

[Ringenberg on Gehrz, 'The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education: Forming Whole and Holy Persons'](#)

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Christopher Gehrz, ed. *The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education: Forming Whole and Holy Persons*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2015. 240 pp. \$26.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8308-4071-7.

Reviewed by William Ringenberg (Taylor University, History Department) **Published on** H-Pietism (October, 2015) **Commissioned by** Peter James Yoder

Heart Religion No Less than Head Religion

The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education is a significant work in that it defines and explains an underemphasized and even under-recognized tradition in Christian higher education. Editor Christopher Gehrz and his colleagues articulate what Douglas and Rhonda Jacobsen have shown before: that the widely celebrated "integration of faith and learning" concept is not the only viable model for explaining the mission of the Christian academy.[1]

The editor opens the book with an introduction that asks whether historical Pietism provides direct relevance (or "a usable past") for today's Christian colleges. He then explains how the subsequent chapters collectively offer an affirmative answer. Gehrz concludes the volume by proposing that just as the original Pietist conventicles ("little churches within the Church") served as "gatherings that supplement(ed) larger organization(s) that lose their vitality once they take on greater systemization," so also the Pietist colleges might well assume the role of a renewal force by asking questions and seeking answers that help to keep the larger church intellectually honest (p. 230).

The scope of this book is much broader than might first appear to be the case. All fifteen authors have an association with a single college, Bethel University of St. Paul, Minnesota, a Swedish Baptist (General Conference) institution. Furthermore, they promote a tradition that some associate only with early modern Germany. But Gehrz identifies thirty American colleges that have direct roots in Pietist denominations.[2] When a person realizes that, as Baylor theologian Roger E. Olson states, "Pietism was and is a spirit or ethos more than any socially perceptible form" (p. 20), then one might argue that it expresses the best of Christian practice at least since the Reformation and perhaps since the New Testament era.

So what, according to this volume, are the defining characteristics of the spirit of Pietism? They include personal religious experience more than theological debate; listening carefully before criticizing; hospitality always; even-handed dialogue (Janel M. Curry); a "lived out" faith; an irenic or peaceable disposition; personal and corporate vitality; conversation more than lecture (Gehrz); continual renewal and reform (David C. Williams); humility and openness to correction (Katherine J. Nevins); civil discourse (Christian Collins Winn); practicing love in the midst of controversy (Marion H. Larson and Sara L. H. Shady); shaping whole and holy people (Nancy Olen); and "oppositional impulse" (Kent T. K. Gerber).

The book is more about current practice than historic roots, but it does include discussion of the

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latter, especially in its "quest for a usable past" (Gehrz, pp. 19, 24, and Gerber, chapter 13). Most church historians trace the Pietist movement to the reaction of seventeenth-century German Lutheran theologian Philipp Jakob Spener (1635-1705) and others against the growing formalism of the state churches and the religious warfare of the Thirty Years' War. Spener's classic work *Pia Desideria* (1675) gave the movement its original theology. If Spener provided the grounding ideas that defined Pietism, August Hermann Francke (1663-1727) was the second-generation leader, who sought to apply the ideas of Spener in a highly practical way. For him, "faith was a verb" lived out in personal devotion and acts of service (p. 136).

The neglected part of Pietism is its spirit rather than its organizational form. Its history as structure is slight, while its history as influence is great. In a real sense, its descendants include all groups and individuals who have separated from a state church system. Their pietistic spirit suspects power, especially the power of the state over the church. Some of their ranks believe that ever since the fourth century, Caesaropapism has been the producer of dead Christianity. It has given birth to a formal Christendom rather than a vital Christianity. The latter has been seen more often in the free church movement represented by such groups as the Baptists, Puritans, Quakers, and Methodists in England; the Anabaptists in Germany, Switzerland, and Holland; the Independent church movement in Sweden and Scotland; and the disestablishment of the colonial Anglican and Congregational churches in America. The present book has not overemphasized this Pietist influence; if anything it has underemphasized it.

For a movement that calls for humility, willingness to listen to critique, and the need for continual reform, it is important that its advocates be open to carefully examining the observations of outside critics. Fortunately, this book demonstrates a willingness to do this, especially in Raymond Van Arragon's chapter, "Intellectual Virtue and the Adventurous Christ Followers" (chapter 11). In particular, Van Arragon is aware of the concern of historian Mark Noll that "Pietism's emphasis on experience and action led to an intellectually vicious and damaging lack of concern about Christian truth" (p. 171). No major tradition in American higher education illustrates the vulnerability of Pietism to this danger more than does Methodism, whose clear and important Pietist connections are largely and strangely undeveloped in this book. No Protestant tradition developed more first-rate institutions that separated themselves so far intellectually from the laity of their churches than has Methodism, the church of the "warm heart."

Throughout its history, Pietism, at its best, has been a corrective voice and spirit, restoring vitality to formal and lukewarm institutions. But vigor alone is not enough; it must be based on a transforming idea. Not all ideas are equal. Even love, in the abstract, is insufficient. Pietism, at its best, never seeks to restore heart religion at the expense of head religion. The best Christian colleges seek the optimum and maximum blend of both mind and affection. The goal is to marry the best that the mind can find with the deepest the heart can give of itself to that most worthy of ideas.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, the Jacobsens' important study, *Scholarship and Christian Faith: Enlarging the Conversation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[2]. The church affiliations of these colleges are primarily Brethren and Mennonite Brethren (fifteen),

Scandinavian Lutheran (six), and German and Swedish free church (four).

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