

FORMER CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES:

Why Are There So Many?

Though differing in various details, the stories describing how Christian colleges and universities become secular institutions usually possess a similar plot. This narrative typically consists of three chapters. The first is a saga of early struggles, heroic sacrifices, and tense relationships between churches and campuses. The second is a celebration of eventual academic, financial, and religious successes. The third is a strange and sorry picture of churches and campuses forsaking the dream of Christian higher education just when it is finally starting to come true. How could this happen?

Four Helpful Studies

Because it describes the different ways colleges and universities can be Christian, an anthology edited by Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian is a good place to begin reading about these issues. Their book, titled *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the 21st Century*,¹ consists of reports written by different specialists about how 14 campuses in North America live out their Christian commitments. These stories reveal that “there is no such thing as generic Christian higher education.”

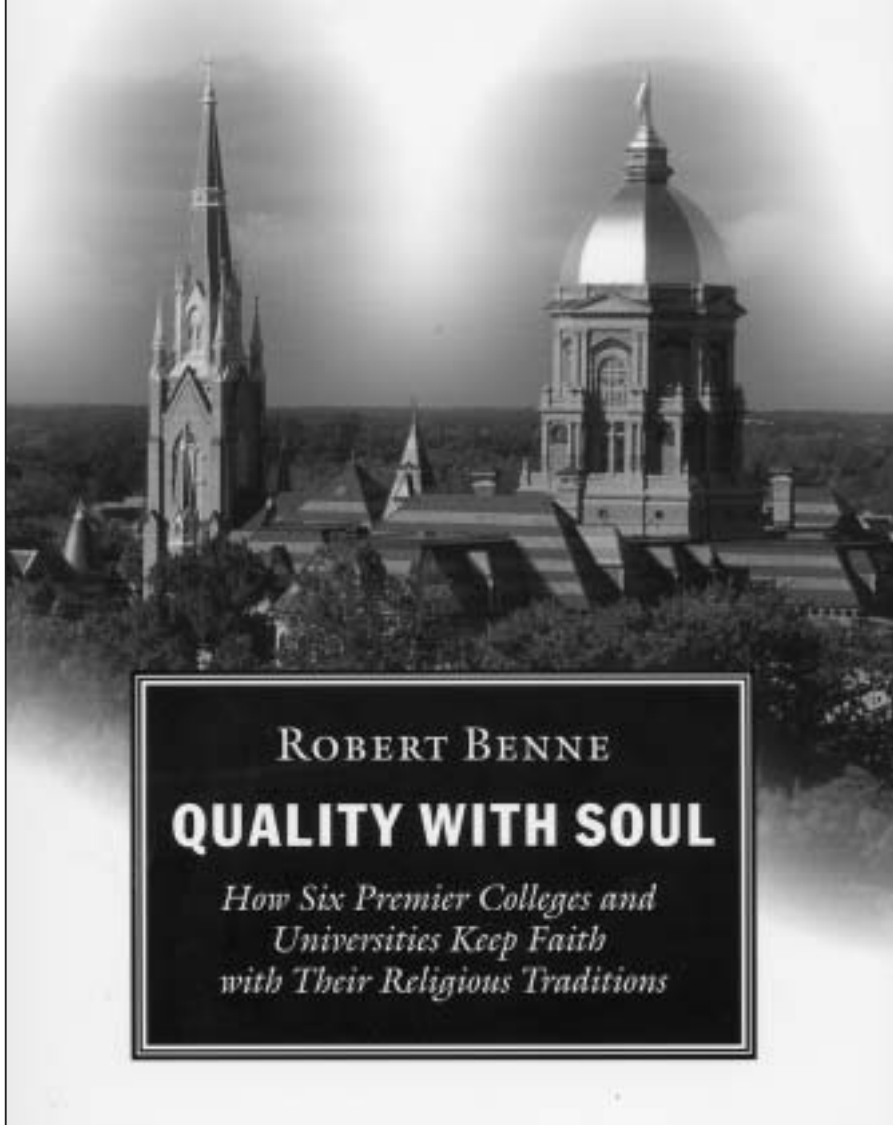
By David R. Larson

Institutions in the Reformed tradition, like Calvin and Whitworth colleges, place a premium upon approaching every topic from a Christian point of view.

