

ANDREW WYLIE, FIRST PRESIDENT OF INDIANA UNIVERSITY,
1829-1851

Courtesy Indiana University Archives

Andrew Wylie and Religion at Indiana University, 1824-1851: Nonsectarianism and Democracy

Gayle Williams*

The modern university is a secular institution, but its predecessors had religious foundations.¹ Historians have tended to attribute this transformation to a process of modernization pioneered at well-known private institutions. Among those schools it began with a move away from sectarianism, which led eventually to a form of education that was distinguished by respect for the advancement of knowledge rather than demonstrations of faith. But private eastern universities were not the only places where secularization happened; it also occurred elsewhere and earlier, for different reasons and with different effects. State institutions, such as Indiana University (I.U.), preceded the private colleges in moving toward nonsectarian education and, eventually, secularization. In the case of Indiana, this early commitment, which was grounded in democratic principles, helped establish the institution as the first public university in the state.

Indiana University's early commitment to nonsectarian, or nondenominational, education reflects in part the efforts of a powerful leader, Andrew Wylie, who saw within his own life the need for flexibility in the profession of faith.² Indeed, he nurtured his fellow founders' commitment to nonsectarian education throughout his long administration as the first president of the university (1829–1851). Indiana University was fortunate that both its first president and the first president of its board of trustees (David Maxwell) served for exceptionally long tenures, providing oversight in the most vulnerable years of the school's history. Wylie was president during the first thirty-one years of the institution's existence, having been

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¹The idea of excluding religious teaching from education is a modern concept. The term “secularization” was not associated with education until well into the second half of the nineteenth century. *Oxford English Dictionary*, see under “secularization.”

²The term “nonsectarian” was not used in documents from the early nineteenth century at Indiana University. Instead, officials claimed there were “no sectarian” tendencies or principles practiced at the institution or that “sectarian influences” were not present on the campus. “Nonsectarian” seems to have been applied retroactively to the period by historians; providing an education without sectarian influences was such a new idea in the early nineteenth century that there was no word for it. Early nineteenth-century Indiana University was Protestant in its ethos, but in modern terms it was nondenominational.

appointed within five years of the first students' being enrolled. Maxwell was the trustees' president for twenty-eight of the board's first thirty-two years.

Their long service was important for many reasons, but for the establishment of a nonsectarian policy the commitment of Maxwell and Wylie was critical. There is little direct evidence about Maxwell's views on nonsectarianism, and what there is derives from a few documents and early historical accounts. But it is reasonable to infer that Maxwell supported Wylie's position, since the president of the university could not have served long without his approval. About Wylie, by contrast, much is known. He publicly expressed his views on nonsectarianism, and his life reflected his religious tolerance, but early allegations by the school's opponents have colored historians' treatment of the subject.³

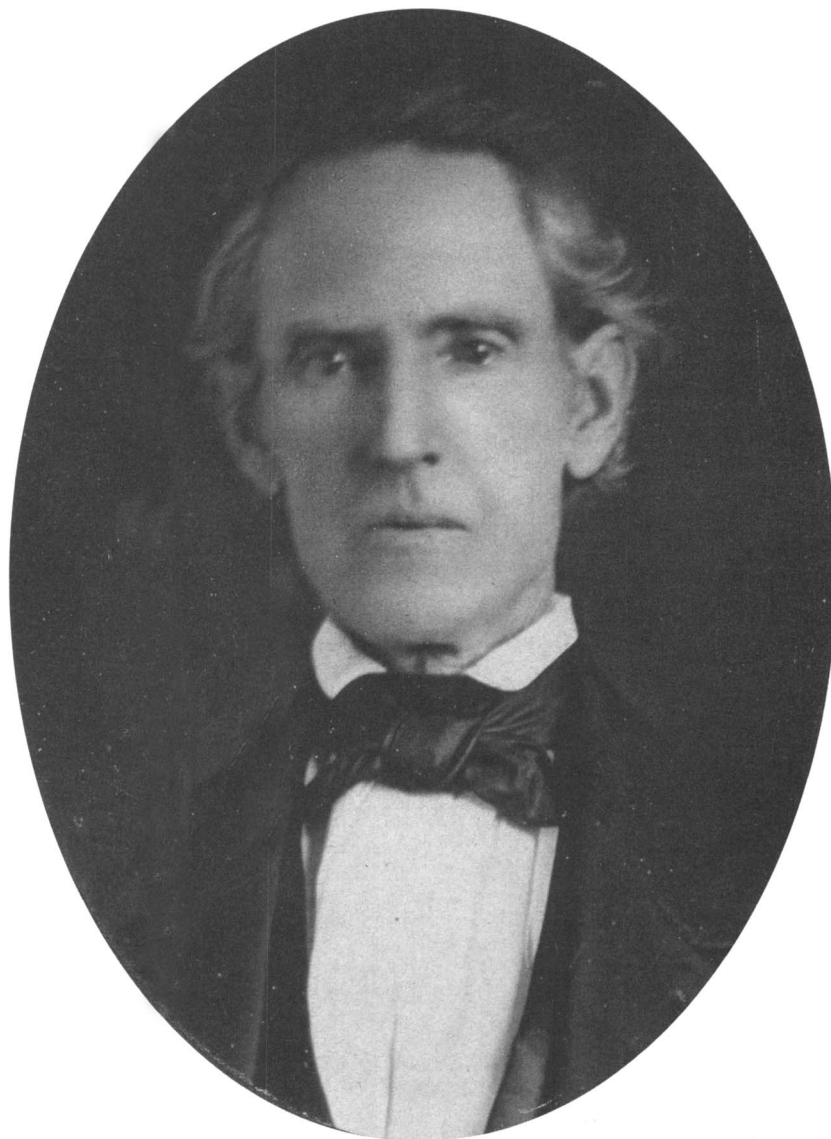
The Presbyterian affiliation of Wylie and Maxwell, as well as that of other pioneer members of the faculty, made their assertion of nonsectarianism difficult to defend. I.U.'s freedom from sectarian status, however, was critically important to the college's identity in the early years. It distinguished the institution from the denominational colleges in the state. Nonsectarianism also helped to enhance Indiana University's relationship with the state legislature, to establish its position as the first public university in the state, and to shape its reputation with Indiana citizens. I.U.'s opponents, recognizing the political importance of its nonsectarian status, regularly challenged the institution's claims.

