remained overwhelmingly dominant.45 The Duke YMCA and YWCA, attempting to cultivate the religious sentiments of the students, emphasized campus evangelism, prayer, Bible study, and social reform.46 Contrary to the trend at many universities in the 1930s, the YMCA at Duke remained such a vital part of the undergraduate student life that in 1938 it was accused of "usurping the powers of the Student Government Association."47

Perhaps no religious event in the interwar years was more influential than the annual Religious Emphasis Week and no annual preacher captured the hearts and minds of Duke undergraduates more than Henry Hitt Crane. A pastor in the northern Methodist Church, Crane preached at the Religious Emphasis Week five times in the 1930s, earning the respect and glowing endorsements of the student body.48 Year after year he proclaimed a gospel of "Christian citizenship" and moral encouragement to a packed chapel at Duke.49

Crane's appearance in 1935 inspired more student interest than any other campus speaker that year and in 1936 the editors of the student paper virtually made him an honorary undergraduate. "We cannot help thinking of him as our friend," the students declared. "We welcome him in our fraternity chapter rooms, at our dining tables, at our meetings and discussions . . . He brings the message of the ages, and from his lips we hear the message of modernity."50

The admiration was mutual, for Crane claimed that of all the universities and colleges he had visited—a total of 118—Duke held first place in his heart.

44 This section challenges the portrayal of voluntary religion in the 1920s at Trinity/Duke in Paula S. Fass, The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 137–139. Fass seeks to portray the 1920s as a period of profound religious declension at Duke. While signs of personal piety did decline in the era and while the religious environment at Duke did show signs of increasing secularization between the world wars, Fass misinterprets some evidence and overstates her case.

45 Chronicle, Nov. 11, 1925, 1; Oct. 17, 1928, 1; Nov. 6, 1934, 1; Alumni Register, 22 (Nov. 1936): 279.

46 Chronicle, Sept. 21, 1927, 1, 6; Oct. 31, 1928, 1.


49 Chronicle, March 8, 1935, 1.

50 Chronicle, March 12, 1935, 2; March 6, 1936, 1, 2. In 1936 he spoke to a total of 15,000 people during the Religious Emphasis Week. See also Chronicle, Feb. 18 and 25, 1938.
The religious life of the campus, he averred in 1939, was "the healthiest, most natural, most conducive to real human understanding" that he had witnessed.51

Despite such glowing praise, student religious life on the Duke campus, like that of the faculty, was showing signs of the increasing secularization of the nation and higher education. The prominence of the YMCA and YWCA in these years notwithstanding, religious fervor among undergraduates was apparently waning, leading the editors of the Chronicle to condemn many of the members of the YMCA as "young hypocrites."52 Moreover mission sentiment at Duke declined in the course of the 1930s and the student missionary group expired in 1938.53 While Henry Hitt Crane's progressive Christianity struck a responsive cord in many of Duke's undergraduates in the years before World War II, religious zeal among many students, as among their professors, was difficult to maintain.

Such trends reflected religious tendencies in mainstream Protestantism at the time. In the course of the late 1920s and 1930s, as Robert T. Handy has argued, the mainstream Protestant churches suffered a "religious depression." Falling interest in foreign missions, declining worship attendance and Sunday school enrollment, and a downturn in financial giving all signaled hard times for the mainline communions that provided the bulk of Duke's student body.54

In the face of such challenges, Few appointed Merrimon Cuninggim to the newly created position of Director of Religious Work in 1936.55 Cuninggim, a graduate of Vanderbilt and Duke who would eventually become director of the Danforth Foundation, embodied the Duke vision.56 In his report to the University in 1938, he insisted that Duke's students were to strive to build a Christian nation and a Christian world.57

Cuninggim oversaw major changes in the organization of worship at Duke that would have lasting impact. As at most colleges, compulsory chapel had been a part of life at Trinity for years. Upon the transformation of the school into a university the requirement continued, but was not rigidly enforced. Finally, in 1931, in an effort to improve Duke's spiritual life, the administration instituted voluntary chapel.58

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51Chronicle, March 3, 1939, 1.
52Chronicle, Oct. 22, 1924, 1; Nov. 14, 1928, 2; Oct. 15, 1935, 2.
55Chronicle, May 19, 1936, 1.
Despite this change, chapel became a hot topic on campus in 1937. A YMCA poll early that year estimated that the chapel services were “reaching about three percent of the student body.” Many students condemned the services as “uninspiring” and several Duke faculty expressed unhappiness with the situation. Accordingly, the YMCA proposed a program for chapel revitalization that included the appointment of a full-time university pastor.\textsuperscript{59}

While the meager influence of chapel among Duke undergraduates was a clear sign of disaffection with public worship at Duke, the editors of the \textit{Chronicle} insisted that the lack of student participation in chapel was not due to the prevalence of “irreligion” among the undergraduates. Rather, students did not attend chapel, they argued, because they were “not being supplied what they demand in the way of college religion.” As evidence, the editors cited the overflow crowds of students who turned out to listen to Henry Hitt Crane during the Religious Emphasis Weeks in 1936 and 1937.\textsuperscript{60}

