



# Journal of Religion & Society

---

The Kripke Center

Volume 3 (2001)

---

**Arthur Holmes. *Building the Christian Academy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001. Pp. v + 122. \$12.00 (Paper).**

[1] Arthur Holmes, emeritus professor of philosophy at Wheaton College in Illinois, has written extensively on the relationship between Christianity and the academy. Hence, I approached reading this work with some amount of anticipation as this is not the work of a neophyte - a work by an emeritus professor with a long, distinguished career is worth one's time and attention. The publisher adds some resonance to the topic, as Eerdmans has demonstrated a valuable commitment to publishing academic works and essays by public intellectuals from many quarters of the historic Christian tradition. Many of these have been of great value to those of us engaged in dialogues about religion and society.

[2] Starting with the early Christian period, *Building the Christian Academy* provides the reader with a brief history of the philosophy of higher education. In it Holmes elaborates four emphases, which he contends are the "heart and soul of the Christian academy: the usefulness of liberal arts as preparation for service to both church and society, the unity of truth, contemplative (or doxological learning), and the care of the soul (what we call moral and spiritual formation)." He begins the book with a brief introductory chapter ("The Soul of a University") in which he establishes some of his working concerns about the nature and purpose of the academy. Holmes also, in a rather cursory way, cites some passages and examples from the Bible to establish warrant (it seems to be an apologetic for the role of learning for a pietist and reminds one of the preface to Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana*).

[3] After this introductory chapter he provides eight brief, readable chapters that broadly follow the development of Christian higher learning. Holmes' topic is the Christian academy and so the first main chapter opens with Alexandria in the second century where he takes up the philosophy of learning from Clement and Origen (with a few pages on the Greco-Roman background). In subsequent chapters Holmes examines Augustine, Monastery and Cathedral Schools, Scholastic education, the Reformation, Francis Bacon, John Henry Newman, and the Twentieth Century. One will notice that his chapters focus on both key movements and significant individuals.

[4] I would describe this not so much as being a learned work but a work of a very learned man. There is much here to engage, educate, and even inspire. At a time when there is much hand ringing over the place of the academy in America, it is a valuable work. One of the values is the relative lack of hand ringing by this author. His is not a diatribe against the academy but it is a fresh challenge to reflect on its purposes. There are few straw men in Holmes' work and his criticisms also allow for and demonstrate the reason and "genius" behind the developments. For example, his study of Francis Bacon clearly demonstrates both the significant value of Bacon to the development of modern science but also indicates the ways in which Bacon's innovations helped lead to disintegrating religion and education. Holmes treats both the Catholic and Protestant traditions with equanimity and respect; he is deeply conversant in the thought of both traditions.

[5] The work is really of the genre of a learned essay; citations are few and there is no bibliography. It is not unusual to find a direct quote offered (with quotations) from some primary sources but without citation. This will limit the value of the book for many readers. An intellectual who has read broadly and deeply on the subject as Holmes evidently has, could offer us much as a resource. Hence, one could only wish that he had given us the benefit of his sources. My concern here is not so much that the infrequency of citation weakens his argument (though this is also true) but more that the pedagogical value of this work would be greatly enhanced by citing the many and varied sources that have aided the author over the years. Those challenged to pursue this topic at greater depth will have to do much of their own digging around.

[6] While the argument works in the main, I suspect specialists will find mistakes that distract. For example, I found several mistakes in the Patristic field. The chapter on Augustine misses the decisive break imposed by his ordination to the priesthood and this skews Holmes' interpretation. He treats the priesthood and bishopric as, in essence, by-products of Augustine the educator rather than a profound redirection of energy, concerns and views that would reshape the nature of Augustine's pedagogy. Another example, Holmes describes Cassiodorus as founding a school for priests just as Augustine did (35). Augustine, however, founded a monastic community connected to the church in Hippo. While he wrote a pedagogical work for young priests (*de Doctrina Christiana*), wrote many sermons for other priests to deliver, and the like, one could not say that he founded a school for priests.

[7] Holmes writes engagingly but his method can be both confusing and frustrating. On a macro scale there is a sense of historical development as is evident from the chapter topics. He has, however, a tendency to skip around historically within each chapter and either minimize or miss the historical development within each period. For example, his study of the academy in Alexandria includes many non-Alexandrians - both Latin and Greek speakers - and covers a period of some 350 years. Nor does he sketch out these figures in historical sequence. The chapter, after offering a nod toward the Greco-Roman background, moves on to cite (in order) Philo, Tertullian, Basil, Clement of Rome, Gregory of Nanzianzan, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.

[8] The final chapter on the twentieth century leaves out or treats ever so briefly many important developments. Missing are crucial innovations and movements which arguably influenced the relations between Christianity and the academy such as Max Weber's Munich

address ("Wissenschaft als Beruf/Science as a Vocation"), the democratization of education in America, and the GI Bill, which so greatly expanded and changed higher education in America. While he turns his scrutiny on utilitarian issues and the development of technology, he leaves out the economic factors that shape so many decisions in the executive offices of each academic institution; these cannot help but influence how academic institutions approach the issues he raises at the outset. Curiously, only one sentence is given over to the modern research university. While his concerns and foci relate primarily to parochial institutions of higher learning, the research universities train most of the Ph.D.'s and so shape the bulk of those who do the teaching in the Catholic and Protestant liberal arts colleges. This last chapter is less historical and more hortatory; it is really an essay on his present concerns.

[9] While it is not clear for whom he has written this book, many scholars teaching in the academy who are interested in the topic but have not studied it in any depth will find it informative. Teachers will find it functional for certain kinds of undergraduate courses (I will be using it this Autumn for a course which studies the historical development of the tensions between Athens and Jerusalem). The general reader interested in the relations between religion and society will find it of interest as well. Those falling into the last two categories, I suspect, will be the main beneficiaries.

[10] This is a brief book for such a massive topic, and so concerns about what he has left out amount to a wish that he had written a longer work of greater detail. Yet to do so may well have undermined the nature of a work as an essay. None of these comments amount to a rejection of the book in any way, however. It is refreshing to read a scholar who has his own evident theological tradition (Reformed) but who treats others (such as Newman and several Papal encyclicals) with admiration and respect. In a time when there is much concern about the identity and nature of parochial higher education, his is a perceptive work that deserves a reading.

Stanley P. Rosenberg, Council for Christian Colleges & Universities and Centre for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, Oxford