H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William C. Ringenberg. *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America.* Introduction by Mark Noll. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006. 316 pp. $28.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8010-3145-8.

Reviewed by Michael Tworek (Harvard University)
Published on H-Education (February, 2011)
Commissioned by Jonathan Anuik

Religion Matters: Protestant Christianity's Influences on the American College

Whether twenty-seven years ago or in its second edition, William C. Ringenberg's book, *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America* (2006), stresses the same message: one must recognize the importance of religion, namely Christianity, in its various Protestant and Evangelical forms, to the development and shape of U.S. higher education, both in the past and present. The same praise and criticisms of the first edition largely apply to the second.[1] Aside from the new preface and epilogue, introduction, one new chapter, and immensely useful appendices, the main body of text is largely unchanged. Roman Catholic colleges are not included in the study since, as Ringenberg notes, they never styled themselves as "Christian" but rather as "Catholic." While he states that he has attempted to maintain an air of impartiality, Ringenberg admits in the preface that his sympathies lie with "those institutions which promote an open search for truth (i.e. every question may be asked and every perspective may be analyzed) and which require of the faculties both intellectual competence and Christian commitment" (p. 14). Depending on their background, readers will find Ringenberg's admission of Christian bias either refreshing or repelling. However, we, as readers, must distance ourselves from any religious and secular divides and judge *The Christian College* on its merits as a work of history alone.

Ringenberg's book is a treasure trove of information on Christian colleges in the United States. Although it is mainly descriptive and at times impressionistic, Mark Noll's insightful general introduction helps to provide an interpretative framework. Ringenberg begins his account of Christian colleges in the United States with the founding of Harvard College in 1636 and provides a descriptive account of the religious ties and influences of the earliest colleges (Yale University and the College of William & Mary, to name a couple) founded in colonial America (c. 1600-1776).[2] Ringenberg believes that the "Christian" world view was the most important shaper of U.S. intellectual life during this period. After the American Revolution, the founding of Christian colleges increased substantially and spread higher education to all parts of the new nation. According to Ringenberg, the religious revival of the Second Great Awakening (c. 1800-35) was, in many respects, a response to the perceived threat of skepticism present amongst youth in the United States. Both new and established Protestant and Evangelical groups, above all Methodists and Baptists, built educational institutions to uphold the importance of Christian doctrine and morality in curricular and extracurricular activities. The primacy of Christian-based instruction, however, was not restricted to newly founded private colleges. Most state universities springing up at this time also placed a strong emphasis on the inculcation of Christian principles and even saw this aim as the major educational function of the university (the University of Virginia, the brainchild of Thomas Jefferson, perhaps being a notable exception). Furthermore, Ringenberg claims that the antebellum Christian colleges, contrary to long secular historiographical prejudice, were not places of regressive and narrow sectarian interests but rather served the local and denominational needs of their respective communities up to the American Civil War.

Ringenberg lists four fundamental developments after the American Civil War that revolutionized the Christian college and, in turn, U.S. collegiate studies. Firstly, Christian colleges contributed to the expansion of educational opportunities for African Americans and women. Secondly, these developments prompted significant changes in university curricula (with Harvard leading the way) that saw not only the expansion of topics and courses available to students but also electives. Thirdly, professors at U.S. universities and colleges gradually specialized in their chosen fields and turned to lec-

tures and seminars over recitation modes of teaching. Quite rightly, Ringenberg notes the importance of advanced study abroad by Americans in Germany and their transportation of the German aims of research and specialization to U.S. university life. Lastly, the introduction of athletics and fraternities to collegiate life transformed the composition, needs, and student spirit of universities and colleges. In total, these factors helped to produce the modern U.S. university in the twentieth century.

