



The Question of Conscience: Higher Education and Personal Responsibility

Watson, David
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Book Review

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David Watson wades deeply into the various discourses on the state of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK (he also examines HEIs in the US and elsewhere), their problems and their prospects, to examine what HEIs say that they do for and to their most important members, award-seeking students. This self-critical look at what he calls “my trade” is for Watson a matter of the “question of conscience” or higher education’s role in shaping students’ moral and civic character.

This relatively short book consists of eight dense chapters on Watson’s evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the best research literature on what higher education seeks to do through at least five lenses: the “evolutionary” stages of modern university history; the sense participants and observers try to make of them in terms of institutional narratives; the types of “capital” generated by their activities; the chosen pedagogical approaches; and a declared set of “purposes” or intended personal transformations.

Titled, “What Does Higher Education Do? A Historical and Philosophical Overview,” the first chapter uses geography as a metaphor to demonstrate that the claims made by the modern universities (post-thirteenth-century) for their existence are previously laid geographical layers, some closer to the surface than others (1). Watson explores one of the earliest layers of university purposes: “that of maintaining, enhancing, and subjecting to supportive criticism the goal of ethical – especially doctrinal instruction” in Chapter 2 where the book gets its title (22). This chapter is arguably the one most relevant for teaching theology and religion. He traces how the university went from being a place for teaching doctrinal allegiances to being a secular place for personal and collective virtue. With the exception of some seminaries, HEIs today have largely eschewed doctrinal allegiances for a more inclusive ethos that embraces

those from many faiths or no faiths at all. This does not mean that universities have become completely secular; to the contrary, the former university Chaplain has now become the Student Life Officer (26-27).

Watson argues that “wariness about moral education” was replaced with a concern that there had been a decline in ethical behavior in business, professional, and political life (32). Therefore, HEIs evolved to teaching for “character.” The remaining chapters explore the other claims made by HEIs for what they do, including preparing students for vocation (43), rounded or “soft” citizenship (58), capability, and lifelong learning (65). The final chapter, “Higher Education and Personal Responsibility,” is Watson’s theory for what higher education should do: prepare students to exercise personal judgment in difficult circumstances, or “cultivate humanity” (100, 108). If taking this book to heart, it would bode well for those faculty members in theological and religious studies in the liberal arts to look critically at what our institutions exist to do and how we participate in that mission.

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