
A light-hearted response, by a Calvin alumnus such as this reviewer, to the significant question posed by two Hope College professors would be, “Not on the basketball court, you don’t!” The midwinter passions of Michigan intercollegiate basketball, however, must take a decided second place to the substantive issues of Reformed Christian higher education that are ably presented in this volume.
Thoughtful Christians have a vested interest in the well-being of all institutions of Christian learning, and Hope College’s history is a very instructive case study in the complex problem of establishing and maintaining a clear identity with a commitment to both educational excellence and Christian conviction.

Identity is what it is all about. Specifically, bearing in mind the common pattern of schools founded by churches gradually weakening their link with their own particular Christian roots to eventually becoming established secular institutions, can a school with a Reformed Christian identity endure? That is the question, wonderfully captured in the book’s provocative and suggestive title. As a work written in faith by two Christian academics from different and complementary disciplines (Kennedy, the historian, was responsible for the archival work and the key interviews; Simon, the philosopher, read deeply in the growing body of literature on Christian higher education and framed the questions that shaped the archival work), this “binocular vision” of Hope College is, by the authors’ own testimony (xi), keenly attentive to the rhythm of guilt, grace, and gratitude in all human history. Interestingly, this fact is itself a partial reply to the question, a point I will come to again in the conclusion of this review.

This book grew out of a study grant provided by the Rhodes Regional Consultation of Church-Related Higher Education. It thus builds on much previous recent work, including George Marsden’s The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief (Oxford, 1994), James T. Burtchaell, The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches (Eerdmans, 1998), Richard T. Hughes and William B. Aduan, Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century (Eerdmans, 1997), and Robert Benne, Quality with Soul: How Six Premier College and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions (Eerdmans, 2001). The titles tell the story, a story portrayed by the first two volumes as a tale of decline and departure from the faith and by the second two as a possible way of keeping the faith.

Although they are clearly indebted to each of these and other studies, Kennedy and Simon do side more with the second point of view. They make extensive use of Benne’s typology of church-related colleges and use it effectively to describe tensions and conflicts in Hope’s institutional history. Benne divides church-related schools into four types: Orthodox—deliberately and pervasively Christian; Critical-Mass—Christian presence privileged through majority (or significant minority) status of faculty and students; Intentionally Pluralist—Christian heritage acknowledged as one voice among many; Accidentally Pluralist—no acknowledgement of the institution’s Christian heritage. Kennedy and Simon prefer to use the descriptor comprehensive rather than orthodox for institutions that seek to maintain a definite Christian identity and then distinguish between comprehensively denominational schools (tied to one tradition), comprehensively evangelical schools (e.g., Wheaton), and comprehensively ecumenical schools.
The thesis of Kennedy’s and Simon’s work is that Hope represents a middle way that they describe as follows: “Neither sectarian nor indifferent to its Reformed Christian identity; not creedal in its requirements of prospective faculty, yet caring about whether they had a Christian faith; nurturing students’ faith but mandating neither Christian affirmation for admission nor Christian practices after matriculation; neither wholly mainline nor wholly evangelical” (3).

It is especially the conscious effort to steer between the first and last of these polarities that characterizes Hope’s middle way. Here, Hope’s situation as a school in the milieu of the Reformed Church of America is the crucial factor. As Calvin College and Seminary was for the CRC, Hope’s founding was tied to the preparation and training of missionary pastors for the Western churches of the RCA. However, the established Eastern wing of the RCA wanted a liberal arts school that trained students to become active participants in American life, with gospel ministry as only one of many possible vocations. Heavily dependent on Eastern money, the school was pulled in two directions; on one side the more conservative, pietist (and poorer!) Western RCA; on the other side the established, theologically more progressive Eastern branch of the RCA. With Christian Reformed neighbors close at hand in Western Michigan, the Western RCA and Hope increasingly sought to distance itself from sectarianism and its link to Dutch ethnicity. As Kennedy and Simon note: “From the very beginning, Hope College was clearly envisaged by founders like Van Raalte and Phelps as an agent of Americanization” (59).

This passion to avoid sectarianism led to a clear demarcation between the RCA school, Hope, and its close CRC neighbor, Calvin College. The latter, founded for the same purposes as Hope, nevertheless became over time the capstone of a complete system of Christian education with a consistent comprehensive Reformed worldview. Instead of focusing on distinctly Christian intellectual activity, Hope’s practically minded, rather antitheoretical Christian vision put its emphasis on Christian faculty, not on Christian curriculum” (78). This formation of Christian character was to serve the church and elevate humanity. Civic virtue and activity were high on the list of goals for graduates. What is missing here, in spite of the brief note about an honorary doctorate bestowed on him by Hope in 1908 (61), is the key role of Abraham Kuyper in transforming the CRC’s educational vision. A key difference between Calvin and Hope is that the former and its supporting constituency warmly embraced and applied Kuyper’s vision; the latter practically ignored it.

Kennedy and Simon track this middle way through the twentieth-century, and key administrations at Hope College. Attempts by various college presidents to solidify or change the college’s mission are highlighted, notably that of President Gordon Van Wylen (1972-1986). The opposition of faculty, the turmoil among certain constituency, debates about hiring policy, and the storm surrounding Dean of the Chapel, Ben Patterson, in the 1990s, are chronicled in a gracious but clear-eyed manner. What becomes apparent from this illuminating overview of tensions is that in addition to attempting to provide a middle way
between sectarian-pietist narrowness and ecumenical broadness, Hope’s history is also a history of middle way accommodation between the administration-constituency on one side and the faculty on the other. Various administrations repeatedly tried to enhance the Christian character of the college; the faculty, in resistance, pulled toward nonsectarian academic excellence.

Where does Kennedy’s and Simon’s story end? In some ambiguity—which is as it should be. Yes, Hope is pulled in the secularization trajectory described by Marsden and others. At the same time, Hope continues “to be more demonstrably faithful to the Christian faith and the church than the many church-related schools where a Christian presence on campus is but vaguely discernable” (209). Hope’s history and location have played an important role in this. Now it faces the challenge of being genuinely ecumenical as well as seriously committed to excellence as a Christian scholarly community and to Christian service in the world. The authors are cautiously hopeful.

Can Hope endure? This volume is itself a testimony to that hope. Perhaps there is even an irony here. Kennedy and Simon have produced a high-quality book representing the very best of decidedly Christian scholarship. A neutral or secular historiography would have produced something far different and less helpful.

Informed as it is by guilt, grace, and gratitude, it is thus more truthful than any secular, neutral account could be. Integrity finally is about truth. A Christian academic institution is about the pursuit of truth, and a self-conscious middle way here is less helpful than a principled one. Christian scholarship “on the way,” the Christian scholar as pilgrim, seems to this reviewer a constructive and more hopeful path, also for Hope.

—John Bolt