In the final part of his book, Ringenberg examines the process of secularization amongst formerly Christian colleges and the response to this by fundamentalist and Evangelical Christians in the twentieth century. Ringenberg argues that the secularization of "old-stock" Christian colleges had a detrimental effect on the spiritual aspects of Protestant higher education. While Ringenberg differentiates how universities and colleges changed from sacred to secular institutions respectively, the reasons for secularization are the same: their desire for intellectual freedom from denominational shackles and for the avoidance of controversy and infighting stemming from religious concerns, "the growing American sensitivity to the separation of church and state," and the wish to de-emphasize "the Christian faith and to replace it with other value belief systems" (p. 130). Although he mentions larger social, cultural, and intellectual reasons (such as evolution and biblical criticism) and points out the signs of secularization, one is left wondering about the connections between these factors. Were students and faculty important agents within this evolution? Ringenberg then examines Christian responses to secularization, namely the Bible college movement. Undoubtedly, his observations on this particularly North American movement are one of the most impressive parts of his book and ably demonstrate his larger point that religion matters in understanding U.S. educational life. Ringenberg concludes his book with a chapter on the rebuilding of Christian collegiate education from the conclusion of World War II to the 1980s (the original endpoint for the first edition) and adds a new chapter in the second edition on the state of Christian higher education in the twentieth century. These chapters sketch the rise to prominence (though not necessarily excellence) of universities founded by individual preachers, such as Liberty University and Bob Jones University, and their roles in political and religious life. These chapters will be most useful to those in academia, specifically the field of educational policy, as they detail how Christian colleges tried to preserve their place as moral educators of U.S. society through forming associations of mutual support among Christian denominations (including Catholics) and by seeking federal and state funding. Ringenberg adds an insightful epilogue and offers his reflections on what aims Christian institutions of higher learning should embrace to improve the educational quality as well as his own propositions concerning reducing costs and providing better training for future instructors. He ends his book on an optimistic note, hoping for the day that public universities are "more truly pluralistic," that the Christian educational experience is accessible to those who wish it, and "students everywhere in increasing number would have come to value the relentless, honest, and even joyful search for truth in general and the source of that truth in particular" (p. 248).

Ringenberg's book is primarily, if not exclusively, geared towards a believing Christian academic and lay community (or as a textbook for an introductory survey course at a Christian institution). That being said, when the first edition was published in 1984, Ringenberg was participating in a larger scholarly trend that attempted to highlight the important role of religion in fostering intellectual life across institutional and social spectra. Ringenberg succeeds, for the most part, in demonstrating the importance of Christianity's role in post-secondary education by his vast institutional and social knowledge of Christian colleges. His section on the rise of fraternities and sports sheds important insights on the evolution of collegiate life and offers possible reasons for why certain schools tend to value athletic over academic achievement. Without a doubt, the wide range of material present in Ringenberg's book for readers to choose from is another area of success.

However, Ringenberg's use of the category "the Christian college" is problematic, at times. Firstly, he uses the term to refer to colleges from colonial America to the present but does not always explain how the meaning of "Christian" or "college" changes over time. Secondly, he tends to conflate the label "Protestant" with "Christian" (and vice versa), forgetting that Baptists, for instance, do not identify themselves as Protestants. Similarly, adding Evangelical and fundamentalist institutions such as Bob Jones University, whose leadership denies "Christian" status to Catholics and many mainline Protestants, complicates matters further. A more critical evaluation of Evangelical institutions' effect on wider, largely negative perceptions of Christian education would have helped readers to understand their significance, other than for political rumblings and prejudice. Consequently, it becomes difficult to decipher what exactly constitutes a "Christian" college for Ringenberg and, more importantly, what kind of history (Christian and Protestant) he is trying to write.

In conclusion, Ringenberg's book has much to offer readers on Christian colleges if we read it with a critical eye and a wide methodological perspective. While filled with many details, facts, and insights, *The Christian College* is not the exhaustive, definitive work on the topic of Protestant higher education in the United States. Scholarly work, such as *Making Higher Education Christian* (1987), by Joel A. Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shipps, or James Tunstead Burtchaell's *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from their Christian Churches* (1998), has helped to fill in many of the gaps left by Ringenberg. Nevertheless, *The Christian College* is an excellent starting point for anyone wanting a broad and accessible entry into the turbulent yet fascinating waters of church and education.

Notes

[1]. One can find the wide range of opinions on the first publication by R. Kirby Godsey, [untitled], *The Journal of Higher Education* 59.6 (1988): 716-717; Virginia Lieson Brereton, "Examining the Christian College," *History of Education Quarterly* 26.2 (1986): 321-327; Robert T. Handy, [untitled], *The Catholic Historical Review* 72.3 (1986): 482; Kenneth W. Shipps, [untitled], *The Public Historian* 8.1 (1986): 121-123.

[2]. For a critical view of these colleges, see Richard Hofstadter, *Academic Freedom in the Age of the College* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1955).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Michael Tworek. Review of Ringenberg, William C., *The Christian College: A History of Protestant Higher Education in America.* H-Education, H-Net Reviews. February, 2011.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=31221

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.