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Robert Benne. Quality With Soul: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001. Pp. 217.

[1] Christianity is a story that is "comprehensive, unsurpassable, and [a] central account of reality" (96). It stands to reason that communities and traditions committed to this thesis would be involved in developing and passing on such a story through any number of social institutions. The concern in this book is how it is embodied in institutions of higher education in the United States. Here Robert Benne seeks to defend and uplift the prospects for Christian higher education. It is written partially in response to James Burtchaell's recent *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches*. Burtchaell put forward a deeply pessimistic view of the future of Christian higher education. But Benne wishes to temper that prospect with the hope that all is not lost. Burtchaell had adopted the method of case studies, examining in detail seventeen instances of schools Christian in their origin, in order to weave together a narrative of how they proceeded from explicit religious commitment to complete or near complete secular status. Benne's project is at once similar, though more modest in the use of case studies - he chooses Baylor University, Calvin College, St. Olaf's College, The University of Notre Dame, Valparaiso University, and Wheaton College, six schools that, with the exception of St. Olaf, Burtchaell had not examined. As a consequence, it is more positive than Burtchaell's effort. He proposes to "examine the success of schools that have maintained both quality and soul. [He] will elaborate why and how [the] six schools . . . have kept their version of the Christian vision publicly relevant in all dimensions of the life and mission of their schools" (ix). Benne is also more theoretical as he seeks certain organizing principles around which to evaluate the schools and their continuing commitment to the project of Christian higher education, while making positive suggestions for retrieving and, or maintaining that project in other colleges and universities.

[2] The work is meticulously organized. The first division is into three sections, "The Current Situation," "Six Ventures in Christian Humanism," and "Strategies for Maintenance and Renewal," for a total of eight chapters spread throughout the sections. The organizing principles are the Vision, the Ethos, and the Persons constitutive of and charged with

maintaining the religious character of the schools. Vision provides the crucial resources for understanding how each school conceives of the relationship between faith and reason in its own tradition, and how that relationship shapes the educational mission of the school. Here Benne is particularly good at explaining how the broad theological commitments of the different traditions inform how they conceive of the relationship between faith and reason. Ethos is a less theoretical and more sociological category than Vision. It considers the "non-curricular practices, traditions, patterns of life, and values that add as much religious character to each school as the intellectual dimension of its religious life" (145). Finally the category of Persons straightforwardly concerns the qualities that are to be expected in the human beings who bear the religious traditions of each school upon their shoulders, as well as the vexed question of the characteristics that should be possessed by the persons in the school who do not. While the first two categories are analyzed separately, the third is discussed along the way amidst the other two. He also provides an account of a fourfold distinction between Orthodox, Critical Mass, Intentionally Pluralist, and Accidentally Pluralist schools that is useful for broad characterization, if not pressed too hard (see summary chart, 49).

[3] In general *Quality with Soul* is a well written and reflective account of the very complicated issues involved in Christian higher education today. In the first part, "The Current Situation," Benne presents a general account of the evolution of Christian education that has led many to wonder about its future. He identifies as the fundamental factor in the secularizing process the loss of confidence by the sponsoring religious institutions in the "comprehensive, unsurpassable, and central" account of reality provided by Christianity (47). The portraits of the successful schools in the second part are lively, and informative. However here a difficulty arises insofar as Benne relies at times upon promotional materials of the schools themselves, and anecdotal discussions with various members of the schools, in some instances with administrators who presumably have a stake in presenting a somewhat rosy picture of their institutions. That is not to say the observations are necessarily invalid, but they are likely one-sided. Also the choice of the University of Notre Dame as the sole representative of the Catholic tradition is unfortunate. However successful Notre Dame is as a Catholic University, there are hundreds of Catholic colleges and universities educating what must be hundreds of thousands of students. The extraordinary wealth of Notre Dame's endowment (nearly three billion dollars) makes possible for it resources and opportunities that no other Catholic school in this country can come close to emulating. Here Burtchaell's sample of Boston College, The College of New Rochelle, and St. Mary's College of California was more representative of the wide range of institutions one finds in the Catholic tradition, and something like success stories to counter Burtchaell's account of their demise would have been more useful in some ways. Indeed, I suspect all of the schools that Benne examines are relatively wealthy compared to the rest of their denominational counterparts, a factor that Benne perhaps should have considered more closely. Does the future of Christian higher education rest with the wealthy, and what pressures might that factor place upon the conception of the nature of that education? Finally, the third section makes concrete suggestions drawn from what has gone before on how other schools might follow the lead of the success stories in reviving their religious

missions, or at least preserving some semblance of Christian character beyond the mere historical event of their founding.

