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Building a Culture of Faith: University-Wide Partnerships for Spiritual Formation

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Building a Culture of Faith: University-Wide Partnerships for Spiritual Formation.

Reviewed by Brenda K. Bender and J. Scott Self

Given the historical relationship between the academy and faith cultures, even from the *scholae monasticae* in the 6th Century, it seems ironic that Christian higher education struggles to find points of articulation between scholarship and spirituality. It appears that a functional and meaningful lexicon of spiritual formation within the context of Christian higher education remains elusive. Moreover, the absence of a consistent epistemology of faith and spiritual development seems to contribute to an even deeper sense of confusion for educators – Christian educators struggle with how to know and/or measure the role Christian higher education plays in forming students spiritually. Balzer and Reed bring a collection of thoughtful essays together into one over-arching argument in *Building a Culture of Faith*: that a Christian university should promote a holistic culture that fosters spiritual formation among faculty, staff, and students.

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Balzer and Reed's collected works are organized into three major sections: (1) *Institutional Influences on Spiritual Formation*, (2) *Exploring Spiritual Formation*, and (3) *Implementation, Praxis, and Models*. The overarching argument, then, starts with the premise that institutions can have an organizational impact on the spiritual formation of students, continues to a contextualization of what spiritual formation is, and then explores various methodologies and measureable outcomes toward those goals. It is important for the reader to note that the stated purpose of this collected work is holistic: that an "integrated" approach "falls short of God's highest and best calling for Christian educations in the university" (p. 14). The editors suggest that an approach that fosters spiritual formation among faculty and staff in the institution can contribute to a culture of spiritual formation to the benefit of the student body.

Section one, *Institutional Influences on Spiritual Formation*, attempts to articulate the foundation that the Christian university setting is especially valuable for spiritual formation. Bill Robinson makes the argument that "Christian college presidents set tones" (p. 31), and that administrators can be intentional about setting a tone for spiritual formation. Steve Moore maps the "DNA" of Christian education and suggests that Christian education will require imagination to move "far beyond what is typical in higher education" (p. 42) if it is to contribute to spiritual formation in the student body. Rod Reed provides perspective on how spiritual formation is more complex than the university's programming "chapel services, ministry options, and student-friendly pastoral-care" (p. 60) and instead recommends that CCCU schools are uniquely positioned to provide the more complex culture for spiritual formation. Cara Balzar suggests that the holistic approach to creating an institutional context for spiritual formation must include faculty, from selection and hiring practices, the space for spiritual development of faculty, and specific resources and guidance for faculty to direct students in spiritual development.

Section two, *Exploring Spiritual Formation*, attempts to create a schema for spiritual formation within the context of Christian education. Steve Harper makes a case for a theology of Christian spiritual formation in the academy that focuses upon "non-negotiable" principles: that spiritual formation should be intentional, interdisciplinary, identifiable, and incarnational (pp.88-90). Rod Reed suggests that a culture of spiritual formation is achieved only when Christian universities have "developed relational approaches to education and have hired faculty and staff who are committed to influencing the whole person of the student for the sake of the world" (p. 105). Perry Glanzer makes the positive argument that faculty have a unique (if not ancient) role to play in the spiritual development of the student when faculty are "not content to undertake the vocational

formation of students alone" (p.121). Robert Mulholland asserts that an incarnational approach to teaching and mentoring students can bridge the apparent gap between academics and spiritual formation if the faculty member will "model for both peers and students how a life hid with Christ in God plays itself out in the academy" (p. 136).

Section three, *Implementation, Praxis, and Models*, attempts to make the argument that responsibility for spiritual formation should be decentralized and instead should permeate the institution. Keith Anderson recommends five essential paradigms for educators "who are rigorously academic and bold people of faith" (p. 145). Susan Reese suggests that the Student Development Professional can assist in the institutional goals of holistic spiritual formation through offering "space for listening in community with others" (p. 162). Bob Yoder illustrates an effort to measure spiritual formation outcomes (in the context of faith-mentoring) at Goshen college and demonstrates that while faculty are often unsure they are sharing the Christian story, students report they are hearing it from faculty (p. 182). James Wilhoit, David Setran, Daniel Haase, and Linda Rozema offer some pragmatic suggestions for integrating spiritually formative praxes into the learning environment and allow for "travel that has phases of movement from one place to another, and not necessarily from one level to another" (p. 198). Gregg Carmer suggests that faculty can embody metaphors for spiritual formation, like "tour guides," or "translators," or "traveling companions," for understanding "the role of educators that rest as easily on the shoulders of campus ministry personnel and student development staff as those of faculty members" (p. 231). Cynthia Toms-Smedly suggests that the university can provide access to a myriad of different communities, all of which "offers students an opportunity to *experience* theology" (p. 236).

While Section two appears to generally define spiritual formation holistically through the praxes of spiritual disciplines in various forms (living the Christian life in academe), Section three appears to be more interested in integration of faith and learning. If the premise of the work is that integration falls short of God's highest and best calling, Section three seems to infer that integration is the means by which the holistic approach is attained. For example, the Soul Projects engage students in spiritual practices (daily prayer, journaling, *lectio divina*). However, it is unclear the role the faculty member plays in the student's formation. It is as if the integration of an assignment is in-and-of-itself sufficient. This seems to militate against the overarching thesis that a holistic culture is more important than faith-integration and rather implies that faith-integration is the means by which a culture of holistic spiritual formation is achieved. The semantic features that differentiate a holistic approach from an integrated approach remain largely unidentified.

This work ultimately brings important insight into Christian higher education's effort to identify the added value of spiritual formation in Christian education. It provides avenues of inquiry for identifying the culture and the student-experiences that may bring spiritual formation out from the academic experience. For example, Anderson describes

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how faculty can be "on the lookout" for what might be revealed in the relationship between faculty and student in spiritually formative ways as mentors rather than advisors. Carmer's metaphors for faculty as tour guides, translators, and traveling companions may provide insight to the faculty's role in helping students navigate the possibilities of spiritual formation. The authors are successful in promoting a holistic view of the possibilities related to the faulty-student relationship, and provide useful metaphors for broadening the understanding of the role of faculty in spiritual formation.

   As a "handbook" for building a culture of spiritual formation within an institution, this book may not meet the objective. As a means to discuss and discover some of the divergent possibilities within the culture of the Christian academy, the writings give a great deal of creative insight. Christian educators and administrators alike will appreciate these writings and their contribution to the latter. ⓖ

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