Beyond the strategic advantage that came from rejecting a sectarian label, however, there was a larger purpose served by the policy: nonsectarianism helped ensure that higher education would be open to all citizens regardless of their religious beliefs. That view, staunchly defended by the university's earliest leaders in the face of much opposition, has rarely been noted and is largely forgotten.

The first faculty member at Indiana University was a Presbyterian minister, Baynard Rush Hall, who arrived in the state around 1820, probably hoping to find employment in the newly conceived institution. Hall believed his aristocratic habits and education made him a kind of misfit in Indiana, or in Hall's terminology, a "big-bug."⁴ He claimed that few people in Indiana could read or write and that he was "the

³L. C. Rudolph, *Hoosier Zion: The Presbyterians in Early Indiana* (New Haven, Conn., 1963), 180.

⁴Robert Carlton, Esq. (Baynard Rush Hall), *The New Purchase or, Seven and a Half Years in the Far West*, ed. James Albert Woodburn (Princeton, N.J., 1916), vi, 81, 270. Since Hall was the first faculty member at Indiana University, his text offers an insider's view of the early development of the institution. Unfortunately, the value of Hall's book is diminished by his cumbersome and confusing writing. Hall uses fictitious names for most of the important people and places identified in the text, including himself, and uses humor or sarcasm throughout. It is often difficult to determine whether he intends for the reader to take his account of specific episodes seriously or whether he is simply trying to entertain.



PHYSICIAN DAVID MAXWELL OF BLOOMINGTON WAS PRESIDENT OF
THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES FOR TWENTY-EIGHT YEARS

Courtesy Indiana University Archives



BAYNARD RUSH HALL, THE UNIVERSITY'S FIRST FACULTY MEMBER,
WROTE A THINLY VEILED DESCRIPTION (*THE NEW PURCHASE,*
OR SEVEN AND A HALF YEARS IN THE FAR WEST, 1843)
OF ITS EARLY YEARS

Courtesy Indiana University Archives

first man since the creation of the world that read Greek in the New Purchase!”⁵ In fact, his description of the establishment of Indiana Seminary (later named Indiana University) suggests that the early prejudice against the young institution reflected primarily the alienation of the local community from educated people and was not merely the result of a bias against Presbyterians.

Religion became a more central focus for the complaints against the institution in 1827, when the trustees decided to hire a second professor, John Harney, to teach mathematics. Harney, who was “nominally” Presbyterian, was chosen by the trustees over several other candidates. Hall reported that the locals objected to spending money on a second professor because they “set no value on learning” and added that when the locals became aware that Harney was Presbyterian, “the wrath was roused of people, religious and irreligious, of all other sects.”⁶ But the local citizens’ group failed to prevent Harney’s appointment. The trustees had acted quickly, awarding the position to Harney when they heard that a group was on the way to protest.

Maxwell attempted to soothe the citizens’ concerns over the hiring of the second Presbyterian minister by noting that the board itself was religiously diverse, representing six different denominations. He added that the board would watch the faculty vigilantly and remove a professor the “instant danger is found to threaten the State from our present course.”⁷ In other words, any faculty member who threatened the nonsectarian status of Indiana Seminary would be fired.

The Indiana General Assembly acted in January 1827 to create a board of visitors to assess the new school. The visitors inspected the seminary’s records, its course of study, and its students and, finding the institution free of aristocratic or sectarian influences, they recommended that Indiana Seminary become a college. The legislature accepted their recommendation, and on January 24, 1828, established Indiana College.⁸ Within a few months, the board of trustees began looking for a president for the new college.

Their choice was Andrew Wylie, an ordained Presbyterian minister, and he was inaugurated on October 29, 1829. Invited a few months later by the joint committee on education to address the state legislature, he traveled to Indianapolis on horseback, and in the course of his address he spoke about the relationship between education and religion.⁹

⁵*Ibid.*, 132, 158.

⁶*Ibid.*, 328.

⁷*Ibid.*, 332.

⁸James A. Woodburn, *History of Indiana University 1820–1902* (2 vols., Bloomington, Ind., 1940), I, 30–32.

⁹*Ibid.*, 54, 75.

Wylie made it clear he respected other religious traditions: "Let us be careful not to impose *our* views of truth upon others," he said, adding that real Christians should not be prejudiced against those who held different opinions and should not be led "to the calling of hard names, misrepresentation, and every species of unreasonable opposition." Further, Wylie went on to say,

were the alternative proposed to my choice, whether to stand, at the final and decisive judgment which awaits us all in the condition of *such a Christian*, or that of the moderate infidel, who takes his view of duty and of the character and government of God from nature alone, I should unhesitatingly prefer the latter.¹⁰

Wylie recommended to the legislators that they give religion and morality their "proper place in a system of liberal public instruction," which, he claimed, was the best and surest way to prevent "the many evils which flow from the prevalence of this vile and odious spirit" of sectarian opposition. He then called on the legislators to help their sons gain the "proper conceptions of the character of God."

Let our youth be taught to fear God and keep his commandments; but let their teachers be enlightened, liberal-minded men—men of science, and they will find employment enough, for themselves and their pupils, on congenial subjects, and be under no temptation to lead them into the dark and thorny wilderness of mystical Theology.¹¹

Unfortunately, Wylie's address before the legislature in early 1830 did not prevent further attacks on the institution, which were characterized as the effort to "Drive sectarianism out of Indiana College!" David D. Banta, however, suggests that everyone connected with the institution denied that sectarianism was present on the campus: "The faculty said it was not; the students said it was not; the board of trustees said that it was not; and legislative committees said it was not."¹² Nevertheless, the presence of three Presbyterian faculty members lent credence to the critics' continued charge.

Maxwell and the board defended the college and its faculty in a report delivered to the Indiana House of Representatives on December 8, 1830. In the report, the trustees insisted that the section of the act that established the institution and forbade the "introduction into the college of sectarian tests, and the inculcation of sectarian principles" had not been violated. They added that

[t]he Board do not sustain the present faculty on account of any religious opinions they may profess, but for their literary attainments, their exalted qualifications, their particular adaptation to the stations which they fill.¹³

¹⁰Andrew Wylie, *A Discourse on Education Delivered before the Legislature of the State of Indiana at the Joint Request of the Committees on Education* ([Indianapolis?], 1830), p. 18, copy in Andrew Wylie Presidential Papers, Collection 207 (Indiana University Archives, Bloomington), hereafter cited as Wylie Presidential Papers.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 16, 17.

