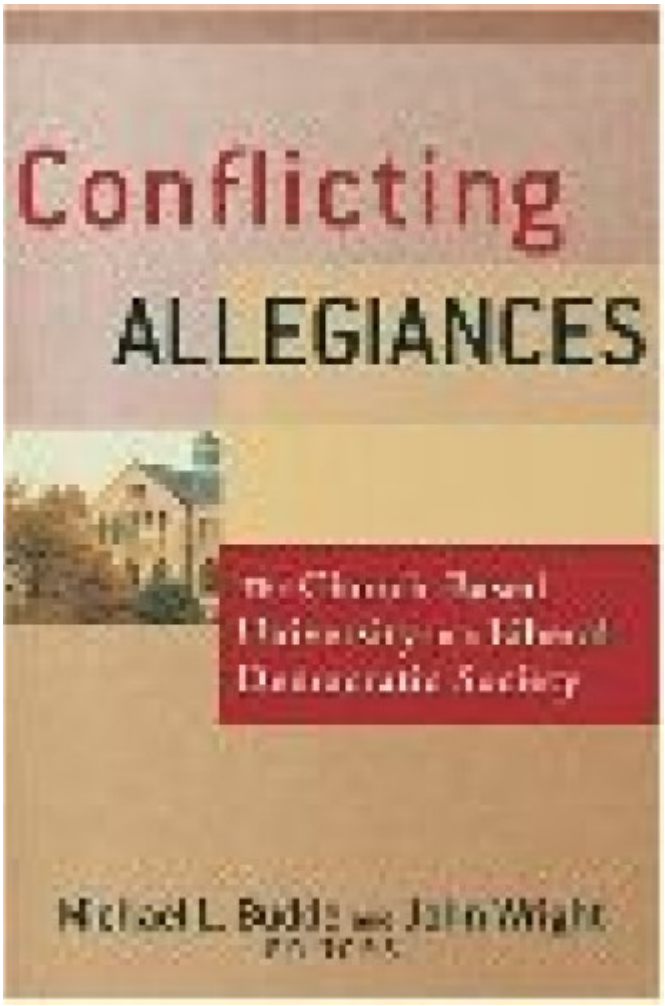
Back to school

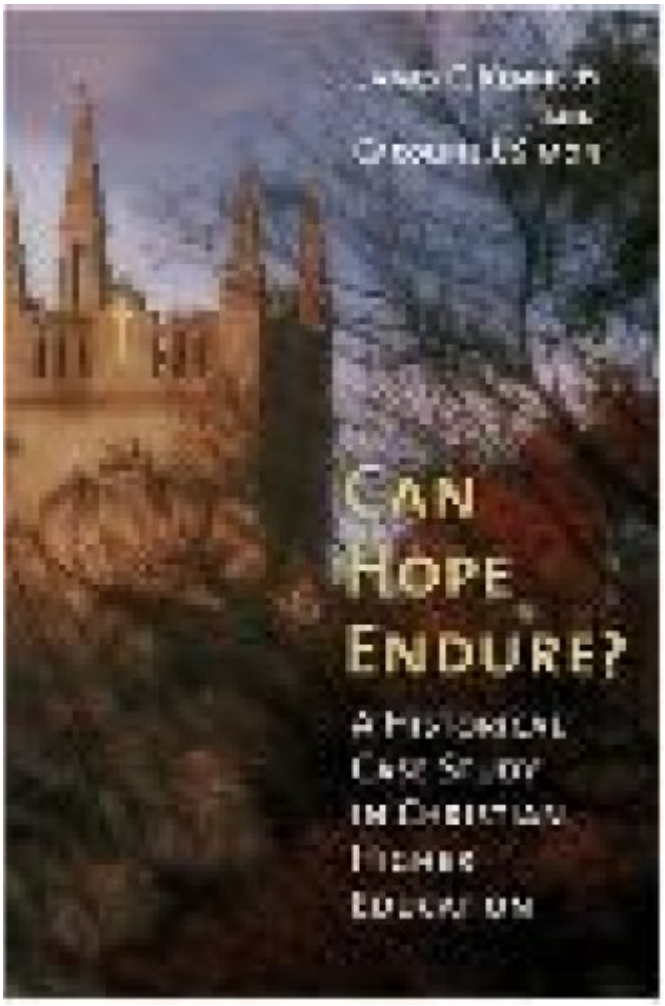
By Ronald A. Wells in the July 26, 2005 issue

In Review



Conflicting Allegiances: The Church-Based University in a Liberal Democratic Society

Michael L. Budde and John Wright
Brazos



Can Hope Endure? A Case Study in Christian Higher Education

James C. Kennedy and Caroline J. Simon
Eerdmans

Can a church-related college reinvigorate its Christian identity while maintaining academic quality? That question has been at the forefront of recent discussion of Christian higher education. These two books advance the discussion in different ways. *Conflicting Allegiances* invites us to imagine a world in which Christianity and academics are thoroughly pursued together—and to imagine what a Christian school would then look like. *Can Hope Endure?* asks us to consider what is plausible in the context of one specific school, Hope College—a context that has included conservative donors, charismatically disruptive chaplains, a professionalized faculty and the challenges of ecumenical pluralism.

