

The college try

by [Ronald A. Wells](#) in the [May 23, 2001](#) issue

*Quality with Souls: How Six Premier Colleges and Universities Keep Faith with Their Religious Traditions* by Robert Benne

With this book Robert Benne extends and deepens his reputation as a distinguished scholar of higher education and of Christian social engagement. Benne reviews the recent scholarship on religion and higher education and explores how church-related colleges might maintain both high academic standards and dynamic contact with their religious heritages. He discusses the recent histories of three liberal arts colleges (St. Olaf, Wheaton and Calvin) and three small universities (Valparaiso, Baylor and Notre Dame).

With subtlety and grace, Benne moves through the minefields of "secularization" and its various meanings. His four-part typology classifies institutions as "orthodox," having "critical mass," being "intentionally pluralist" or being "accidentally pluralist." The six institutions discussed in the book are of the first or second types. The Christian vision and vocation provide the organizing paradigm for thought and action in these schools, while the pluralistic colleges are organized around "secular" paradigms.

To maintain "quality with soul" a college needs an overarching theological vision, an ethos of memory and purpose in engaging and extending its founding heritage and, finally, the right people to own that heritage. Not all of the institutions discussed here are equally strong on all counts, but they are strong enough to support both academic rigor and a heritage-specific version of the Christian vision for intellectual life.

Benne is a gentle critic of the institutions presented. For example, Calvin, so confident and seemingly unassailable in its insistence on worldview coherence, is asked to consider taking some risks in the direction of ecumenical grace. St. Olaf gets relatively more criticism, but Benne does not push the college on where its ideology of dividing faith and learning might finally lead. Notre Dame is lauded on several grounds, but Benne repeats the concern of some Notre Dame constituents

that the university's intense desire to make it in the academic premier league might cause it to lose its soul.

As evangelical schools, Wheaton and Baylor score high on matters of ethos, but at the same time have no substantive theological tradition. Benne seems to support Mark Noll's suggestion that if evangelicals are to survive intellectually, they must reach toward the more theological traditions--i.e., Lutheran, Reformed and Catholic.

Although Benne does not explicitly say so, Valparaiso seems to be his personal favorite among these soulful/quality institutions, for here one finds outstanding worship in the most stunning college chapel in North America, high-quality intellectual leadership and an excellent magazine relating Christianity and culture. But Benne also knows that the university as a whole is not the same as Christ College, the home for honor students, or the Cresset, and that the Missouri branch of Lutheranism, which sponsors the university, is often reactionary.

Finally, Benne's book is most appealing when it addresses the large number of people at church-related colleges who have lost the battle for a combination of academic integrity and religious vitality. Many people want to reexamine what it might mean to be a church-related institution--a constituency which, for example, Steve Haynes has been quietly regathering through the Rhodes Consultation on the Future of the Church-Related College (based at Rhodes College in Memphis). Benne gives practical and politic advice to people in pluralist institutions and helps them to think about what might be possible in their situations. He abandons the "dying light" terminology and uses the more functional, and surely less pejorative, term "reconnection."

While he is aware that reconnection cannot come easily if mostly from the top down (as Baylor people can attest), Benne insists that change at pluralist institutions is possible only if their leaders have a vision. This book can help rekindle that vision without demeaning anyone now in a pluralist institution, and it can show the way forward in practical and gracious terms. If Benne gets the wide readership his book deserves, the churches and their colleges will be the better for it.