¹²Woodburn, *History of Indiana University*, I, 75. The first six chapters of this book were written by David D. Banta.

¹³Indiana, *House Journal* (1830), 44.

The board also assured the legislators that if faculty members at any time failed to follow the expectations established, especially if they violated the constitution of the college by teaching sectarian tenets to the students, the board would “promptly and fearlessly remove them.” Moreover,

[i]n addition to the obligation which the Board are under to their families, to the state, and by the oaths they have taken, to support the constitution or charter of the college to prevent the introduction of sectarian tests and qualifications, it will be perceived by the General Assembly, that the institution at this time derives a further guarantee from the religious complexion of the Board of Trustees Of this Board it is believed 4 are Presbyterians, or at least were so educated; 4 Protestant Episcopalians; 3 Baptists; 2 Methodists; 1 Covenanter, and 1 a member of the *Christian* society or church. Out of such a mixture of religious opinion, it cannot reasonably be supposed, that a majority could be prevailed upon to establish, or in any respect to countenance a sectarian domination.¹⁴

Despite these assurances, critics of the university still doubted the university’s openness to faculty members of other Protestant denominations. Two similar petitions submitted to the legislature in late 1830 called for the selection of professors at Indiana College to be based on religious affiliation.¹⁵ But a legislative committee rejected the request:

[A] board of trustees composed of different religious denominations, under whose immediate supervision, all the interests of the college pass, should be allowed to choose professors in the various departments of science, with a single eye to their literary attainments, and without regard to religious opinions, the committee believe even the petitioners themselves, upon more mature reflection will concede to be the most eligible organization attainable.¹⁶

The committee report argued that complying with the petitioners’ request would violate the state constitution, which clearly outlawed any “religious test . . . as a qualification to any office of trust or profit.” In addition, the committee noted that the petitioners’ request violated the charter of the college, which stated in their words that no “president, professor, tutor, instructor, or other officer of the college” could be required to profess a particular religious opinion. Nor should “any sectarian tenets or principles be taught, instructed, or inculcated” in the college by anyone including the president and the professors.¹⁷

By 1832, Wylie had already survived several attacks on the institution and had garnered the support of the board of trustees and the Indiana state legislature. But, according to Banta, the greatest threat to the young institution came from within the school itself during the “Faculty War” of 1832.¹⁸

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 44-45.

¹⁵Woodburn, *History of Indiana University*, I, 76.

¹⁶Indiana, *Senate Journal* (1830-1831), 273-74.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁸Woodburn, *History of Indiana University*, I, 95-96.

It is unclear what prompted the “Faculty War” or created the animosity between Wylie and members of his faculty, though some evidence suggests the men disagreed over student discipline and the governance of the institution. In any event, Wylie was acquitted by the Presbyterian General Assembly and withstood this challenge to his leadership.¹⁹

In his own chronicle of these events Wylie alleged that some of his Presbyterian adversaries were motivated by their rivalry with Indiana College.

The State College here was liable to suffer from any successful assaults upon its President; and the Colleges, one at Crawfordsville [Wabash] & the other at South Hanover [Hanover] might hope to reap some advantages from such assaults . . . to put the most charitable construction which can be put on the conduct of some who were [indecipherable word—possibly *thus*] connected, and who as members of Synod sat in judgment on the case between W Harney & myself, I must say they seemed to be under the influence of something which exerted an influence over their minds which was not favorable to a clear discernment & an impartial decision.²⁰

Throughout the remaining years of the 1830s, Wylie’s opponents came from another source: the Methodists, who were the largest religious denomination in Indiana at that time. Their opposition would prove to be more dangerous to the new college than the internal squabbles among the governing bodies of the Presbyterian Church.

In October 1832 the Indiana Methodist Conference, having separated from the Illinois Conference and become an independent body, appointed a committee to investigate the possibility of establishing a Methodist institution of higher education. When the conference met again in 1834 they determined not only to try to establish their own institution, but also to achieve a share of the control of Indiana College and representation within the faculty. They submitted a resolution to the state legislature to this end.

We would impress it upon your Hon. Body, that Literature belongs to no one religious denomination of Persons, and that no one, exclusively, be allowed, to possess the keys that unlock her treasures. . . . We look to their charter [of the State College] and read that the places of President, Professor and Tutor, are open . . . without regard to religious profession or doctrines. We then turn our eyes on the faculty, from the organization of the Institution up to this hour, and we see one common hue, one common religion, characterizes every member as if capacity and fitness were confined to one Church and one set of religious opinions.²¹

The conference delegates also requested that the legislature take upon itself the responsibility to appoint new trustees for the

¹⁹An article in the student newspaper published many years after Wylie’s death stated the following: “When Dr. Wylie came home victorious from the final trial the Seniors illuminated the building, and Dr. McPheeters and Custis paid \$14.00 for the candles.” *Bloomington Indiana Student*, March 1888.

²⁰Andrew Wylie, “The Presbytery,” 1832, manuscript, Andrew Wylie Personal Papers, Collection 1 (Indiana University Archives, Bloomington), hereafter cited as Wylie Personal Papers.

²¹George B. Manhart, *DePauw Through the Years: Indiana Asbury University, 1837–1884, DePauw University, 1884–1919* (2 vols., Greencastle, Ind., 1962), I, 4, 5.

college, rather than continuing the policy by which members of the board selected their own replacements as needed. The Methodists claimed that a change in the appointment policy for the board would allow “a due proportion from other religious denominations and breathe into it a new spirit, full of life and vigor.”²²

The conference members also appointed a committee to distribute a copy of the petition to all the Methodist clergy in the state, urging them to forward similar petitions to the state legislature. At least six more petitions were submitted and referred to a legislative committee. One of the members of the Methodist petition committee was William Daily, who was to become the third president of Indiana University in 1853.²³

Indiana College attempted to appease the Methodists by selecting a professor from that denomination, Augustus W. Ruter, as a member of the faculty in 1836, but by then Indiana Methodists were well on their way to establishing their own institution of higher education. The charter for Asbury College, later DePauw, was granted in January 1837.²⁴

Wylie discussed his views of the Methodist issue in his book, *Sectarianism is Heresy* (1840). He described his interactions with Methodist C. G. Ballard, a new member of the board of trustees, who was particularly “eager to be on very friendly terms with me” and who asked Wylie to preach at his church and “to contribute toward the purchase of a Parsonage” for the congregation. Wylie indicated that he “cheerfully complied” with both requests, adding that Ballard “visited me in my room in the college very frequently.” Wylie reported that Ballard urged

that a certain professorship should be established, to be called the *Wesleyan*—it would conciliate and gratify the Methodists. I was indeed desirous that the professorship should be created and that a gentleman, who was spoken of for that purpose, a preacher of some distinction in that church, should be the person to occupy it.