Each contributor to *Conflicting Allegiances* was asked to comment on some aspect of an ideal-type "ecclesially based university," or EBU. John Wright opens the book with a brilliant essay that goes beyond the work of George Marsden (*The Soul of the American University*) and James Burtchaell (*The Dying of the Light*) in looking at the broad sociopolitical context of higher education. He gives a powerful analysis of what some have called the "two spheres" of American life: the state is sovereign in the public sphere but allows for "freedom" in the private sphere. As long as colleges and universities cooperate in serving the smooth operation of the political, economic and social order, they have freedom to do what they want in the private sphere. But as Clark Kerr's downfall as president of the University of California at Berkeley in the 1960s demonstrated, the range of moral and religious choices remaining in that context may be very small. Indeed, religion confined to a private sphere may, by some definitions, not be religion at all.

William Cavanaugh takes on the arrogance of the American Association of University Professors in its statements (1940, 1970, 1988) about "academic freedom." To the AAUP, the presence of a department of theology in a university is a contradiction, as is a church-related college of any kind—that is, if it still takes its religious vocations seriously. Whereas Marsden—who has his own substantial critique of the AAUP—could be said to have argued for a place at the academic table for Christians, Cavanaugh wants to redefine the table. He claims that secular universities don't really understand a fully orbed method of truth seeking. This argument is not new, but I have not seen it presented with such power and intensity. (Holding such views, Cavanaugh could be tenured at his own University of St. Thomas; I wonder if he'd make it at the University of Minnesota.)

Many other essays in this challenging book deserve attention. One in particular is Michael Cartwright's on the formation and vocation of students. As someone who has taught for many years, I was delighted to learn a term to describe the role I have developed in my own style: *in loco amicis* should replace *in loco parentis* for the mentoring professor. In short, the professor who is a "wise friend" of students can be of great help in the formation of the people to whom we dedicate our lives.

Elizabeth Newman takes up a similar theme in an essay on hospitality. A Southern Baptist now back at a Baptist institution, she taught for a dozen years at a Catholic institution in the upper Midwest. She offers a moving story of being "the other" and discusses "a theology of *oikos* hospitality." She concludes with a reminder that the church is broken and that our academic witness is partly compromised because of

that brokenness.

Keeping up the Baptist connection, Scott Moore of Baylor extends “hospitality” to the curriculum, calling for a “hermeneutic of hospitality” that brings students and professors to their tasks with texts in a way that allows faith and reason to intersect. Amy Laura Hall of Duke contributes an intriguing and well-argued chapter on the way women’s studies might help the EBU to remap its future, especially in the “unmasking of a social tapestry that cloaks false wisdom as true.”

Michael Budde closes the volume by asking what these reflections amount to. To him, the EBU must have a transformative vision for students, faculty and society, not merely a vision that finds its place in the private sphere allotted it by a liberal democratic polity. Budde is aware that the AAUP elite and others in the academic establishment will oppose ventures in faith-based teaching and learning, sometimes adding ridicule to that opposition.

Worse still, to Budde, are those Christian leaders who think a call for an EBU is a step backward to second-class institutions. He ruefully notes that much of both Catholic and Protestant leadership has, for at least a half century, been backing away from church-relatedness, hoping to imitate elite institutions and thereby be accepted by them as “academically respectable.” Budde hopes that academic and religious leaders will realize the intellectual and spiritual costs of that desire to imitate, and that they will create institutions in which the church can do its thinking and from which a called and educated laity will emerge.

Hope College in Holland, Michigan, has not received much attention in the discussion of church-related colleges. Nearly 150 years old, it is the creation of America’s oldest Protestant denomination, the Reformed Church in America (RCA). Hope perhaps suffers from underappreciation because it is within a few hours’ drive of the institutions that get most of the attention when this topic comes up: Notre Dame, Valparaiso, Wheaton and Calvin.

Can Hope Endure? is the work of two Hope College professors, philosopher Caroline Simon and historian James Kennedy. Fair disclosure requires that I mention that my wife, Barbara, was a faculty member at Hope College during some of the period described in the book and that she (by then teaching at Maryville College in Tennessee) and I were resource people at a national consultation on church-related colleges, where we talked with Simon and many others.

The first chapter is an excellent review of the discussion about the church-related college as shaped by Marsden, Burtchaell, Arthur Holmes, Jon Roberts, James Turner, Arthur DeJong, Richard Hughes, Robert Benne and Douglas Sloan.

Kennedy and Simon admit early on that their thesis—that Hope survived by keeping to a middle way—can be read in both positive and negative lights. On the one hand, the balancing of Reformed, evangelical and ecumenical/ progressive impulses provided the school with the strength and depth to withstand secularization. On the other hand, Hope was perhaps deluded in thinking that the center would hold, or even that there was any center at all. On the latter reading of the situation, Hope may soon have to make a faithful, even fateful, choice among the several traditions it has held loosely together over the years.

