Conceiving the Christian College

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Understanding the connectedness of the world is also sympathetic with Christian thought. Romans 8:28 states that “And we know that God causes all thing to work together for good to those who love God, and are called according His purpose.” The fact that all things work together addresses the type of connectedness that Love and Estanek speak of in their book. The very essence of the concept of the body found in I Corinthians 12 suggests an interdependence among people that is often not found in our highly competitive, self-oriented world. Love and Estanek’s encouragement to understand that the universe is not understood by dividing and controlling singular elements but rather but a systemic, holistic view of life is clearly within a Christian worldview. But again, the concept is not complete without a serious consideration of the unforeseen forces that create and maintain this cohesive connected universe. Christians would assert that the essence of God is central to recognizing and embracing connectedness.

And finally, embracing paradox is at the heart of the New Testament. We are called to love our enemies. We are created in the image of God yet have the capacity for sin. Influential leaders in the New Testament were also influential persecutors of the faith. However, for the Christian to embrace paradox does not imply that we non-critically move to the center between the two divergent points of view. This may simply create an amoral relativism that does not create positive change. Yet, at the same time paradox should not force us into an entrenched dualistic perspective on life that limits God. The challenge of embracing the paradox is to understand our great and abiding need for God. This book is a valuable tool for challenging our existing paradigms and moving us toward the renewing of our minds.

Conceiving the Christian College

Duane Litfin

A Review Essay by David M. Johnstone

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There are multiple times in one’s life when a person must evaluate his or her priorities. I believe these occurrences are more frequent for those working with students in higher education. The traditional undergraduate age is one where students often, for the first time, encounter the serious personal implications of faith, calling, relationships and self discipline. Those in student development who are committed to walk beside students will invariably ask these questions of themselves. However, more significant self scrutinizing questions do arise as well. Trauma, crisis and death place the personal debate over core values and foundational assumptions directly in one’s face. Beyond the personal wrestling and defining values, an institution and its community members must also take time with these types of questions.

Litfin’s means of engaging with the reader is to present each chapter in the form of a challenge. These are challenges he is personally dealing with and ones he asserts will be worthy of note for all those involved in Christian higher education. In Conceiving the Christian College, the president of Wheaton College presents multiple assumptions shared by evangelical and other faith based institutions. He observes that some of the ideas he is bringing to attention are ones that “are so overworked as to be, paradoxically, under-appreciated, under-developed, or even misunderstood” (p. 1). In spite of this failure to appreciate them at a deep level, he asserts that each is “crucial, to the task of Christian higher education” (p. 2). These notions must be dealt with “skill and sophistication” (p. 2) as they are foundational to the Christian educational institute. While Litfin realizes that he is not presenting novel ideas for discussion and that at a certain level these particular ones are overworked, he believes that it is critical for those in Christian higher education to revisit them (p. 2).

Litfin’s ways of engaging with the reader is to present each chapter in the form of a challenge. These are challenges he is personally dealing with and ones he asserts will be worthy of note for all those involved in Christian higher education. At the beginning of his work, he presents a foundational challenge which he articulates as “To understand more clearly our own identity” (p. 11). He distinguishes between systemic and umbrella institutions, both as faith based, and both worthy of respect, but both being very different. An umbrella institution is defined as one that seeks “to provide a Christian “umbrella” or canopy under which a variety of voices can thrive” (p. 14). While a significant part of the umbrella institution represents the sponsoring Christian tradition, it is also home for a myriad of other perspectives and voices. Litfin further acknowledges that in such a place “some voices may be unhesitatingly secular, others open but searching, while still others may represent competing religious perspectives” (p. 14). It is a community which affirms Christianity, but does not expect all community members to think christianly. While having high regard for these umbrella institutions, he also defines an alternative to this model, in what he calls the systemic institution.
The systemic school is one defined as seeking “to engage any and all ideas from every perspective, but they attempt to do so from a particular intellectual location, that of the sponsoring Christian tradition” (p. 18). Litfin’s definition identifies that these institutions are pervasively and systematically permeated with Christian thought. Genuine “Christian thinking will permeate the school’s academic and student life programs” (p. 19). This discussion provides the foundation for the rest of the book. Litfin’s primary concern for the rest of the volume is the challenges and discussions he brings up as they pertain to systemic institutions.