Wylie, however, objected to calling the position the Wesleyan professorship,

not because of any antipathy I might be supposed to have either to Wesley, or that numerous and powerful sect which he was the founder, but simply because it was a sectarian name. I would have had the same objection to the name of Calvin, or to the name of any other man with which the bitter feelings and atrocious prejudices of sect had become associated. I had a still stronger reason for my opposition: By accepting the place which I held in the Institution I had virtually pledged myself to the public to keep it clear of sectarianism: and to consent to call any professorship by the name of Wesley, would be to give to his followers a pledge inconsistent with the former: so that, in the one case or the other, I must prove unfaithful—a predicament in which I could not consent to be placed—All this I candidly stated to Mr. B. at the time. Hence *his* enmity.²⁵

²²*Ibid.*, 5.

²³*Ibid.*

²⁴*Ibid.*, 6, 8.

²⁵Andrew Wylie, *Sectarianism is Heresy: In Three Parts in Which Are Shown Its Nature, Evils and Remedy* (Bloomington, Ind., 1840), 121, 122.

Wylie's problems with his board escalated, and William Foster, another Methodist trustee, eventually brought charges against him. Wylie's defenders, however, were more numerous than his accusers. A large number of students, for example, signed a document and submitted it to the faculty on January 28, 1839, asserting Wylie's innocence.

We the undersigned students of the Indiana University having had read to us the following charge said to have been exhibited before the State Legislature against Dr. Wylie viz 'That he has publicly threatened students that if they did not go to hear him preach on Sunday they should be *marked*' &c do hereby certify that we have never heard him threaten any such thing either publicly or privately, but on the contrary have always understood from him when explaining our duty on this point to say that it was the wish both of the Board of Trustees & his own that we should be left at perfect liberty on this subject.²⁶

In a report submitted to the Indiana House of Representatives on January 9, 1837, the other trustees also defended Wylie and the college.

The Board of Trustees have . . . made it the duty of the president of the Faculty . . . to deliver a public discourse or lecture, on some moral or religious subject, on each Sabbath day in the college chapel to the students, who are recommended to attend. It is not however made an imperative duty on them to do so; the President understanding the views of the Board of Trustees on this subject, carefully abstains from the inculcation of any sectarian principles or doctrines.²⁷

In its report, the board also requested that the status of Indiana College be changed to that of a university, and in doing so it reaffirmed the nonsectarian status of the institution at this critical juncture in its history:

The Trustees would here remark, that the public discourses delivered by the President to the students, on each Sabbath day, are numerously attended by the members of other denominations of christians in Bloomington and its vicinity, whenever it is convenient for them to attend; and that no complaint has ever yet reached them in reference to this particular provision of the charter: upon the contrary, the Trustees are induced to believe that it is one of the strongest evidences of the propriety of the course which they have adopted; nor would they have been thus minute on this subject, but for the fact that prejudices have heretofore existed in the public mind against Indiana College, in relation to this particular subject, in view of this they deem it their imperious duty to defend the character of the Institution from the malign influence which such prejudices are calculated to exert over its growing prospects and usefulness.²⁸

The trustees defended President Wylie even more specifically by asserting that "the hatred which all *bigots* bear to him" was "the best testimonial" that Wylie avoided sectarianism.²⁹

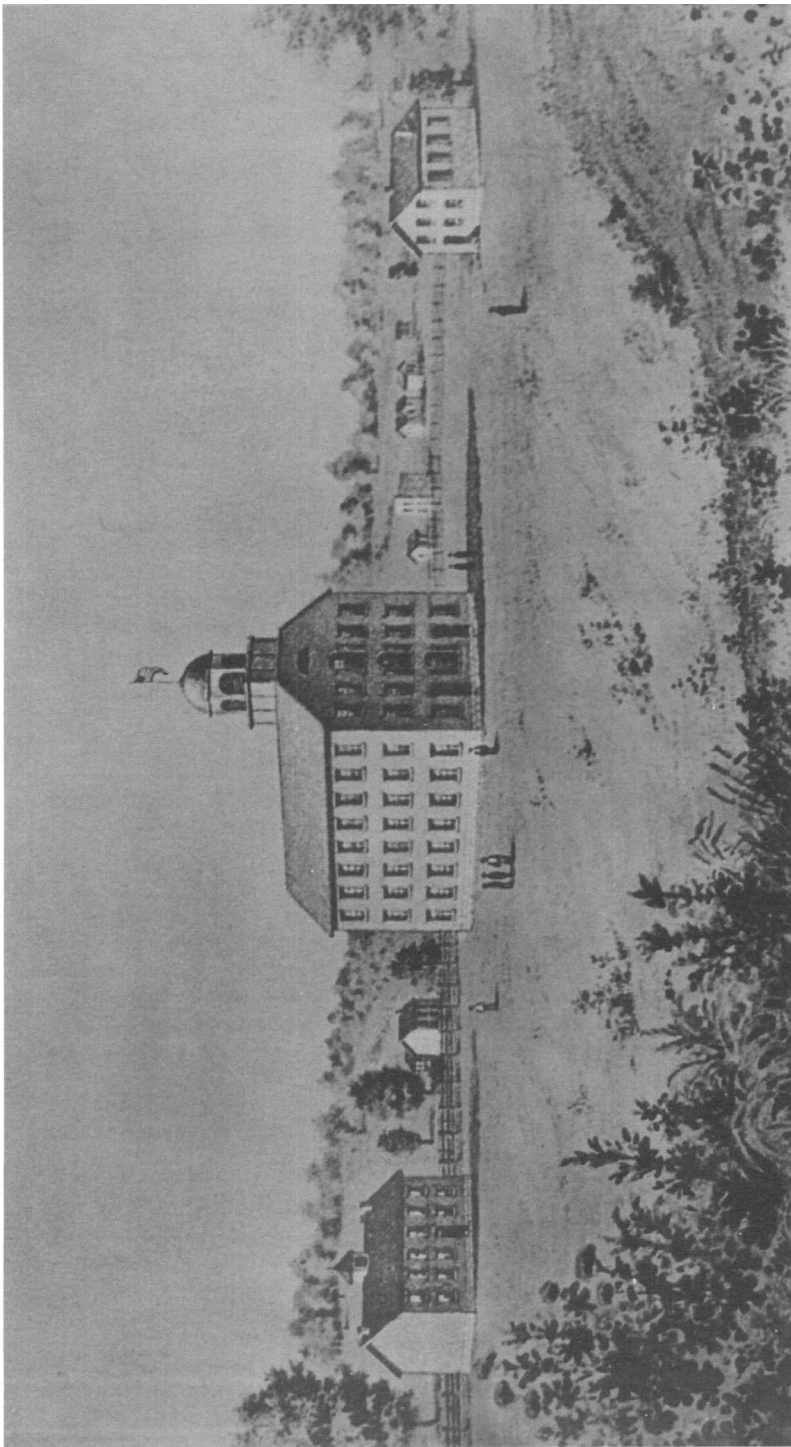
The last few years of the 1830s were undoubtedly extremely difficult ones for Wylie. While he was engaged in public controversy