While not denying the value of Christian beliefs, schools in the Mennonite tradition, like Goshen and Fresno Pacific colleges, put more emphasis upon how their students and faculty live. “The Reformed model,” according to one report, “tends to be cerebral and therefore transforms living by thinking. The Mennonite model, on the other hand, transforms thinking by living.”

Even those schools that attempt to transform living by thinking do so in various ways. Wheaton College over the years has tried four different approaches: The *convergence model* senses little or no

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ROBERT BENNE
QUALITY WITH SOUL
*How Six Premier Colleges and
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tension between Christianity and the best secular learning. The *triumphalist* model experiences irreconcilable conflict between the two and is confident that Christianity will prevail. According to the *value-added model*, the church-related college or university's role is to provide Christian insights and experiences, especially the latter, as a supplement to what can be learned elsewhere. The *integration model* seeks to transform all of the academic disciplines by having the professors do their work based on more adequate Christian convictions. According to Hughes and Adrian, the more explicit a campus can be about these and other alternatives, the better.

There may never be a more thorough and witty lament of what so often goes wrong than *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities From Their Christian Churches*.² Authored by James Tunstead Burtchaell,

formerly at the University of Notre Dame and more recently at Princeton, this huge tome mourns and mocks the divorces of 17 colleges and universities from their religious organizations.

Academic specialization is one of many factors that contributes to this unintended but frequent outcome, Burtchaell claims. In order to be effective in teaching, research, and service when knowledge is exploding, professors concentrate on smaller and still smaller areas of study. This makes it progressively more difficult to articulate in substantive ways how the concerns of some specialty or subspecialty relates to the whole of Christian life. Furthermore, over time the constituencies with whom professors stay most in touch shift from the ones on their campuses and in their churches to similar academic specialists scattered around the world. Eventually, such professors serve "in" the Christian college

or university without actually being "of" it. Once this pattern becomes widespread, neither the churches nor their campuses see much point in maintaining their unions. The neglect of connections, both conceptual and human, has contributed to yet another dissolution.

*Quality With Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith With Their Religious Traditions*³ by Robert Benne of Roanoke College is not filled with instant remedies for complex and subtle problems. It stresses instead the importance of cultivating over long periods what he repeatedly calls "robust connections" between the vision, ethos, and personnel of the campus and those of its sponsoring religious organization.

Benne underlines the importance of embedding the vision of the church and its campus in its promotional literature—but even more so in its people: administrators, newcomers, members of the religion or theology department, faculty in other areas, and those who lead centers and institutes or hold endowed professorships.

Without neglecting other methods of religious formation, Benne writes that excellent chapel services that are well attended by administrators, faculty, and students are exceedingly effective in nurturing an institution's ethos. He holds that in schools that attempt to make a Christian paradigm the organizing principle, at least one-third of those who teach, learn, and support the institution should be active members of the church, with at least another third willing to cooperate. Those who are indifferent or even part of the loyal opposition should comprise no more than one-third, he writes.

Although they reject all attempts to provide "recipes" or "blueprints," the eight professors on different Protestant and Catholic campuses who wrote *Mentoring for Mission: Nurturing New Faculty at Church-Related Colleges*⁴ offer a rationale for mentoring programs as well as helpful guidelines to ensure their success. These arrangements encourage and enable experienced members of the faculty to gently introduce

younger professors, over whom they have no administrative authority, to the vision and values of the campus. Although their benefits greatly exceed their costs, effective mentoring programs are more than an institution's prudent attempts to counteract "missional amnesia," these authors claim. They also exemplify how to integrate into campus life such Christian virtues as love, hospitality, and humility.

One way or another, these various methods take seriously the words of Scripture about "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more so as you see the Day approaching" (Hebrews 10:25, NRSV). As these ancient lines suggest, successful communities of faith foster continuity by making large investments in ongoing companionship and conversation. Much depends upon what Benne calls "robust connections."

Key Questions

The point is not merely to spend more money to maintain denominational connections, but to do so in ways that are efficient and effective. This can happen only if both church leaders and campus administrators ask and answer certain key questions with kindness and candor.

One of these is whether both the church and the campus really want to continue their union. Campus leaders sometimes suggest that things would be better if the college or university were independent. Church leaders sometimes express regret at how expensive such campuses can be, particularly when compared with what could be accomplished if similar amounts were invested in evangelistic projects.

