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Joy Schroeder

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BOOK REVIEW

Robert Benne, *Quality With Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith With Their Religious Traditions*. Eerdmans Publishing, Grand Rapids, MI; 2001

Joy Schroeder

Individuals concerned with strengthening or recovering their college or university's denominational connections and heritage will welcome Robert Benne's recent book, *Quality With Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 2001). Benne, who serves as professor of religion and director for the Center for Religion and Society at Roanoke College, not only offers a general indictment of church-related schools for whom religious heritage has become merely "a flavor in the mix, a social ornament, or a fragile grace note" (p. 35), but he also provides strategies for reconnecting institutions with their sponsoring church bodies.

The first section of the book consists of Benne's assessment of the current situation at church-related colleges and universities. Drawing in large part from other recent analyses, especially James T. Burtchaell's *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), Benne describes schools' have lost their religious moorings and have become detached from their denomination's intellectual traditions. He cites the decreasing numbers of students, faculty, administrators, and board members who belong to the school's sponsoring religious tradition. Benne also notes that in the past "members of the academic community were part of an ongoing narrative that was sharply etched in communal memory," but now colleges no longer endeavor to "imprint their story" on faculty and students through celebration of the institution's founders or retellings of the institutional history (p. 12). He laments the diminished role of chapel services. Once a public event that "defined the rhythm of life for the institution" and attended by most or all of the community, the chapel service is now only one among many voluntary activities (p. 11).

Benne identifies a number of factors for the erosion of institutions' religious identity. Reaction to "market forces" and the competition for students brought about the tendency to dilute religious language in mission statements and other public discourse—out of fear (a *mistaken* fear, Benne believes) that fewer students will enroll if the school articulates a specific theological and religious vision. (Benne is highly critical of schools whose mission

statements limit themselves to "first article"--Creator and creation--language, ignoring the second and third persons of the Trinity--Christ and the Holy Spirit.) For most faculty members, allegiance to the various professional guilds shaped by an Enlightenment paradigm takes priority over maintaining the school's religious heritage or articulating a Christian intellectual position. Benne says that the roots of the problem can be found several generations in the past, as many schools in the middle decades of the twentieth century relied upon a "critical mass" of members of the denomination to carry the tradition. Instead, institutional leaders should have worked to shape and give voice to a theological vision arising from their respective traditions. In many cases, the fostering denominations share the blame because "the sponsoring traditions have to produce enough persons who intensely believe that the Christian account is pervasively relevant to the life of a college or university" (p. 179).

Benne names six institutions from differing religious traditions which he considers to be "bright lights" in an ever darkening landscape: Calvin College (Christian Reformed), Wheaton University (evangelical), Baylor University (Southern Baptist), the University of Notre Dame (Roman Catholic), Valparaiso University (Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod), and St. Olaf College (Evangelical Lutheran Church in America). These schools embody academic excellence (demonstrated by a high quality faculty and bright, engaged students) while maintaining faithfulness to the religious traditions that fostered the institutions.

Each of these institutions has a "critical mass" of community members who are adherents of the sponsoring religious body. Several of these schools (Calvin, Wheaton and Baylor) have maintained church connections through imposing certain confessional and/or behavioral requirements on their faculty and students. But these factors alone are not the reason for the institutions' successes. Benne argues that each of these schools has benefited from visionary leaders who have had "enough confidence in the Christian account of life and reality to insist that it be the organizing paradigm for the identity and mission of the college" (p. 97). Mission statements, sometimes explicitly Trinitarian, reflect and embody the

schools' theological heritage. Required courses in religion, theology, and philosophy send strong signals about the schools' commitments. Worship occupies a central place in the life of each school. In these schools "the Christian account of life and reality [is] made visible and relevant in all facets of each school's activities—academic, extra-curricular, music and the arts, worship, atmosphere, and self-definition" (p. 95).

The book's most compelling claim is that the *specific intellectual content* of an institution's own denominational tradition should permeate public discourse and serve as a strong voice in the classroom and chapel. Benne insists that piety alone, or a "generic Christianity," is not sufficient for conveying an institution's religious identity. Within most denominational traditions there are intellectual and theological resources which should shape and invigorate the entire academic endeavor.

Benne's penultimate chapter provides strategies for schools that desire to "keep the faith." He counsels mutual accountability between institutions and their sponsoring religious traditions. He argues that there should be a "critical mass" of faculty, administrators, board members, and students who identify strongly with the college's mission, with the ability to articulate this vision and provide leadership. There should also be "willing followers"—individuals sympathetic to the school's mission even if they do not carry the banner. Both of these groups are acquired and maintained through a careful selection or hiring process monitored by the appropriate authority (president, provost, dean, board, etc.). Benne believes that faculty members hostile, unsympathetic, or indifferent toward the college's theological tradition and vision may have some helpful things to offer (e.g., expertise in research, a critical counter voice, etc.), but should be outnumbered two to one by faculty who are firm proponents of or sympathetic toward the college's religious tradition (p. 187).

Benne says that the schools' vision should be inculcated in new members of the community, especially the faculty (p. 204). This can take place in faculty orientation and "faith and learning groups." Crucial leaders are the president, chaplain, board members, and the theology department. Regarding the latter, Benne argues that "the animating vision has to be borne by a first-rate theology department willing to take up that burden. The theology department has to be the trustworthy guardian of the school's particular

tradition of thought" (p. 204).

Benne's final chapter, a mere seven and a half pages, contains counsel for individuals at those schools which have experienced an too much of the "darkening trends" of secularization. He says that a handful of "true believers"—especially among the faculty—can begin to educate others about the institution's traditions. The goal in this case may be to give the tradition an *assured voice* in the institution: "If the Christian account is not and cannot be the organizing paradigm, it can at least provide one voice in the larger array of voices that inhabit any college or university. Furthermore, that voice can be assured a role by intentionally placing it amid the key facets of the school's life—faculty, administration, board, and student body" (p. 210).

One weakness in Benne's study is the under-representation of student and faculty voices. In his description of the six premier institutions, Benne quotes extensively from mission statements, college catalogs, administrators' speeches, and institutional websites. We do learn of chapel attendance figures and the numbers of Bible study groups in the dorms; however, missing are firsthand accounts from alumni and students. If students are the primary focus of educational efforts, quotes and anecdotal accounts from the student perspective could strengthen his arguments, demonstrating how students experience the results of the "top-down" approach enjoined by Benne. Furthermore, since Benne argues the need for integrating the school's theological vision into its academic life, it would be helpful to hear about some specific instances where he has actually observed this occurring in the classroom.

This book should be required reading for all presidents and board members of church-related colleges and universities. It would also make for lively discussions at faculty seminars. Not all readers will agree with Benne's approach to the faculty hiring process, such as his contention that at least one-third of the faculty should be communicant members of the sponsoring denomination. Many readers will certainly recognize in their own institutions the trends Benne describes, such as the move to let rhetoric about generic "values" and "service" carry most of the institution's religious freight. Those who care about providing a quality education "with soul" will find much value in Benne's challenging and provocative book.

Joy Schroeder holds the Bergener chair, a joint position at Trinity Seminary and Capital University.