²⁶[Andrew Wylie], "Replication or Plea of Dr. Wylie in Answer to Charges Brought against Him by William C. Foster and Others," c. 1838, Wylie Presidential Papers.

²⁷Indiana, *House Journal* (1837), 3.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 4.

²⁹*Ibid.*, 3-4.



INDIANA UNIVERSITY'S SEMINARY SQUARE CAMPUS, C. 1840

Courtesy Indiana University Archives

with some of his board members, he was also struggling with his own religious convictions. Comments he made in the appendix of *Sectarianism is Heresy* offer insight into his state of mind. Wylie complained that false accusations had been brought against him and that some "have taken an active part in that bitter and relentless persecution which the spirit of sect has raised against me."

It has, for instance, been reported far and wide, that I am verging fast towards Infidelity; I have received, I know not how many letters, from points more than a thousand miles apart, written by friends, who seemed to entertain serious apprehensions that there might be some truth in these reports. I have, therefore, thought proper here to say, that for all such surmises and suspicions there exists no foundation whatever, unless it be in the fact that I preached some time ago, in the Unitarian Church in the city of Louisville. I regret that this has given umbrage to any: but I do not repent of it.

Toward the end of his book, Wylie summarized his feelings about religious disputes:

My very soul is sick of religious controversy! How I hate the little narrowing names of Arminian and Calvinist! Christianity is a broad basis. Bible Christianity is what I love; that does not insist on opinions indifferent in themselves—a christianity practical and pure which teaches holiness, humility, repentance and faith in Christ; and which, after summing up all the evangelical graces, declares that the greatest of these is, charity.

The same year his book was published Wylie was confirmed as an Episcopalian and sought ordination as a priest, which was granted in 1842; later he preached regularly at the university.³⁰

It is difficult to gauge Bloomington's reaction to Wylie's religious controversies. An article anonymously signed as "Observer" and printed in the *Bloomington Post* on October 11, 1839, indicates that I.U. retained some local support.

Institutions of learning, under governmental care and patronage, have generally been sought after by the predominant religious sects, until some one obtained the ascendancy and secured its control. This University, however, forms an exception: here, though it has been made somewhat the bone of contention with the churches, it has, ultimately been rescued from their grasps. Indiana should be proud that she has such an institution where all sectarian feelings and opinions are equally tolerated, and none exclusively inculcated An Institution established and conducted upon such principles (for they alone conform to man's true nature) must ultimately triumph though its trials are fiery and its difficulties apparently overwhelming.³¹

Although Wylie seems to have weathered the difficulties that surrounded his personal religious convictions, new problems were

³⁰Wylie, *Sectarianism is Heresy*, 122, 130-31. In 1845, Wylie made the following report to the convention of the Episcopal Diocese of Indiana:

The undersigned respectfully reports, that during the past year he has been enabled, in the good providence of God, to preach in the chapel of the University once every Sabbath, offering prayers according to order and forms prescribed by the Church. He is encouraged to hope that these labors have not been in vain in the Lord.

L. C. Rudolph, *Hoosier Faiths: A History of Indiana Churches & Religious Groups* (Bloomington, Ind., 1995), 165.

³¹"Indiana University," *Bloomington Post*, October 11, 1839.

surfacing at the institution. On February 21, 1840, the General Assembly, taking note of a decline in enrollment from 105 students in 1837–1838 to 78 in 1839, appointed a legislative committee “to inquire into the condition of the State University, and the causes of its decline.”³²

In 1840 private denominational colleges dominated higher education in the United States: state universities, of which there were only fifteen, would not become important players in higher education until after the Civil War.³³ But in Indiana, legislators attempted to chart a direction for their state university that defined its mission as different from that of denominational colleges. They claimed that it was “right” for the public to maintain “at least one college in which the sciences are taught and the morality of the bible inculcated, without any reference to the peculiar tenets of any sect of christians,” and they added that the state legislature should become the guardian of Indiana University.³⁴

The trustees’ address to the legislature in 1840 echoed this view, calling for free and equal educational opportunities for all citizens:

When to all, without distinction of rank, of sect or of party, the elevating and ennobling influences of Education shall be thus made free; when every citizen shall feel, that, let his lot have fallen as it may, his children shall share with the richest and most favored, that cultivation of the mind and heart which raises man, far more than wealth or titled distinction, among his fellow men; then may Indiana boast, that her liberties and her prosperity are safe, beyond the reach almost of Fate itself. Then shall Equality rest, not on Sumptuary laws or agrarian restrictions, but upon the stable and peaceful basis of equal education.³⁵

The author of the trustees’ report was Robert Dale Owen, who was among the most distinguished members of the board during Indiana University’s first thirty years. A trustee for ten years, Owen served in the General Assembly for three years, in the Indiana Constitutional Convention in 1850, and in Congress from 1843 to 1847. In 1853, Owen was named charge d’affaires to the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, and in 1872, Indiana University conferred on him an honorary L.L.D. degree.³⁶

Owen, like his father Robert Owen, the founder of the communitarian experiment at New Harmony, Indiana, from 1825 to 1828, was an avowed atheist. According to Martin Marty, New Harmony “was an especially scandalous venture, because [Robert Owen] made no secret of being a socialist and of having nothing to

³²Indiana, *Documentary Journal* (1840), 385, 394.

³³Donald G. Tewksbury, *The Founding of American Colleges Before the Civil War* (New York, 1932), 133–34, 167–68.

