Are Christian Colleges and Universities Really Possible?

By David R. Larson

Harvard, Yale, Columbia, Princeton and a host of other colleges and universities began as Christian educational institutions and now are wholly secular, we often hear. How did these losses occur? Why are they still taking place? Are any Christian ventures in higher education succeeding?

Because it displays the different ways colleges and universities can be Christian, the anthology edited by Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian is a good place to begin when reading about these issues. Their book consists of reports written by different specialists about how fourteen campuses in North America embody their Christian commitments. One point of these stories is that "there is no such thing as generic Christian higher education."

Institutions in the Reformed tradition, like Calvin College and Whitworth College, place a premium on approaching every topic from a Christian point of view. Without denying the value of Christian beliefs, schools in the Mennonite tradition, like Goshen College and Fresno Pacific College, 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 a variety of ways. Wheaton College over the years has tried four different approaches, for instance.

The convergence model senses little or no tension between Christianity and the best secular learning. The triumphalist model experiences irreconcilable conflict between the two and is confident that the first will prevail. According to the value-added model, the role of a church-related college or university is to supplement what can be learned elsewhere with Christian insights and experiences, especially the latter. The integration model seeks to transform all of the academic disciplines by doing their work on the basis of 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.* Authored by James Tunstead Burtchaell, formerly at the University of Notre Dame and now at Princeton, this huge tome mourns and mocks

Robert Benne.
Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with their Religious Traditions.
Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001. xii + 217 pages.

James Tunstead Burtchaell.
The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches.
Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1998. xx + 868 pages.

Richard T. Hughes and William B. Adrian, eds.
Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century.
Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1997. ix + 461 pages.

the divorces of seventeen colleges and universities from their religious organizations.

Despite all their differences in detail, these stories usually possess a similar plot with three chapters. The first is a saga of early struggles, heroic sacrifices, and tense relationships between churches and campuses. The second celebrates an eventual measure of academic, financial, and religious success. The third is the strange and sorry picture of both churches and campuses forsaking the dream of Christian higher education just when it is finally starting to come true!

Academic specialization is one of many factors that contributes to this unanticipated 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 difficult to articulate in substantive ways how the concerns of some specialty or subspecialty relate to the whole of Christian life and thought.

Furthermore, over time the constituencies with whom professors stay most in touch shift from those on their campuses and in their churches to similar specialists scattered around the world. Eventually everyone recognizes that 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.

The study by Robert Benne of Roanoke College is not filled with instant remedies for such 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, he writes that excellent chapel services that are well attended by administrators, faculty, and students are still 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 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.

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 (Heb. 10:25 NRSV). As these ancient lines suggest, successful communities of faith foster continuity by making large investments in ongoing companionship and conversation. Funding these "robust connections" is costly. Not financing them is more so.

David Larson is professor of religion at Loma Linda University. He also serves as president of the Association of Adventist Forums.
DavidRLarson46@aol.com