Ultimately, the YMCA study led to the formation of the Duke University Church.\textsuperscript{61} The church, whose stated mission was to “advance the Kingdom of God in Duke University” was to be “the central unifying force for the religious life of the University.” Many students responded to the new fellowship enthusiastically, seven hundred becoming affiliate members in the first two months.\textsuperscript{62}

The Dean of the Chapel, Frank Hickman, used his post to commend the Duke vision to his congregation. In \textit{Signs of Promise}, published in 1943, Hickman revealed the concerns for spirituality and democracy that must have permeated his preaching. In the face of the apparent undoing of Western Christian civilization in World War II, Hickman called for “a tremendous revival of authentic insight” that would lead to the “spiritual conquest of the world.” Such a revival of Christianity would, Hickman declared, ensure the triumph of democracy, which rested on Christian foundations.\textsuperscript{63}

Duke, Cuninggim believed, through its religious programs, stood in the vanguard of religious higher education. “Duke University,” he claimed,

\textsuperscript{60} \textit{Chronicle}, Oct. 15, 1937, 2.  
"has . . . an opportunity to lead the way in which other schools will most certainly follow." Commited to the union of knowledge and religion the leaders of Duke envisioned their school as a model for broadly Christian higher education in the twentieth century.

But this model comprehended the dual mission of Duke, to church and nation, that would contribute to the secularization of the university in the years ahead. Duke's commitment to service to the church and the country could be sustained in an era in which the nation—and especially, in Duke's case, the south—was viewed as more or less Christian. But in the course of the twentieth century, as service to the nation came to be viewed in more and more pluralistic terms, commitment to a particular faith tradition would become increasingly problematic.

As Few looked at the growing international conflicts in the late 1930s, however, these inherent tensions were the last thing on his mind. Rather, on the eve of America's entrance into World War II, Duke's mission to the church, the nation, and the world seemed more essential, and more integrated, than ever.

In June 1940 Few delivered what would be his final baccalaureate sermon. As he looked out at the world, he saw all that he valued imperiled by the rise of totalitarianism and the scourge of war. But Few was not without hope. Rather, he looked for democracy and Christianity to triumph over the "pagan elements" of the world. Such a victory would require that the churches and the nation make some changes. Few insisted that the churches, which had been "too much preoccupied with formal professions and correctness of creed" needed instead to emphasize "spiritual vitality and moral energy." If freedom and democracy were to endure in the world, the nation needed "moral and intellectual leaders" who would "place the welfare of the country and of humanity high above every other consideration." If ever Duke's vision of service to God and country was critical, now, Few believed, was the time.

For its first fifteen years Duke University forthrightly sought to join a commitment to Christianity with advanced research and teaching in service to God and the world. The efforts of Few, Ellwood, Cuninggim, and Hickman notwithstanding, numerous pressures were working to erode Christian influences on the campus. As George Marsden has argued, the demands of an increasingly industrialized technological society (contributing to the growing professionalization and specialization of academic fields), a growing secular consensus in the academic world, an ever more

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"Woody, Few, 326-64, 369."
pluralistic society, and the liberal Protestant appreciation of tolerance and freedom combined to gradually draw American universities, Duke included, away from their religious roots.  

Signs of these trends were apparent even from the time of Duke's birth. While few, in the 1920s and 1930s, could hire a faculty largely in sympathy with Duke's religious mission, the increasing specialization of the academy made it difficult for him to find scholars committed to linking Christianity and scholarship in an explicit way and who possessed a true fervor to promote a vital Christianity on the campus. Moreover, as Duke sought to draw a national student constituency, its clientele naturally reflected the "religious depression" that gripped the mainline churches in the 1930s. While Duke's Methodist ties and southern location encouraged a stronger religious aura than could be found at many other universities of the era, and while Duke students manifested a strong propensity to view social issues from a religious perspective, Duke was not immune from the forces that were enervating religious influences throughout higher education. Nevertheless, contrary to the dominant view that Christian influences had largely disappeared from American universities by World War I, Duke provides an example of an institution that was founded and administered in the years between the world wars with the intention of uniting Christian faith and higher learning. This case gives reason to question the standard claim that religion had been effectively marginalized in American universities by the early-twentieth century.  

While, in its early years, Duke succeeded in various ways in joining knowledge and religion, Cuninggim's view of Duke as the future leader of Christian higher education in America was a bit too sanguine. As long as the United States continued to view itself as in some way a Christian nation, Duke could continue to envision itself as serving both church and country. But in the coming decades, as the nation became increasingly diverse and the South, led in part by Duke, came more and more into the national mainstream, the religious mission of the university became ever more tenuous.

See Marsden, "The Soul of the American University," in Secularization of the Academy, eds. Marsden and Longfield, 9–45.