³⁴Indiana, *Documentary Journal* (1840), 388.

³⁵[Robert Dale Owen], *Address by a Committee of the Trustees of Indiana University to the People of Indiana* (Indianapolis, 1840), 4.

³⁶Burton Dorr Myers, *Trustees and Officers of Indiana University, 1820 to 1950* (Greenfield, Ind., 1951), 115–17; Richard William Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen: A Biography* (Cambridge, Mass., 1940), 300.



ROBERT DALE OWEN (1801–1877) WAS A MEMBER OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES FROM 1838 TO 1846 AND FROM 1850 TO 1852.

Courtesy Indiana University Archives

do with God.”³⁷ Robert Dale Owen, following his father’s lead, decided in 1818 while still in his teens that he no longer believed in God, and he remained an atheist until well after he ended his tenure as a trustee at Indiana University.³⁸

Richard Leopold’s biography claims that in the 1840 trustees’ report, Owen tried to gain popular support for the university by arguing that “Bloomington’s was the only non-sectarian college in the state.” According to Leopold,

Owen’s address to the people marked the turn of the tide. Early in 1841 the legislative investigating committee placed its stamp of approval on both the policy of the Trustees and the opinions expressed in their manifesto Owen himself was rewarded by being one of the few Trustees who were reappointed when the Board was shaken up and abbreviated.³⁹

It is surprising that a prominent member of a family known for its opposition to religion was appointed to the board of trustees at Indiana University in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet Indiana citizens also elected Owen to the state legislature and to Congress during the same period. Owen’s active, ten-year presence on the board indicates that the trustees were tolerant to an extent that could easily be overlooked. More important, Owen’s service on the board for that length of time and, even more, his willingness to be a spokesman for the institution imply that he felt comfortable in that role. These factors also indicate that Owen believed that the university was truly nonsectarian.

Claims of Presbyterian control of I.U. nevertheless continued to gain currency, even to the point of figuring in the 1843 gubernatorial election. Indianapolis attorney Alexander Davidson, writing on July 28 of that year, lamented the state of the contest between Governor Samuel Bigger and his challenger, James Whitcomb:

Until within a few days we were electing our candidate for Governor, but matters have assumed a new phase. The attempt has been made, & I fear with some success to array the whole Methodist Church against Gov. Bigger, and for these very grave reasons:—Some 12 years ago the Methodist Conference memorialized the legislature to appoint a Methodist minister Professor in the Indiana University. Two ministers who were written to on the subject replied that there was no one in the Conference whom they could safely recommend for the station. Upon the faith of that statement Bigger (who was then a member of the legislature) moved to lay the memorial on the table with the simple remark that there was no minister in the State of that denomination qualified to fill the place of professor. This charge has slept until Whitcomb the loco candidate for gov. waked it up & has bruited it all over the state with all the improvements & additions that an artful demagogue was capable of making to it. The other reason (& with them the most weighty) is that [in] the notice given for the meeting of the Education Convention which was held in Indianapolis last winter (& over which Gov. Bigger happened to preside) the President of the Methodist College in Indiana was called

³⁷Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (Boston, 1984), 190.

³⁸Leopold, *Robert Dale Owen*, 8, 321.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 257-58.

professor & this is esteemed a blow at the *dignity* of their church! Oh, most weighty reasons! Oh, ineffable asses! If our candidate is defeated it will be from this cause . . . the Methodist vote in this State is large.⁴⁰

According to Davidson, the claim that there was not a Methodist in Indiana who was qualified to be a professor at Indiana College in the early 1830s was made by two ministers, apparently from the Methodist denomination, and not by Bigger. But historian Robert Clark, in an article about the 1843 gubernatorial election, states that it was Bigger himself who made the claim that “when Ohio University wished to get a Methodist professor ‘they had to send to Europe for him.’” Clark adds, “the fact that no Methodist preacher in Indiana was a college graduate” suggests that “Bigger’s contempt was not altogether unfounded” and notes that when Bigger laid “the proposal on the table, he secured the overwhelming support of his fellow legislators.”⁴¹

There were fewer Presbyterians than Methodists in early Indiana, partly because Presbyterians insisted on an educated clergy, while Methodists accepted lay ministers. According to L.C. Rudolph’s history of the Presbyterian Church in Indiana, “Ministers of the Presbyterian Church were always going away to school,” while the Methodist lay preachers could more easily follow the settlers who “were going deeper into the woods.”⁴² Lay ministers contributed to the spread of the Methodist faith in Indiana, but at a time when college presidents were typically members of the clergy, the Presbyterians held a distinct advantage over the Methodists in the field of education. In a 1921 article on Methodism in southwestern Indiana, John Iglehart observed

that among the backwoodsmen who first settled Indiana there was much illiteracy, and that both secular and religious education was greatly to be desired. . . . [I]t must be admitted that the stand taken by the Presbyterians, both in the matters of secular education and in the demand for an educated ministry, have in a substantial degree aided in the elevation of those standards [and] to that extent they are entitled to credit.⁴³

I.U.’s heavy reliance on Presbyterians to staff the institution left it vulnerable to accusations of sectarian control, which must have been evident to the supporters of the institution although they were steadfast in denying the charge. The early leaders of the school probably believed that they had no choice, since in the Midwest few ministers from other traditions were educated in the early years. Presbyterians, therefore, filled the void.

⁴⁰Rudolph, *Hoosier Zion*, 180-81.

⁴¹Robert D. Clark, “Matthew Simpson, the Methodists, and the Defeat of Governor Samuel Bigger, 1843,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, L (March 1954), 23-24.

⁴²Rudolph, *Hoosier Zion*, 20-21, 28.

⁴³John E. Iglehart, “Methodism in Southwestern Indiana,” *Indiana Magazine of History*, XVII (June 1921), 137-38.