Measuring the health of a church only by how many more members it baptizes each year is not compatible with sound Christian scholarship, however. Unless church leaders and campus leaders both value growth "in wisdom, and in stature and in favour with God and man" (Luke 2:52, KJV) as well as growth in numbers, the dream of Christian higher education cannot come

true. This dream can be fulfilled only where a theology of institutions grounds and guides the lives of Christian colleges, and universities and churches regard them as intrinsically valuable components of the denomination's comprehensive ministry.

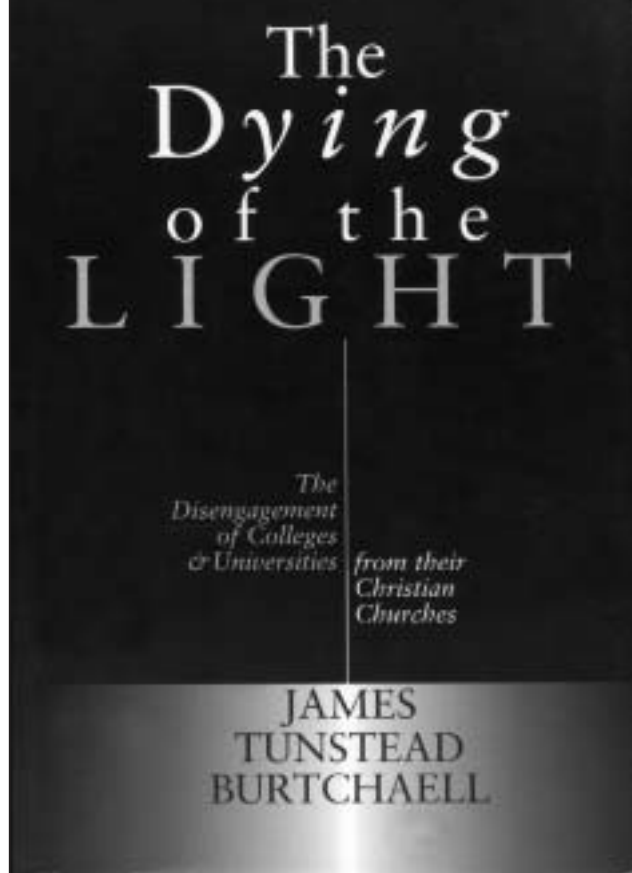
Another important question concerns what it should mean to be a Christian college or university. Although, as we have seen, there are other alternatives, the two primary ones are the value-added approach and the integrationist approach. The primary difference is that the first tries to achieve its objectives through extracurricular activities, whereas the second attempts to make Christian views and values significant in every academic and professional endeavor. A campus that moves in the second direction invests its human and material resources differently than does one that fulfills its whole mission by creating settings in which Christian students can worship, relax, socialize, and be entertained when not studying.

A third question concerns what can be done over time to develop the personnel, ethos, and vision favored by both church leaders and campus leaders. Colleges and universities that take this seriously are selective in their admissions and employment practices. They also provide rich orientation opportunities, offering and rewarding employees for participating in seminars on the history, literature, self-understanding, and purposes of the institution, which should require as much time and preparation as taking one of the university's graduate courses. Such campuses also frequently fund "Centers for Faith and Learning" that sponsor conferences, workshops, and research projects that nurture ongoing "robust connections" between academic specialties and Chris-

tian life and thought, and between professors and administrators and their colleagues on campus and in the church.

Christian institutions of higher learning toy with diminishing the role of chapel services at their own peril. So do those that schedule chapels with extremely casual formats that are more appropriate for mountain campfires and beach outings than campus houses of worship. Also, if the top administrators of the campus are too busy to participate in the chapel worship services on a regular and visible basis, others on campus often conclude that they are, too.

