THE CHANGING CHARACTER OF RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES AT SWEET BRIAR COLLEGE, 1918-1933

Lisa Hagan
February 1, 1979

"O pledge..."

Lisa Hagan
"O God, Father of us all, we come before thee at the closing of this day to ask thy blessing... May we earnestly and faithfully pursue our appointed tasks, but let us never lose sight of the vision that inspires the task. Keep us from the sins of pettiness and superficiality. Grant, O Lord, that we may ever be large in soul and in thought; citizens of the world and citizens of eternity..."

Dr. Emilie Watts McVea,
Vesper Service,
June 3, 1923,
Sweet Briar College
The years 1918-19 witnessed a definite change in religious attitudes at Sweet Briar. The prewar period harbored traditionally devout church attendance, ideal theological motives, and an integration of religious and social activities. Essentially, the school respected the charter's designs for both "...religious and moral training." However, religious convictions apparently weakened after World War I; attendance at chapel dwindled; Bible classes lost their popularity and disappeared; and community service, once inspired by the desire to "emanate rays of Christian light to the whole world," took on much more secular overtones. Correspondingly, the study of the Bible for its moral significance was gradually encroached upon by the study of it for its academic literary value.

Students' attitudes toward religious devotion were fundamentally shaken as their society grew more worldly. A special bulletin sent home to parents in 1921 warned of student unrest, prolonged absences from school, and, notably, extravagance: "Simplicity in dress and personal tastes we believe to be the mark of the best education." The "unrest" manifested itself in "a desire for constant dancing, motoring, visiting and in ardent pursuit of other
pleasures.‖ Faculty and administration made repeated attempts at curbing these tendencies. In a sermon delivered on September 23, 1923, President McVea implored the students to emulate Christ on the Mountaintop, and "place the things of the earth in proper proportion—pleasures, food, clothes, games, even bridge.‖ Yet years later they were still imploring. On March 3, 1928, Professor Ernest R. Groves gave a lecture in which he expounded upon "the cosmopolitan effect on youth:" Former generations have built their philosophies on the hardships of life, or self-sacrifice—our generation does not accept the standard.‖

One of the most obvious signs of a change in religious sentiment during this timespan was the abolition of mandatory chapel attendance. Student emancipation from chapel was indeed a nagging issue of the twenties, yet it actually had its beginnings as early as 1916. In a petition presented to the Executive Committee of the Faculty, the Class of 1917 requested, amongst other things, that "the privilege of voluntary (weekday) be granted the Seniors;" it was passed as an experiment for one year. The experiment apparently failed, for in 1918 the Seniors were again making the request. It was again granted, this time on more permanent grounds. (A significant concession, even though the Class of 1919 had only 18 members.) The Seniors were freed for the time being.

Underclassmen received a break the following year. During the summer of 1919, President McVea, a sincerely devout woman, had attended the annual summer collegiate con-
ference held in Blue Ridge, North Carolina, and returned
influenced by a discussion there of compulsory chapel as
presented in a paper entitled "The Ideal Campus." On the
President's suggestion it was decided that voluntary cha-
pel, for everyone, be given a trial, attendance on Sundays
remaining compulsory. What had been the prevailing opin-
ion at Blue Ridge was most significant; a less forceful,
more independent approach to religion was no doubt the crux
of the discussion. In the face of a conservative age in
national politics, it seemed that religion was taking a
laissez-faire turn.

Given an inch, the students took a mile. Immediately,
accounts of unsatisfactory Sunday attendance began to fil-
ter into the Executive Committee minutes. Students were
now spending all of their allotted "cuts" on Sundays, an
unforeseen danger. Little over a month after granting them
their freedom, the Executive Committee deemed it "best to
consult the president of the Student Government Association
before making any change in the present system." It is
worthy of note that the students were even consulted; it
is also worthy of note that the students suffered a definite
setback: not only was weekday service again made mandan-
tory, but Sunday absences now counted as two cuts.