In chapters entitled “To see more fully who we serve” and “To keep the center at the center,” Litfin tackles the slogan [and almost cliché] “Christ centered education” (p. 64). He clearly defines a Christ centered education as being vastly important. He is concerned that the slogan is so familiar that it seldom carries the depth that it once possessed. Litfin observes that it too easily “rolls off our tongues” (p. 36). However, familiarity should not lead to contempt, therefore this idea must be part of the systemic institution’s fabric.

He also raises some concern with phrases which have become tired clichés, such as “all truth is God’s truth” (p. 99) or “integration of faith and learning” (p. 127). These and others are profound statements that need to be restored at all levels of the college and university. These phrases and distinctive need to be scrutinized, reflected on, and agreed upon by all faculty and administrators. They should be more than platitudes presented to donors and parents in order to recruit more students and increase endowments.

While Litfin is president of Wheaton College, he does not use this book as a means of gratuitously advancing the college’s impact on Christian higher education. He uses Wheaton as part of his illustrations, but does not hesitate to use other schools as well to convey his points. The volume is a cohesive unit, yet each chapter could easily stand alone. The target audience seems to be all of those in the academy; however the discussions lean slightly towards the faculty community. While his thoughts are laced with implications and practicality, they also move into the philosophical realm. This more intricate discussion is helpful for those seeking to understand the issues at greater depth; however the many facets of the issues are a challenge for those not prepared to invest time and mental energy. In short, this is a volume that is accessible to all who work in higher education, but it does not limit itself to a shallow discussion of the issues it raises. It provokes both the veteran educator and the novice at the same time.

Personally I appreciated the glimpses I caught of Dr. Litfin himself. His book presented serious issues facing Christian Higher Education. Yet, they were presented in a manner which displayed that he too is still learning even after many years in the academy. I warmed to the fact that he was comfortable that this book was not the end of the discussion.

I believe that this is an important volume to help Christian Higher Education define its identity and purposes. Following in the steps of Arthur Holmes’ reflections in The Idea of the Christian College, Conceiving the Christian College is gracious in its presentation, but provoking and challenging in its purpose. As Dr. Litfin has written, his “... purpose is not so much to explore the slope as to render it less slippery” (p. 4). This particular comment encapsulates how this volume is shaped. *Soli Deo Gloria.*

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**College of the Overwhelmed:**

**The Campus Mental Health Crisis and What To Do About It**

**Richard Kadison, M.D. and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo**


Michael Lastoria, Ed.D. NCC, is Director of Counseling Services at Houghton College.

Timely, thoughtful, and well-organized … are adjectives that came to mind after having read *College of the Overwhelmed.* Kadison and DiGeronimo argue there is a mental health crisis affecting college students; specifically the authors cite the “extraordinary increase in serious mental illness on college campuses today.”

The book is timely given that 81% of college and university counseling center directors report seeing more students with serious psychological problems than were seen five years ago, and 63% report a growing demand for services without an appropriate increase in resources (National Survey of Counseling Center Directors, 2003). Furthermore suicide is the second leading cause of death (after accidents) among college students, and accounts for more deaths than all other student medical illnesses combined. Finally, the recent suicides at NYU and the Shin family’s landmark $27 million lawsuit against MIT alleging negligence in the care of their daughter, Elizabeth, have brought the mental health problems of college students to public attention.

In light of this crisis the authors ask, how much responsibility do schools have for the emotional health of their students. Realizing that our campuses are not residential treatment centers for students with unstable mental health, the authors argue that proponents opposing funding for strengthening mental health services on our campuses “do not fully understand the ramifications of not helping these students. The mental health crisis on campus affects far more than just the mental health counselors; it affects the individual students, the student body in general, and the entire institution.” (p.156)

Kadison and DiGeronimo’s work is thoughtful. In large measure they have done their homework. They rely heavily upon survey data, scholarly journals, and popular media when appropriate, these sources being cited frequently when making their arguments. The lead author, Kadison, serves as the Chief of Mental Health Service at Harvard University and brings a wealth of experience to this work. He speaks with a compelling, yet gentle, authority at a time when leadership is badly needed to address the growing concern of providing adequate mental health services to the students at our institutions.

Addressed primarily to parents of prospects and current college students, the book is also a useful resource for student life professionals. It is divided into two parts. The first part (chapters 1-4) address the problem: *Why are some kids so unhappy at college?* Part one is an easy to read primer, especially for parents and new professional staff.

The first chapter, *Normal Developmental Issues,* discusses identity, relationships and sexuality, and the interpersonal world of the college student. These issues, while common, mark a period of transition for students, many leaving home for the first time … and change equates to stress at any age. Chapter 2, *Pressure and Competition,* cites additional