A look at the makeup and experience of I.U.'s early student body offers further evidence that the prominence of Presbyterians on the staff did not undermine the school's nonsectarian mission. Theophilus Wylie's history of Indiana University lists all of the students named in one of the university catalogues and offers brief biographies of those who graduated from the institution, beginning with the class of 1830 and continuing until the class of 1887. Some biographies included the students' religious affiliations. Since T. Wylie was himself both a Presbyterian pastor in Bloomington and a professor at the university, it is likely that he personally knew the religious affiliation of those students who were members of his congregation, hence the proportion named as Presbyterians may be unduly large. But he also identifies the religions of some students who were not Presbyterians. He lists biographies of 147 graduates of Indiana University who attended during Andrew Wylie's presidency; fifty, or 34 percent, were Presbyterian; an additional twenty-one, or 14 percent, belonged to other religious denominations (including ten Methodists, two Baptists, two "Christians," and four Episcopalians), and seventy-six, or 52 percent, were not identified by religious affiliation.⁴⁴

Wylie's information on the earliest graduates of the institution shows that they represented a variety of denominations from the beginning. Of the three students in the first graduation class (1830), one was a graduate of Princeton Theological Seminary and an ordained minister of the gospel, which implies that he was a Presbyterian.⁴⁵ Neither of the other two was a member of a church, although one, James Dunn, was a major supporter of a Presbyterian congregation. The first student to be listed as belonging to a different denomination was Andrew Thickstun, a preacher for the Methodist Episcopal Church, who graduated in 1836. In the class of 1837, Wylie lists two Episcopalians and one Presbyterian, while the denominations of the other seven students are not given.⁴⁶

Probably the best source on student experiences during Andrew Wylie's administration is a diary written by Richard Henry Holman, an 1837 graduate. Holman's father, Jesse, was a Baptist minister and one of the founders of Franklin College, a Baptist institution.

⁴⁴Theophilus A. Wylie, *Indiana University: Its History from 1820, When Founded, to 1890* (Indianapolis, 1890).

⁴⁵An editorial note in Woodburn's *History of Indiana University* suggests that there were actually four graduates in the 1830 class. Theophilus Wylie lists William Stockwell as a graduate of the class of 1831, but Woodburn places him in the 1830 graduating class. Wylie, *Indiana University*, 168.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, 166-68, 176-79, 182-84. Among the class of 1839, T. Wylie lists George Grover Wright, the brother of a future governor of Indiana, Joseph A. Wright. Both brothers attended Indiana University, but only George was a graduate. Joseph, however, held the distinction of being among the first ten students accepted in the institution by Baynard Hall. According to Wylie, George Wright was also a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church. Woodburn, *History of Indiana University*, 18.

Although he never states his religious affiliation, it is likely that Richard Holman was also a Baptist.⁴⁷

Holman frequently mentions his personal religious practices in his diary, for example, that he attended services to hear the Methodist William M. Daily preach ("he is a clever fellow, and one of the best Methodist preachers I ever heard [*sic*]"). Later Holman describes Daily as "a young Methodist preacher of considerable imagination and some native talent, of which he is well aware." Holman adds that he goes to "hear him preach once every Sunday, when it does not rain."⁴⁸

Holman also sometimes discusses the religious affiliations of his fellow students, and his comments suggest that the student body at Indiana College in the mid-1830s contained members of several denominations. Of William Jones, Holman reflects that he "will probably (altho he does not now profess religion) come out a Methodist preacher." Holman says that Joseph Barwick, a sophomore, is "a Methodist licensed preacher," and adds, "*He is my friend*, and a most estimable young man."⁴⁹

Holman's friend James Lasselle of Logansport was not only not a Presbyterian: he was not even a Protestant. Holman describes Lasselle as "a young man of fine moral character and feelings, and I believe of some talent. He is a Catholic in principle. Is my friend."⁵⁰ Both James Lasselle and his brother, Charles, attended the university from 1836 to 1839, without graduating. They were members of a distinguished Catholic family that arrived in the earliest years of Indiana territory. Their father, Hyacinth Lasselle, was born in Kekionga (Fort Wayne, Indiana) in 1777, and some claim that he was the first white child born in Indiana north of the city of Vincennes. Hyacinth Lasselle was also a trustee of St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Vincennes.⁵¹

Holman records that he intensely disliked a student named John McClurkin, who was a "Covenanter—a real bigotted covenanter and a bitter enemy to the Catholic faith." Holman adds that he and McClurkin "had a very *interesting* and *eddyfiing* contest in the Hall, last session, concerning the treatment the Catholicks should receive from the denominations."⁵² Holman's claim that Lasselle is his friend,

⁴⁷Holman Hamilton, ed., "An Indiana College Boy in 1836: The Diary of Richard Henry Holman," *Indiana Magazine of History*, XLIX (September 1953), 281-82.

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, 288, 294-95, 298.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 300, 302.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 297.

⁵¹"Charles B. Lasselle," *ibid.*, IV (December 1908), 200; Dorothy Riker, "Francis Vigo," *ibid.*, XXVI (March 1930), 19.

⁵²Holman refers to John McClurkin as "McClurkin" and "Mr. McClurkin," but he never indicates his first name. Hamilton, "An Indiana College Boy in 1836," 300. T. Wylie lists a "John Johnston McClurkin" among the graduates of 1836. Wylie, *Indiana University*, 176.

whom he respects as a person of “fine moral character and feelings,” as well as his obvious dislike for the anti-Catholic McClurkin, indicate that Holman at least was not a bigot. His attendance at Methodist services may also imply that Holman, scion of a strong Baptist family, was not prejudiced in his religious practices. When Holman writes in reference to his fellow students, “On Sunday, the Faculty recommend them to go to church,” the use of the word “recommend” appears to confirm that students were not required by the faculty to attend church.⁵³

After a brief illness resulting from an accident, Wylie died on November 11, 1851, and his funeral demonstrated symbolically the distance the university had come from appearing to be a Presbyterian stronghold. The sermon was delivered in the university chapel by Daily, who was a Methodist, an alumnus, and Wylie’s good friend. (Wylie had even suggested to a board member that Daily would be a good candidate for a professorship.)⁵⁴

In his funeral address Daily praised Wylie as “one of the best and most valued friends of my youthful days and riper years” and as “my *Instructor*—and to me a Father as well as my friend and brother minister. . . . the Protestant Episcopal Church has lost in him one of her brightest ornaments.” Daily, who was with Wylie at his deathbed, reported that “[a] few minutes before he departed, at his request, I knelt by his side and offered up prayers to God in the name of Jesus; at the close of which he responded, ‘Amen’ four times.”⁵⁵

Wylie was a firm supporter of a collegiate education freed from the limitations imposed by sectarian tenets. He advocated his position in his writing and in his public addresses, and he lived his life as a witness to his convictions. For a man whose own commitment to the Presbyterian Church eventually faltered, it must have been ironic to be accused of trying to foist Presbyterianism on young students. While the battles between Presbyterians and Methodists challenged Wylie’s administration, his personal friendship with a Methodist minister was more representative of Indiana University in the second half of the nineteenth century.