After a brief respite, student persistence cropped
up again undaunted. In 1923, Seniors petitioned for unlim-
ited cuts from Church, and "the matter was left to the Dean
to settle." Concessions on the administration's part ap-
peared again to a certain extent. In 1924, chapel attendance
was compulsory only on Sunday morning and Wednesday night. However, the S.G.A., whose duty it was to enforce compliance with these regulations and punish offenders, changed the penalty in a rather radical fashion. Before, chapel overcuts had been counted as "serious offences," punishable by a loss of social privileges. The penalty in 1924, however, was a fine of five dollars for every excess cut, the fund collected to be used "at the discretion of the Church Committee."\(^\text{12}\) Extortion had worked its way into the system of chapel attendance; something was fundamentally amiss.

The more complex a problem becomes, the more elaborate the remedy. In the spring of 1926, President McVea suggested that there be two assemblies of students during the week (not counting Sunday): "one for purely religious service and another devoted to various programs."\(^\text{13}\) Perhaps she believed that by offering students variety and a choice, attendance would become more appealing. At any rate, that fall, a special committee appointed to the task had devised a regular weekly program of services: a Monday night musical program; a Tuesday chapel; a Wednesday YWCA service; the Thursday convocation service; and a Friday chapel. Sunday, Thursday, and one other religious service required attendance. (The students quickly found a loophole. The student handbook issued the next year very clearly stipulated that "the Monday night musical service is not to be considered a religious service" after all.\(^\text{14}\))

Nothing illustrates the tedious situation so well as an editorial that appeared in October, 1927, the first
month of the first year of *The Sweet Briar News*:

We find the attendance regulations acceptable, the services interesting and profitable, the opportunities for self-development innumerable, yet we remain only partially satisfied... Since no fault can be found with the present arrangement... it is well to look for defects in our individual attitudes towards this phase of our college life... Is our attendance at Chapel based primarily on a desire for a richer, fuller understanding of life and a deeper sympathy with its manifold aspects, or do we often consider a satisfactory attendance record as the only reward of a period of unrelieved boredom? 15

A year later, in 1928, it appears that this deep introspection was over and that a decision had been made. Students held "the general idea that chapel is a boring twenty minutes to be put off 'til the last minute." 16 An opinion poll conducted by the newspaper ran the question, "How do you feel about compulsory chapel?" and the opinions printed were unanimous:

"The Catalogue says that this is not a religious school and I don't think we ought to be compelled to go to chapel." 17

"I think the present system is somewhat of a farce..."

"Compulsory attendance tends to give the wrong attitude towards religion..."

"...too many people mark themselves present when they don't go..."

"I even think that some of the people that never go now would go if they weren't compelled..." 18

Compulsory chapel was obviously believed by the Faculty to be the best holdout on immorality. As the twenties progressed and honor and social violations ran ramp-
pant, their idea, however obsolete, of chapel as a moral rejuvenator, struggled along. A strain of the Faculty's sentiments became exposed in a student editorial of March, 1929:

For this problem of so-called compulsory chapel attendance is one of such importance to the whole character of our school life that it is not to be influenced by such a basically superficial consideration as that rebellious spirit which is so frequently, if often mistakably, considered becoming to the youth of today...\(^{19}\)

By May, 1929, the Student Government had requested not to handle chapel attendance any longer. Reverence in the church was suffering; reports came in on excessive noise, tardiness to chapel, people crowding in the back and crawling over one another to get to the wall, and even some knitting during the service.

In October, 1931, students returned to "a host of alterations, and improvements, not the least of which," of course, was "the abolition of compulsory chapel."\(^{20}\)

In 1918, the same year that seniors were resuggesting the idea of voluntary chapel, the Young Women's Christian Association still listed as its main object: "To bring girls to Christ, to train them in Christ, and to send them out for Christ."\(^{21}\) The organization still conducted voluntary study classes in Bible, "since we have no Sunday School and the Bible is not a part of the curriculum,"\(^{22}\) and were seeing to it that the Indian Mission and the school waitresses were receiving instruction in "the standards of Christian living."

However, along with these theological ideas, there
existed a quite volatile sense of nationalism. The YWCA saw themselves as "the greatest army of girls in the world," inseparably and indissolubly bound up with every phase of campus activity," yet feeling the need to "become acquainted with world rather than campus problems, where the self-same principles of Christian democracy must hold true..." This nationalism would be the first step in a general move toward secularization by the YWCA, in which its aesthetic ideals would be debased by a strong sense of material security.