From the beginning, Hope was driven by external circumstances. It was founded in the relatively conservative Midwest—relative, that is, to the eastern, more liberal wing of the RCA. The easterners were more numerous, and they had more money. So Hope had to work with the more conservative folks of Michigan, Iowa and Wisconsin while the bills were being paid by the folks in New York and New Jersey.

Another source of pressure were the conservative elements among the new waves of Dutch immigrants who arrived in the late-19th and early-20th centuries. These folks were much more confessionally minded than the RCA mainliners, and they were less willing to adapt to American culture without a fight. For example, the newcomers brought with them expectations for Christian day schools and opposition to the Masonic Lodge. Hope was again caught between two imperatives. In the end, the more confessional and ideologically argumentative elements were drawn to a breakaway denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, and to its school, Calvin College. Many pietistically conservative folks stayed with the RCA—if their piety allowed for public schools and lodge membership, as well as for embracing the “American” character of evangelicalism, which the psalm-singers in Grand Rapids found unattractive.

Throughout Hope’s first century—into the 1950s—the college could plausibly adhere to the notion that Christian and American values were approximately the same. In that context Hope prospered. But as time went on it wasn’t clear why such a college should prefer a Reformed, even a Protestant or Christian, faculty if all upstanding Americans with equal academic training could contribute to an equally acceptable moral and societal end. The authors repeatedly wonder if a college always trying to

mediate between two poles is deluding itself or is doing a unique thing in higher education.

A major topic in the book's last section is the faculty hiring policy. This question has racked the Hope campus in the past half century. Should Hope faculty be what Robert Benne calls "orthodox" (which Simon and Kennedy redefine as "comprehensive") or should it be intentionally pluralistic? As all commentators on the church-related college agree, faculty hiring is vital to institutional identity. (Benne offers a typology of faculty hiring policies ranging from "orthodox," to "critical mass," to "intentionally pluralistic," to "accidentally pluralistic.")

Faculty hiring was more or less intentionally pluralistic at Hope College (though more by custom than design) until the 1960s, when a new president arrived. Calvin Vander Werf took Hope in what must be termed a secularizing direction. He clearly adopted what Sloan and others call the "two spheres" idea—that faculty hiring should be blind to religion in order to hire the best-trained people, and that the religious character of the school would be developed in the private and nonacademic realms of chapel and personal piety. After seven eventful years, Vander Werf resigned and in 1972 Gordon Van Wylen became president. He and provost Jack Nyenhuis were determined to bring Hope back to the middle way. (An irony that Simon notes but doesn't develop is that both men were Calvin graduates.)

While the two leaders never said so directly, many interpreted their work as a war on two fronts. They were determined that Hope would not lose its Christian identity as it pursued excellence (as happened at Oberlin, for example), and that Hope would neither join the evangelically oriented Christian College Coalition, which has some fundamentalist members, nor become confessionally focused (like Calvin, for example).

The Van Wylen presidency largely reversed the open hiring policy of the previous administration. That restrictive policy has been maintained through the succeeding administrations, though not without opposition from a considerable number of faculty and fierce opposition from some members of the history department.

The ethos of adhering to the middle was stretched to the breaking point in the 1990s. The challenge this time came from the right, not the left, with the appointment of Ben Patterson as college chaplain. A self-identified evangelical, Patterson was supported by many in the faculty, but a majority thought his message

and his style were too much like that of a fundamentalist. Both his supporters and his detractors agree that he may have been the most divisive figure in the history of Hope College. His tenure and departure make for a fascinating story.

With a lessening of those tensions, we can reckon what can be learned from this college's history. First and foremost: Hope is the only church-related college I know of that welcomed secularization about the time many other colleges did, in the 1960s, but then backed away from it, in the direction of resacralization. Second, and almost as important: Hope is the only academically excellent college I know of that purposefully adopted an open hiring policy and then reversed it. On these two points Hope's history and struggles can be instructive to other colleges that, having relinquished much of their heritage a generation ago, want to try to recover it.

Some readers may be a bit surprised by Kennedy's and Simon's own acceptance of a (nearly) Christians-only hiring policy as the only way this church-related college could maintain its identity and vocation. To be sure, they argue their views in the Hope way, which is to say in a middle way: they want neither a statement of faith for all faculty to sign (like Wheaton) nor a Protestants-only hiring policy (like Calvin).

The authors aimed to write a cautionary tale, a reminder that if schools like Hope do not come to a sense of Christian purpose that is at once broad and deep, then cultural forces around them—most of them not very friendly to Christianity—will make their choices for them.

Having allowed our vision to be raised by Budde, Wright and colleagues, and then having looked anew at a real school, we might well be grateful for such an institution as Hope College. The way it has embraced the tensions in American academic and religious life and yet (apparently) not lost the middle way could be an example to all church-related colleges that want to retain, in Robert Benne's phrase, academic quality and soul.