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Book Review: Conceiving the Christian College

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BOOK REVIEW

CONCEIVING THE CHRISTIAN COLLEGE BY DUANE LITFIN

Reviewed by Jeff Guernsey
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In *Conceiving the Christian College* (2004, Eerdmans), Duane Litfin, President of Wheaton College, has written a clarion call, particularly relevant to those who desire to think more deeply about the foundational principles of a Christ-centered college. The author reconsiders ‘old’ thoughts -asking us to look anew at them, and deeply examines many issues impacting Christ-centered education. Personally, I found my thoughts challenged and energized because of reading this book (and having discussed it with a group of colleagues). Not coincidentally, our department was at the same time working to craft a vision statement, during which I found myself thinking frequently about Litfin’s ideas.

One of the early topics that Pres. Litfin addresses is the concept of Systemic and Umbrellas academic institutions. Systemic institutions have a singular focus, which drives the entire organization. As Litfin states, they “...seek to make Christian thinking systemic throughout the institution, root, branch, and leaf.” (p.18). Umbrella organizations seek to provide a “canopy under which a variety of voices can thrive. (p. 14)”; they do in fact have an over arching goal, but there is much diversity of views, theology etc. “Umbrella institutions create an environment congenial to Christian thinking, but without expecting it of everyone.” (p. 17)

From my observation, Umbrella and Systemic types of academic organizations have not considered themselves as allies, (and have at times even attacked each other). Litfin states:

Such criticisms stem from a failure to appreciate each model for what it is, and

to appreciate the different institution for what they are. It seems perfectly appropriate to prefer one model to the other, but neither should simply dismiss, much less work against, the other. ” (p.31).

Litfin calls for a more positive perspective, and suggests that they can be “complementary” and “work to support one another” (p. 31).

Litfin examines anew several well-known phrases including: “Christ-centered education” (he has a wonderful exegesis in Chapter 3 of Colossians 1 and the pre-eminence of Christ), “all truth is God’s truth”, and “the integration of faith and learning”. Much of what he says about truth is very timely for the ‘truth and certainty’ discussions that are currently occurring - on our campus (and perhaps others as well). As he points out, all truth ultimately resides in God. “Thus no Christian need fear truth from any source.” (p. 94). In the integration portion of the book, Litfin has a helpful section about the various ways several faith traditions have historically thought about integration.

In a fascinating and intriguing section, Litfin addresses motives for those in Christian academia, in light of desiring to move toward being Christ-centered. He discusses that our ‘first motives’ ought to be intrinsic, rather than ‘instrumental.’

*...we must learn to love God with our minds, to use our artistic gifts for Christ, to embody him in serving our neighbor and our society. **But our primary motive for doing so must not be the transformation of culture.** Our prime motive must*

be obedience to Jesus Christ. Then, if the living Christ graciously chooses to use our efforts to mold our culture into more of what he wants it to be, we will be grateful. On the other hand, if he does not so choose – and let us be clear about it, he does not always so choose - and the culture remains resistant, even hostile, to our Christian influence, we must not be cast down. Our motivation is not dependent on the acceptance and approval of our culture; in the end we care preeminently about the approval of Jesus Christ. Our goal is to love God with our minds whether the culture comes to appreciate our efforts or not. (emphasis added) (p.57).

Along the way, Litfin makes insightful comments about Christian scholarship. Besides the central motivation of doing it unto Christ, he suggests five other ideas: i) Christian scholarship requires work and determination, ii) it necessitates a certain level of “biblical and theological insight”, iii) this approach requires honesty -

The Christian scholar is under obligation to seek the truth, and only the truth, confident that when it is adequately and accurately understood it will point to Christ. (p. 73),

iv) given the loftiness of the goal, it requires humility, and v) the work requires patience and cooperation. He also remarks that Christian scholarship “is typically a communal affair; we are dependent on each other” (p. 74). We in the business academia should consider implications of Litfin’s ideas as we engage in meaningful scholarship in our fields.

