Book Review

William C. Ringenberg. *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House Company, 2006. 316 pp. Paperback $28.00.

In the second edition of *The Christian College*, William Ringenberg takes his original text from 1984 and adds a new Introduction by Christian scholar Mark Noll and a last chapter that brings the state of Christian higher education into the twenty-first century. As the author explains in the new preface, he does not significantly modify the original text. Therefore, the author brings the contributions of the original, of which there are several, to new readers.

Not surprisingly, Ringenberg starts with the founding of Harvard College and the Colonial era when the ubiquity of Christianity's influence is hardly questioned. Although this story of Colonial history has been told before, the author brings religion's influence into sharper focus. An interesting example is his attributing the founding of six of the nine Colonial colleges in the eighteenth century to the ideological and religious impetus of the “First Great Awakening” of the 1730s and 1740s rather than the forces of denominational squabbling.

As Ringenberg moves through history, the text continually reminds the reader of the tremendous influence—both historically and even today—of Christianity and its educational and moral principles. This stands in contrast to other historical accounts that may de-emphasize such forces, especially as the nineteenth century came to a close. The author gives credit not only to Christianity as a worldview but to specific denominational influences as well as the contributions of individual presidents, trustees, professors, and students who were compelled by their religious beliefs to create or reform higher education, and, through it, society at large. He argues compellingly that even the state colleges and universities founded after the Civil War owe their early ideas and initial success to the same influences that helped found the spate of colleges during the “Second Great Awakening” of the 1830s and 1840s. Because Christianity, in general, and American Protestantism, in particular, were such strong antebellum influences, he argues, “it was natural that the denominations would seek to exert the maximum possible influence in the new state universities. In many cases, the denominations exercised greater administrative authority over the universities than did the state governments” (p. 81).

Another very important contribution of the book is Ringenberg’s discussion of Christian college development through the twentieth
century, especially in the early and last decades. For example, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed the origins of the Bible college movement. Ringenberg gives these institutions, largely ignored or dismissed as irrelevant or unworthy in many texts, their due. He candidly admits that many started behind their mainstream counterparts in intellectual rigor, but he goes beyond that and illustrates how some evolved academically and even discusses the contributions of those that remained more insular.

Without question, this edition's major contribution is the last chapter detailing what has happened to Christian education since the original publication in 1984. Beyond discussing the increase in the number, variety, and quality of Christian colleges, Ringenberg looks at the influence of religion on the rest of the academy. He cites examples of the increased interest in things spiritual for students throughout higher education and the contribution of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) in providing "structure, influence, and recognition" since the organization was founded in 1975 for these institutions (p. 210). Finally, in the epilogue, the author provides a wonderful definition of the essential nature of Christian colleges and what sets them apart. They are a community:

of those who share the central conviction that the key to understanding the human condition is the incarnational idea that God has come to us in Christ. ... The Christian college experience then is an especially focused period of truth-seeking, ... when the company of the committed develop a life-long practice of continual seeking and of being transformed by the truth that they find (p. 243).

One failing of this book, however, is that the author leaves the original edition largely unchanged, disregarding the historical scholarship of the last two decades. Thus, aspects of the book seem outdated and inconsistent with the current extant literature. At a minimum, the author should have changed the language of his numerous references to "recent" events, some of which were based on ten- to twenty-year-old sources in 1984 but are completely out of date for the 2006 edition. Other examples are more troubling. The author relies on scholarship that has been surpassed with new interpretations or deemed faulty in either its methodology or conclusions such as Allmendinger's Paupers and Scholars, Brubacher and Rudy's Higher Education in Transition, Tewksbury's The Founding of the American Colleges and Universities, and even Hofstadter and Hardy's The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States.

During a discussion of the early nineteenth century, for example, Ringenberg states, "historians expressed mostly critical comments about the antebellum colleges" (p. 83). Yet there is a small but
growing body of recent work that, had the author consulted it, might have altered his depiction of the academy movement including Beadie and Tolley's edited book, *Chartered Schools: Two Hundred Years of Independent Academies in the United States*, and Nash's *Women's Education in the United States*. It is also disappointing that Ringenberg does not incorporate the extensive and expanding body of scholarship on the education of women and African Americans for his sections on these two groups and the colleges that served them. Undoubtedly, there are places where Ringenberg could change the tone, emphasis, or perhaps even the conclusions of the original based on the intervening scholarship of the last twenty plus years.

A second concern I have with the book is his depiction of all institutions that were not explicitly Christian as "secular." In the language of quantitative researchers, Ringenberg depicts religiosity as a dichotomous, rather than a continuous, variable. Unquestionably, the Christian character of mainstream institutions in the latter nineteenth and throughout the twentieth century was different from the Colonial and even antebellum colleges. However, to refer to all such institutions as secular seems to do a disservice to the countless number of students, professors, and presidents who identified as Christian although they were educated in or worked for institutions Ringenberg disdainfully describes as secular. The author is dismissive of different expressions of Christianity such as student interest in the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) movement or followers of Liberal Protestantism and considers such trends evidence of secularization. His harsh tone toward such developments is in startling contrast to his tenor at the end of the book. In his last chapter, when discussing the current state of Christian higher education, he sees the data that more undergraduates are interested in "spirituality" as evidence that religion is playing a greater role in the academy.

Ringenberg's discussion of the forces "toward secularization" is interesting and informative. One key litmus test for him is whether preponderance of faculty at such institutions "began to look to the Bible more as a source of religious history and general wisdom and inspiration than as the unique source of divinely revealed truth" (p. 115). But despite his level of specificity, I cannot accept his assertion that institutions not Christian by his definition were truly secular. In a 2004 dissertation (University of Michigan), Jeffrey Bouman argued that the supposedly "secular" institutions had considerable Christian influences during the so-called secularization era from perhaps the 1870s until well into the twentieth century. Such influences were found in both the curricular and extracurricular aspects of the university as well as the personal beliefs of many members of the campus community. He posited that perhaps "nonsectarian" was a better way to describe a middle ground between
the Christian colleges as identified by Ringenberg and more fully secular institutions of the early twenty-first century. The author might be well served to nuance his interpretation in a similar fashion.

Without doubt, any scholar of higher education who questions or is unaware of Christianity’s influence on the founding and development of colleges and universities or who is interested in the development of Christian colleges in the modern era would benefit from this book, especially the last chapter, which could possibly stand alone as a monograph. In some ways, it helps explain how current limitations on such Christian-influenced issues as stem-cell research or domestic partner benefits for same-sex couples, for example, become policies at so-called secular institutions. However, the author misses an opportunity to update and nuance the original text rendering the result more of an addition than truly a second edition.

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