The YWCA, in 1918, had under its auspices two committees, which had originally been designated solely for religious instruction, but were beginning to involve more than Bible lessons. The Social Services Committee conducted a Sunday school for the waitresses; in 1918 it was described as "no longer... simply a place of worship and religious instruction on Sunday afternoon, but a vital center of community interest..." Likewise, the Voluntary Study Committee felt the need to encompass more than Scriptural lessons and therefore developed classes in "World Citizenship" as well, explaining their motives by stating: "We, as a nation, are facing a world problem, which we students must understand as thoroughly as possible."

In 1920, the study of "World Citizenship" split from the Bible study course in a microcosmic separation of Church and State; by 1921, there was an even more drastic
transformation. The "World Citizenship" class was apparently overrun by the new International Relations Club and the Voluntary Bible Study course disappeared altogether, although the catalogue continued to list it. This latter fact may simply have been an oversight, but it continued for so long that it is possible that the administration wanted the outside world to believe that the classes (and the student initiative) still existed. In any case, the development and continuance of worldly concerns and the disappearance of willful religion classes certainly suggests a shift in extracurricular priorities.

At approximately the same time that President McVea was endorsing the experiment of voluntary chapel attendance as advocated by the Blue Ridge council, the National Convention of the YWCA voted to adopt "the personal basis of membership," wherein membership in the Y was no longer automatic by becoming a student, but wherein members were solicited. This innovation of 1920 was in hopes of making the girls "feel more keenly that they are the Association," and that this feeling "should kill any tendency to indifference." Indifference, obviously, had reared its ugly head. Additional enticements were sought: more parties are mentioned amongst the club's activities, and "The Y Hut," a place for recreation, benefit and rest" was built, complete with its own Victrola. The Y's recruiting committee definitely had contemporary attractions in mind.

One of the YWCA's major subdivisions was its Exten-
sion Committee, which was, in effect, its own small missionary force. Aside from rendering help to the destitute on campus and around Amherst County, the Committee's most continual project was "saving" the Indian Mission. From 1918 until 1930, though, Sweet Briar's YWCA altered their aide to the Mission so that they were no longer concentrating on correcting basic spiritual distress but on providing only immediate material needs...

In 1918, the fundamental problem with the Mission, as the YWCA saw it, was its ignorance of Christian manners. Legend had it, and it was no doubt believed, that a tribe of Indians, "on its way to Washington to tell its troubles to the Great White Father," deposited its more quarrelsome members in caves about six miles from Amherst, where they intermingled with whites and blacks and consequently inherited "the mental, moral and physical weaknesses of all three..." When the weather permitted, Sweet Briar girls would walk over and conduct simple classes in cooking, sewing, and kindergarten work, for it was their ultimate aim "...to teach practical Christian ideals of living." In the same way, Sweet Briar's "Y" also helped finance a missionary, who not only taught "readin', writin', and 'rithmetic," but also, "to the best of her abilities, standards of Christian living." By 1924, the character of the help offered at the Indian Mission had changed substantially. Fundamental efforts to reform the Indians were no longer attempted; material provisions, such as clothes, food, and candy, constituted the aide given to the Mission. The motive force behind
the help was still somewhat sincere, but it sought only the remedy for short-range, superficial problems. The Sweet Briar girls would sometimes try to relieve a situation in the best way that they knew how, by throwing a party: "The Association gets up frequent hiking parties to go over and arrange entertainment for the children, carrying them toys and candy, and at Christmas, filling stockings for them."^{31} Hedonism seemed to govern Sweet Briar's method of reform.

After a period of several years (the latter twenties) during which the constitution of the YWCA remained rather static, an important change was evidenced by the overhaul of the document, resulting in much more secular overtones. The oath one had to declare for membership lost almost all sound of strong conviction in the wording. The earlier pledge had stated:

"I am in sympathy with the purpose of the Association and 
It is my purpose to live as a true follower of Jesus Christ,"^{32}

while the latter version simply stated:

"I wish to enter the fellowship of the Young Women's Christian Association and will endeavor to uphold its purposes in my own life."^{33}

Direct references to Christ, God, the Holy Spirit, the Holy Scripture, and the Church were frequently omitted in the latter version.