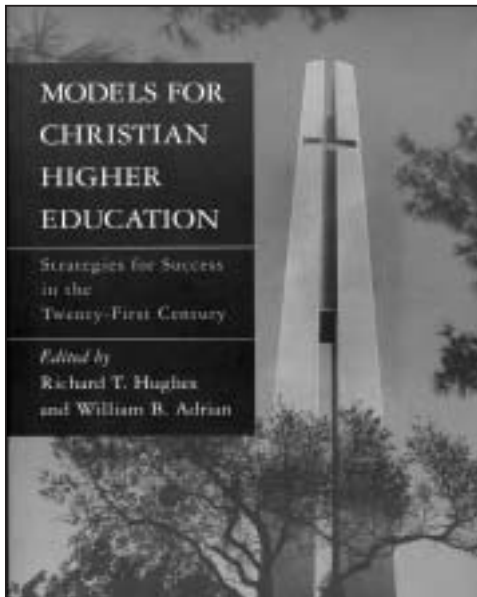
Chapel services are best viewed as a specific academic community at worship. Usually, this means that those who lead the congregation in music, prayer, and exposition of Scripture must know the campus and be known by it. Although visiting speakers make essential contributions to academic life in other settings, local administrators and teachers can be more effective in providing leadership when all those who live together on a particular campus come together to worship. Chapel is the time when a specific academic community renews itself from within by centering upon the One who is the author of



everything true, beautiful, and good. Leading these occasions should usually not be an assignment for strangers.

Impersonal Trends

The secularization of Christian colleges and universities more often occurs as the result of impersonal trends, each of which is intrinsically benign, rather than from disloyal students, teachers, and administrators. Over time, replacing personnel is likely to make little difference if church and campus leaders do not address these unintended



side effects directly and successfully. As has been noted above, one of these trends is increasing specialization and professionalism; however, at least three others also deserve attention.

1. *The trend toward larger student bodies and more complex campuses.* It is possible to convene an entire academic community for regular worship services if the institution serves fewer than 1,500 students. This is impossible if it serves 10 times that many. In such cases, the responsibility of nurturing the Christian ethos of the campus necessarily devolves to smaller units such as schools, divisions, departments, and programs. Too often, however, limited resources and competing priorities make this difficult or impossible.

2. *Increased numbers of part-time students and teachers* can also unintention-

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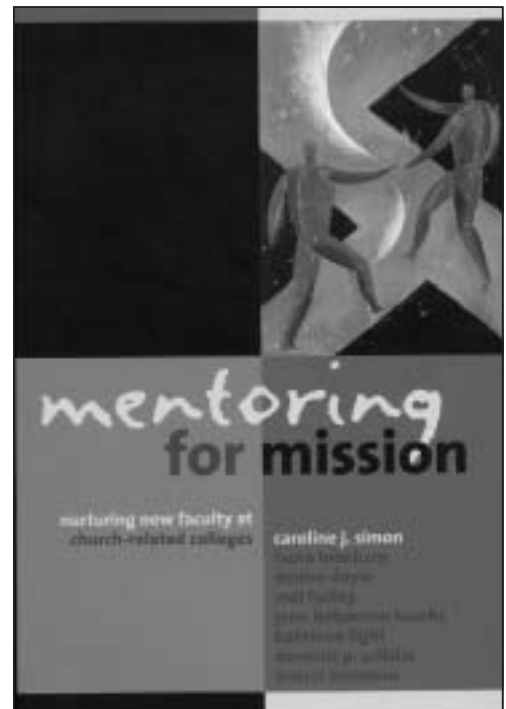
ally increase secularization. The less time a student spends on campus, the fewer opportunities he or she has to absorb its distinctive ethos. Likewise, the less time a professor spends on campus, the fewer are his or her opportunities to appreciate and convey the distinctive views and values of the institution. The financial benefits of enrolling part-time students and hiring part-time teachers can be attractive; however, the other costs can be very high unless church and campus leaders purposefully take steps to offset them.

3. *The trend toward multiple off-campus learning centers and long-distance educational opportunities that rely almost entirely on the Internet* often results in greater secularization, albeit unintentionally. Because such programs usually benefit the institution, making it possible to serve more students, the answer is not to eschew these options. The solution is to recognize the limitations of these educational experiences and find ways to overcome them.

These trends, and others that could be mentioned, have in common the unintended tendency to weaken, and sometimes even to sever, the “robust connections” that Robert Benne and others pinpoint as essential to maintaining and enhancing the Christian character of a college or university.

Conclusion

The evidence is in, and it is conclusive. Unless church and campus leaders commit themselves to ongoing collaboration in identifying and addressing the negative side effects of trends that are otherwise positive, every successful



Christian college and university eventually will become secularized. This will happen even if there are never any “heretics” on campus. About this, there can be no reasonable doubt. ☞



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