[4] If there is a general difficulty with this work it has to do with the Vision, particularly once we get beyond the Orthodox schools, and into the Critical-Mass, Intentionally Pluralist, and Accidentally Pluralist instances, presumably the vast majority of Christian schools in this country. Benne's title intimates the difficulty, *Quality with Soul*. The title suggests that the religious dimension in some ways is something other than and perhaps tacked onto the "quality" of a university that can be evaluated first by some sort of standard that does not itself reflect that religious soul. The religious soul is externally conceived with regard to the question of educational quality, so that it makes sense to write of "maintaining both quality and soul." What is that "quality" apart from the religious soul? The difficulty with Benne's framework comes out in two particular instances in the work.

[5] First he sees the question of vision in fundamentally epistemological terms. Adopting a fashionable epistemological category, he sees secular learning and claims of revelation in a "conversation." And "the most important thing for these schools is not that they carry on the conversation the same way, but that the conversation goes on in a serious and authentic way" (144). This vision shows the uneasy balance that Benne wants to strike within Christian universities between the claims of modern Enlightenment goals of rationality characteristic of secular colleges and universities and the growing atmosphere of postmodernism in those same schools. On the one hand he surveys the corrosive influence of Enlightenment notions of rationality upon the idea of a religious institution of higher education (25-33). In the modern Enlightenment view, we are not allowed to dine at their table because of our religious commitments. But who are *they*? Presumably the secular institutions.

[6] On the other hand the flourishing of postmodernism in secular universities provides us with epistemological breathing space, at least in the research universities (32), as they have abandoned the foundational pretensions of a privileged starting point. And yet, we cannot simply discard the Enlightenment paradigm with its "basic standards of evidence and argument" (58). But in postmodern fashion we have to recognize that it too is a tradition, and we should not "absolutize" those standards. The difficulty with this delicate epistemological balance of modernism and postmodernism is that we take our bearings on what a school is and what its quality consists in from these secular paradigms, and then ask what a religious soul would add. I fear that in not being theoretical enough in his discussion, but rather too sociological, he has not faced the problem of his own title, that the Vision itself might be conceived of as an "add on." A position that is "comprehensive, unsurpassable, and [a] central account of reality" is not an epistemological position about *how* we know; it is a material commitment to certain body of knowledge. Christianity is at heart a metaphysical account, however much it may include an epistemology within it. It is about God's creative and redemptive relationship to the world. While our secular culture may be modern or postmodern or some mixture of both, our souls are neither modern nor postmodern. Thus, as the author himself intimates (32-33), neither modernism nor postmodernism can set any real place at the dinner table conversation for the Christian metaphysical soul.

[7] Second, this difficulty comes out in Benne's various passing discussions of the controversy within Catholic education of the episcopal insistence upon the implementation of *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, the papal apostolic constitution on Catholic colleges and universities. Benne admires the general claims made in *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* about the nature and goals of education in the Catholic tradition. However, time and again, when it comes to the difficult question of the relationship of Catholic schools to episcopal and papal authority, in good Enlightenment fashion he reflects the position of those who oppose a juridical relation, and sees the document as threatening and inappropriate. He makes no effort to investigate theoretically the other side of that "conversation." So the "call for juridical accountability to the church by Catholic colleges and universities obscures many of its more constructive offerings" (118). He relates without comment the sense of faculty at Notre Dame that these juridical claims are perceived as a "threat [that] damages the reputation of the Catholic university," "an intrusion into the university's autonomy, if not into academic freedom itself," as opposed to their sympathy with the documents "positive vision" (121). Does he mean their "secular" reputation, and wouldn't that be a sign that for the purposes of reputation "quality" is evaluated apart from "soul"? Finally, Benne in his own voice understands the difficulty in terms of the classic Enlightenment dichotomy between the voluntary and the authoritative. "Coercive power is far less important than voluntary accountability in keeping a strong connection between the Catholic tradition and its schools" (182, note 6). I do not want to minimize in any way the very serious difficulties that attend the juridical implementation of *Ex corde*. But is there no judgment possible about just what it is that scholars have made themselves voluntarily accountable to? A lifeless insubstantial spectre called tradition, or a living organic body called the Church? What does accountability consist in? With the postmoderns, Benne wants traditions of learning, but with the moderns he will have nothing of authority in those traditions. And there lies a very serious epistemological question, whether a tradition of learning without living authoritative voices is operating on anything more than the lifeless inertia of the past constantly wearing down against the secular frictional social forces within which it operates? Until we can answer what the quality of soul is in a Christian education, it seems that we may well be drawn back to Burtchaell's pessimism. But a sign of a book worth reading is that it raises serious questions to be pursued from the questions it answers. And this is such a book.

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