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Can Hope Endure: A Historical Case Study in Christian Higher Education

James C. Kennedy and Caroline J. Simon

Reviewed by Jason M. Morris

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In the history of higher education in America, Christian institutions have faced the challenge of allegiance. As institutions, will they maintain their religious identity or will they align themselves with those on a more pluralistic path? Seldom does one have the opportunity to intimately examine the historical and current story of an institution wrestling with its religious identity. In the book, *Can Hope Endure? A Historical Case Study in Christian Higher Education*, authors Kennedy and Simon provide a vivid portrayal of the journey one college takes as it grapples with who they have been, who they are, and who they are going to be. The work is an in-depth look at the lived experience of the challenge of maintaining a Christian identity in higher education.

Hope College, founded in 1866 in Holland, Michigan, by Dutch immigrants, is affiliated with the Reformed Church of America. The authors bring the lens of an historian (Kennedy) and a philosopher (Simon) to bear on the intellectual and social struggles this college has faced since its inception. Kennedy and Simon, both professors at Hope, contend that Hope represents a unique case in Christian higher education; unique in its attempt to reestablish a religious identity in its recent history and exceptional in how the college has lived out a “Middle Way,” described as an educational hybrid between a ‘mainline’ Protestant model of education and a more evangelical Protestant model. In their work, the authors pose two primary questions: (1) How did Hope develop and sustain this hybrid model of education? (2) How is Hope’s story relevant to the larger world of church-related higher education? This book is timely and pertinent as many institutions in the realm of Christian higher education struggle with issues related to religious identity.

The authors open the book with an extensive and helpful discussion of the literature pertaining to the sustainability of Christian higher education. Setting the context for their thesis, the authors site several important works, such as Marsden’s *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief*, Burtchaell’s *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*, Hughes and Adrians’ *Models for Christian Higher Education: Strategies for Success in the Twenty-First Century*, and Robert Benne’s *Quality with Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions*. The discussion in this first chapter is critical in helping the reader understand foundational elements of Christian higher education and the forces that shape and form these institutions.

In chapters 2-6, the historical context is revealed in an easy to follow narrative format. The chronology of these chapters primarily tracks the presidential leadership of the college. The methodology employed to answer the primary research questions is historical narrative. The authors collected and interpreted archived documents (school newspaper articles, unpublished meeting minutes, and other historical pieces) spanning the history of Hope College. In addition, Kennedy and Simon interviewed key witnesses to the history of the college who provided valuable insight into the creation of this text. The methodology chosen for this text is sound, and the authors take time to discuss the limitations of the historical narrative approach and reveal their biases as researchers and actors in the story. The narrative in these chapters helps to paint a picture of Hope's chosen "Middle Way" – from its formation to its most recent challenges. Unlike many other college histories, this book takes a bold and honest look at the religious trajectory of the institution.

Perhaps the most helpful chapters of the book are the final two chapters, where the authors discuss Hope's most recent challenges and broaden their discussion to the wider realm of Christian higher education. In chapter 7, the authors lay out the three issues that bring Hope to a very divided juncture in the late 1990s. The issue that receives the most attention throughout the majority of the text is the faculty hiring procedure established by the college. The authors describe how the college moved to a more open hiring policy in the 1960s under President Calvin Vander Werf, leading the college toward a more pluralistic approach toward education; then turned back to a more "critical mass" approach through the 1990s under President John H. Jacobson. This hiring approach, combined with the appointment of a controversial Chapel Dean and the contentious social issue of homosexuality, collide and bring great pressure to Hope's "Middle Way." The divisions facing the campus community in the late 1990s forced the authors to ask, "Was Hope's Middle Way a grand illusion that had been unmasked or could it, through grappling with the shortcomings revealed by Hope's time of testing endure" (p. 205).

The final chapter brings to a close the historical case of Hope College by further examining the durability of the "Middle Way"; acknowledging the difficulty involved in hearing others' voices (conservative and progressive) and encouraging further dialogue among the constituents of the college. The authors state, "The question Hope must face is whether its strands can be braided into a strong, flexible, and mutually correcting whole – whether a life enhancing balance can be forged and retained among those (disparate) elements" (pg. 217). The authors go on to point out that Hope's story has lessons that are transferable to the larger world of Christian higher education. These lessons included: 1) The challenges and benefits of taking a more ecumenical approach to education; 2) The usefulness of institutionally crafted documents or statements to inform public debate over institutional direction and mission; and 3) How shifts in institutional identity affect the campus community – both students and faculty.

Although this work is not written specifically for student development professionals working in Christian higher education, it offers some extrapolated suggestions that may enhance one's understanding of identity issues faced at one's own institution: 1) Be familiar with the larger context of the history of Christian higher education and the dialogue that surrounds its sustainability and future trends; 2) Be informed about the histories of your own institutions and the issues and challenges that it faces in



relationship to Christian identity; 3) Create an awareness of the different voices on your own campus, and find an appropriate means for these voices to be heard; and 4) Realize that small events in the lives of your institutions can have bigger picture consequences for the long range trajectory of your campus.

A growing amount of literature has been published on Christian higher education, but few works have focused on a single institution and its historical struggle with its own religious identity. I valued the honesty, and effort the authors used to tell the story of Hope and the lessons learned as one deeply interested in the future of Christian higher education. I recommend this read as a timely addition to the discussion of the purpose and sustainability of Christian higher education.