The claim that state universities were nonsectarian is rarely taken seriously by historians. Some argue that the state institutions described themselves as nonsectarian for practical reasons, specifically to attract a larger pool of potential students. Others imply that the assertion was a ruse and the universities were actually controlled by various religious denominations throughout much of the century. Few acknowledge that nonsectarianism was an important component

⁵³Hamilton, “An Indiana College Boy in 1836,” 303.

⁵⁴[Wylie], “Replication or Plea of Dr. Wylie.”

⁵⁵William M. Daily, *Funeral Discourse Delivered in the University Chapel in Bloomington, Indiana, November 13th, 1851, over the Remains of the Late Rev. Andrew Wylie, D.D., President of Indiana University*, Wylie Presidential Papers.

of the mission of state universities and represented for them, at times, their democratic sense that educational opportunities should be available to all citizens.⁵⁶ Fewer historians still acknowledge a connection between nonsectarianism and secularization.

One scholar has taken a decidedly different position than most. In an article on the evolution of the idea of a state university, Eldon Johnson claims that

[t]he period between the colonial colleges and the so-called state university movement needs more light because it has been portrayed as a comatose or even retrograde period inimical to the development of public higher education. . . . The impression is left that some kind of later movement—new, original, essentially rootless—suddenly sprang into being only after the pangs of the Civil War.⁵⁷

According to Johnson, “the institutional mission” of state universities in the antebellum period was accompanied by a “parallel development toward public control and public support.” Nevertheless, it would take many years before the concept of “public” would become a reality. Yet, during the “great proliferation of denominational colleges as the dominant type of institution . . . an alternative type—naturally smaller in number—more aligned with the state than the church” saw its beginning.⁵⁸

Johnson’s research stresses the unique contribution of the state universities to American higher education, including their position

⁵⁶The act that established the University of Missouri was modeled on the law that governed the University of Virginia, which stipulated that there be no religious requirements for hiring faculty or admitting students. Joel P. Brereton and Patricia A. Love, eds., *Religion and Higher Education: 1989 Paine Lectures in Religion* (Columbia, Mo., 1989), 8. The 1870 Illinois State Constitution guaranteed liberty of conscience and the “free exercise and enjoyment of religious profession and worship.” Winton U. Solberg, “The Conflict Between Religion and Secularism at the University of Illinois, 1867–1894,” *American Quarterly*, XVIII (Summer 1966), 188. The constitution for Wisconsin states that “no sectarian instruction shall be allowed in said university.” Michigan did not bar sectarianism in its constitution, but the principle of nonsectarianism is mentioned in the three legislative acts that established the University of Michigan. Alfred Lindsay Skerpan, “A Place for God: Religion, State Universities, and American Society, 1865–1920” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, 1998), 128–33. The first Indiana constitution called for the establishment of a state university “wherein tuition shall be gratis, and equally open to all,” but it did not mention religion. The act that established Indiana College on January 24, 1828, however, stipulated that “No instructor could be required to profess any particular religious opinions, and no student was to be denied admission, or refused any privileges, honors or degrees on account of religious opinions, and no sectarian principles were to be taught or inculcated.” In 1838, the act that established Indiana University repeated and extended the nonsectarian clause: “nor shall any president, professor, tutor, instructor, or other officer of the University, ever be required by the Trustees to profess any particular religious opinions, and no student shall be denied admission, or refused any of the privileges, honors or degrees of the University on account of the religious opinions he may entertain; nor shall any sectarian tenets or principles be taught, instructed or inculcated at said University, by any President, professor, tutor, or instructor thereof.” Wylie, *Indiana University*, 14, 20, 24.

⁵⁷Eldon L. Johnson, “Evolution of the State University Idea: Presidential Inaugural Addresses Before 1860,” 1989, ERIC, ED 414 831, p. 1.

⁵⁸*Ibid.*, 17–18.

on the separation of education from church control and their move “from religious preoccupation to secular emphasis.”⁵⁹ His research, confined to state universities before the Civil War, is particularly important in indicating that movement toward public and secular higher education began much earlier in the century than is typically believed.

As Johnson suggests, nonsectarianism helped prepare state universities for secularization. Those institutions, however, did not follow a clearly discernible path from a nonsectarian position to a secularized one. Instead, the move was gradual and even imperceptible at the time. Nonsectarianism and secularization share several characteristics. Both resist religious dogmatism, and both are associated, to a degree, with religious tolerance and democratic principles. Adherence to nonsectarianism, therefore, paved the way for institutions like Indiana University to move toward secularization.

In the first half of the nineteenth century Indiana University was essentially a Christian institution. The school offered morning prayers and sabbath services, and it required that students take religious courses. It is also evident that many of the people closely associated with the institution, especially in its earliest years, were members of the Presbyterian Church. Nevertheless, the history of the university during that period indicates, as its leaders maintained, that it was never a Presbyterian institution and that it was always nonsectarian in practice.

The university's claim to a nonsectarian status was critically important to its mission. Among public universities in the United States, Indiana University is one of the oldest, founded at a time when the distinctions between private and public institutions of higher education were blurred. As I.U. approached the middle of the nineteenth century, its supporters clearly needed to define its mission in contrast to that of the religious colleges in the state. The university's nonsectarian status became the point of difference most frequently cited.

The reasons for Indiana University's tenacious adherence to nonsectarian status are not clear. Perhaps I.U.'s supporters promoted nonsectarianism simply because it was the only characteristic that distinguished the institution from the other colleges in the state. Perhaps the university's nonsectarian policy helped it to attract students, although little or no evidence exists to support that interpretation. The evidence suggests that at least some of the school's leaders and backers supported nonsectarianism because of their religious and democratic principles. These principles are most evident in Wylie's insistence that religious people should accept individuals regardless of their beliefs, in the 1840 trustees' statement that education must be open to all regardless of their religious sect, and

⁵⁹*Ibid.*, 18.

in the 1840 legislative committee report's claims that the public has a right to at least one college that is free of sectarian principles.

Nonsectarian education was an important component of Indiana University's mission during the early years. Throughout that period, the university's faculty and supporters believed that it could be both nonsectarian and a religious institution. For a time, it was. Nonsectarianism, however, set the stage for the gradual secularization of the institution that would take place at Indiana University in the second half of the nineteenth century.