These rhetorical changes may only have been a move toward compact wording in the Handbook, or an effort toward compatibility with the contemporary vernacular; in any case, the changes and deletions did weaken the sense of religious devotion. However, there were also omissions of a more sub-
stantive nature. For instance, the personal pledge which appeared in the handbook of 1929, "To spend as much time as possible daily with Christ in the study of our Bible and in prayer" was apparently deemed extraneous in the revision of 1930 and was therefore left out. \(^{34}\)

During a span of years in which attention to the Bible seemed to diminish, it seems curious that some sort of Biblical study would become required in the curriculum and that ultimately (in 1933), the study would become a subject in which to major. \(^{35}\) However, the focal points of the Bible courses in the curriculum dealt not with the moral connotations of the Bible, but with its more academic, literary aspects. Religion, therefore, was becoming objective, and faith was explored more as an academic curiosity than as a moral guide.

The move towards an objective approach to religious studies was necessarily somewhat gradual. The courses offered under the heading "Biblical Literature" in 1918 concerned almost exclusively, as the heading implies, the Old and New Testaments. Only one course, "The History of Religions," studied "the great non-Christian religions of the world;" however, it did make a comparison of each of these with Christianity. \(^{36}\) All of the courses, although nominally literature classes, included the spiritual message of the writings.

Perhaps the most obvious indicator of the change of emphasis from the moral to the academic value of the
text was the faculty in that department. Up until 1919, the Bible courses were taught by the resident chaplain, who, of course, had been trained as a minister. In 1920, however, there was no longer a chaplain and all religion courses, as well as some in "Comparative Literature," came under the tutelage of Professor W.E.J. Czarnomska, a former English professor at Smith College and graduate student of Semitics at Columbia. Study thereafter took on a much broader academic emphasis. The course in "Literature of the Old Testament" studied the forms developed in Hebrew prose and poetry, as well as the "Democratic and Economic systems begun by the Israelites." 37

It may be argued that the change in the Bible department was wholly due to the effects of Professor Czarnomska. However, beginning in 1929, Professor Czarnomska taught only courses in "Comparative Literature" and the religion courses were handled by another instructor trained as a minister, while the curriculum remained almost entirely the same. The trend had been developed, and "Biblical Literature" had been established as a subject mainly of academic curiosity.

It can be drawn from the preceding accounts that the major shifts in compulsory chapel attendance, the YWCA, and the religious curriculum all took place around the early 1930's. However, changing attitudes trace back into the later teens. It is tempting to explain the order of events by arranging them on a political chronology, the effects of World War I knocking religion into a tremulous state that the overwhelming disillusionment of the Great Depression
finally upset. In any case, the decline of religious interests was believed by contemporary adults to be a result of the raging immorality of the age. The faculty at Sweet Briar believed it, the college's administration believed it, the older generation in general believed it. On April 4, 1928, Count Herman Keyserling, founder of the School of Wisdom at Darmstadt, delivered a lecture at Sweet Briar in which he stated:

Immorality is a change from tradition. As such, it cannot exist for a long period of time. Routine is the law of nature and the universe. Count Keyserling was not only feeding the hopes of all those who longed for traditional morality, but also all those who longed for the return of the deeply-rooted religious attitudes which accompanied that morality.
FOOTNOTES

1. Sweet Briar College Charter.

2. Sweet Briar College Student Handbook, 1918-19, p.11.


4. Ibid.

5. Sermon files of Emilie Watts McVea.


10. How many religious services were required per week is not determinable since the Student Handbooks for 1921-24, which contain this information, are missing.


12. Sweet Briar College Student Handbook, 1924-25, p.57. The Treasurer of the Church Committee's report of receipts is not itemized, but it is interesting to notice that four of the five deposits made that year were in multiples of five dollars.


FOOTNOTES (cont.)


17  This statement was refuted by a member of the faculty in the next issue of the paper.


21  **Student Handbook**, 1918-19, p. 25.


23  Ibid, p. 16.

24  **Briar Patch**, 1918, p. 111.


27  Ibid, 1920-21, p. 11.

28  Ibid, 1919-20, p. 15.


The Social Services Committee lasted, nominally, until 1933.
FOOTNOTES (cont.)

35 Up until 1916, the catalogue included under the heading "Religious Life" the entry: "Classes are organized for Bible study. Three-hour courses are offered as elective work counting toward the A.B. degree. One-hour courses, open to all students, are offered." Not until 1922 did four hours of Biblical studies become a requirement for the degree.
36 Sweet Briar College Catalogue, 1918-19, p. 42.
37 Ibid, 1922, p. 46.
REFERENCES

The Briar Patch. 1910-date. Sweet Briar College Archives, Room #2, top shelves on right. The captions often suggest the editor's sentiments toward the YWCA. Rosters which are sometimes included with pictures provide some information as to extent of membership. I reviewed the yearbooks from 1918-1934.