In the chapter entitled “Doing Integration”, Litfin calls out against the dichotomist model, which in its essence states that reason and faith (or science and religion) do not conflict because they don’t overlap. He warns that this model has ‘ghettoized’ Christianity, “reducing Christianity to little more than an ethical system” (p. 152) Instead, Litfin challenges us that

...Christian integrative thinking views all of that created order as Christ’s handi-

work and thus insists that the reach of such thinking be pervasive and systemic (p. 156),

and

...because the Christian thinker works from a Christ centric reference point, and nothing can be irrelevant to the person of Christ, by the same token Jesus Christ cannot be irrelevant to anything we study. (p. 158)

How integration happens, Litfin goes on, will vary by discipline. For example, the significance of world views seems to be less important in the practice of the ‘hard’ sciences, than the humanities, fine arts or social sciences. However, we should acknowledge that each discipline has an underlying philosophy. As one of my colleagues suggested, it is at this point of underlying philosophy that integration for that discipline begins. For those of us who teach in the discipline of business, we would do well to evaluate our discipline’s philosophical foundations.

In his remarks on faith and learning, Litfin argues forcefully that our starting point as Christians is special revelation (most notably His Word). In his words,

there can be no such thing as Christianity without revelation. A faith-based Christian worldview requires it. Without faith it is impossible to please God, and there is no faith, at least on the Bible’s terms, without revelation. (p. 195)

In his final chapter, Litfin offers an apologetic of sorts for Systemic institutions. He first acknowledges the pluralistic nature of the academy. He then speaks to several world views that are not pluralistic, be it dogmatic religion, dogmatic rationalism, or dogmatic relativism. He warns that each is dangerous. Litfin says,

History will show that the upper hand is a dangerous thing for any ideas to hold... tyranny is tyranny, whoever’s dogma is stifling dissent. (p. 266)

First he looks at both the negative and positive aspects of dogmatic religion.

Negatively:

Overestimating what they think they know from revelation and losing sight of the imperative of free decision-making on the part of all, claimants who stake their positions on what they take to be revealed truth may be unduly inclined to force their views on others. We acknowledge these potential dangers. (p. 262- 3).

Positively:

“t is precisely that which Christians consider divine revelation that insists upon the dignity of the other and the integrity of the other’s choice-making (p. 263)

Dogmatic rationalism is the dogma of ‘autonomous human reason’; the notion which insists

unaided human reason is the only legitimate avenue to knowledge, and therefore that only those ideas discoverable through reason will be allowed into the academic marketplace. (p.261).

Others might call that naturalism.

As he uses the term dogmatic relativism, Litfin means, in some sense, what others term postmodernism. Rather than human knowledge resting on a foundation of reliable truths (foundationalism), to the postmodernist there are

no absolute principles, laws, values, or truths (which) are normative or binding for all times, places and people (p. 268).

As a result, postmodernism is dogmatic, in that it

...opposes all viewpoints that make claims to transcendence and condemns any worldview that attempts to portray a unified picture of reality (p. 268).

Ironically, this anti-foundationalist perspective is absolutist in its opposition to foundationalist principles. As Litfin states,

under a relativist regime, no one can be permitted to think that he or she is right, since such a stance implies premises that undermine the regime itself (p. 272)

Throughout the book, Litfin is clear that he

is not making statements of behalf of Wheaton College, but expressing his learned perspective. It seems rather unique for a ‘sitting’ college President to speak so forcibly to these issues. Much of which he talks about in the book obviously comes from his experience during the 13+ years in his current position.

The author amply uses the writings and voices of others; the book is therefore a good resource from which to explore other’s thoughts. Unfortunately, Litfin does not provide a bibliography, although he clearly footnotes throughout each chapter.

Litfin’s ideas are rich for further extension of thought and discussion. He asks the reader to revisit - in a fresh way - many thoughts and ideas perhaps taken for granted within Christian academia. I would certainly recommend *Conceiving the Christian College* for your personal reading and consideration; or better yet, read and discuss it with a group of colleagues. I think you’ll be glad you did.