McVea, Emilie Watts. Personal documents of Sweet Briar Archives, Room #2, left side shelves midway through room in a green box labelled "McVea, 2nd President." The box contains clippings and magazine articles saved by President McVea, bulletins she issued and her own sermon notes. All were quite helpful.

Stohlman, Martha Lou Lemmon. The Story of Sweet Briar, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956. (Published by the Sweet Briar Alumnae Association). The "Story" presents Sweet Briar in a very favorable light. The sources were mainly "Anecdotes, personal descriptions and evaluations from faculty, alumnae and staff..." There are no footnotes. I just skimmed the parts of this concerning President McVea and the chapel.

Sweet Briar College Catalogue: 1906-1977. Sweet Briar Archives, Room #2, second shelves on right. The catalogue is compiled "by the College" (i.e. faculty and administration), to first courses, course descriptions, degree requirements, plus some general information. At times it is more detailed in its course descriptions than at others. I looked at the catalogues for 1918-1934.

Sweet Briar College Charter. (copy) Sweet Briar College Archives, Room #2, middle shelf on right, midway through the room.

Sweet Briar College Faculty Committee, Minutes of 1906-1957, Holograph MS-1916; Mimeograph MS-1957. Sweet Briar Archives, Room #1, lower shelf to immediate right of doorway. They deal guardedly with non-academic matters (no discussion) and give general announcements. They were not as helpful as the Executive Committee Minutes of 1918-1934.
REFERENCES (cont.)

Sweet Briar College Faculty Committee. Minutes of Church Committee of the- 1 volume, 1924-31. Holograph MS. Sweet Briar Archives, Room #2, second shelf on immediate right. The minutes contain secretary's reports on money allocation and situations of possible recipients. Treasurer's reports are rather scant. Five students were added to the Committee in 1925, but their presence is never made known.

Sweet Briar College Faculty Committee. Minutes of Executive Committee of- Oct. 27, 1911-1966 (excepting the period between 1952-64, the minutes for which are randomly collected in the folder labelled: "Executive Committee, 1948-65.") Holograph MS-1916; mimeograph MS-1966. Sweet Briar Archives, Room #1, bottom shelf to the immediate right of doorway. Fairly accurate accounts of curriculum changes are given, yet without the precipitating arguments. Indirect information of student life as seen mainly through its infractions. Accounts are generally restricted to academic matters, student petitions, and accounts of violations of school regulations (such regulations explained only when violated.) Information is screened in regard to faculty and administration dissension, perhaps due to contemporary Victorian discretion. Mr. Kermann's index was indispensable - I referred most often to "Chapel Attendance; "YWCA;" and "Instruction Committee" entries.

Sweet Briar College Faculty Committee. Minutes of the Instruction Committee of-. 1926-71 (excepting the years 1951-58; 1960-67; and 1969-70.) Holograph MS. Sweet Briar Archives, Room #1, lower shelf on immediate right. These notes verified facts I had gotten from other sources, such as the date when the "Biblical Literature" major began. They give little discussion. I looked only at the minutes for 1932-34.

The Sweet Briar News. 1927-68, Volumes 1-41. Sweet Briar Archives, Room #2, farthest shelf from door on right, second row from the top. Editorials were very helpful, with the student bias easy to detect. Accounts and reviews of lectures were also very helpful. I looked at the years 1918-32.
REFERENCES (cont.)

Sweet Briar College Student Handbook, 1917-1977 (excepting the years 1921-24.) Sweet Briar Archives, Room #2, middle shelves on the right, midway through the room. The Handbook was compiled by students mainly to acquaint new students with the college's rules and regulations, and with student organizations. Somewhere between 1920 and 1924, the editorship switched from the YWCA to the Sweet Briar Student Association. The club directives and rules listed are to be understood as ideals and are not always authentic descriptions of practice. However, my interests were often in the ideals. Emphases can be noted by a club's placement within the Handbook and by the relative amount of space devoted to it. I looked at the years 1918-1934 extremely carefully.