



The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education: Forming Whole and Holy Persons

Gehrz, Christopher, ed.
InterVarsity Press, 2015

Book Review

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In *The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education*, Christopher Gehrz convenes an impressive array of scholars to offer fresh, cross-disciplinary reflections on how the Pietist mandate to form whole and holy persons can invigorate institutions of Christian higher education. Gehrz is professor of history and chair of the history department at Bethel University, and his ongoing work is focused on both tracing and promoting the Pietist impulse within Christianity. His co-authors represent a variety of disciplines, including English, theology, ethics, geography, psychology, nursing, anthropology, physics, philosophy, communication, sociology, and library sciences. The breadth of expertise serves to reinforce the underlying thesis of the book: the Pietistic traditions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Germany, nineteenth-century Sweden, and twentieth-century Minnesota can provide a “usable past” with which Christian colleges and universities in the twenty-first century can navigate the many challenges facing higher education.

Faculty, staff, and administrators need not serve at institutions traditionally associated with the Pietist tradition to find resonance with the authors’ ideas and perspectives. While the chapters offer a healthy accounting of the influence of Pietism on Christian higher education, the calling to form “whole and holy persons” is broadly shared within the Christian tradition. To be sure, the chapters are written squarely from the Pietist perspective. However, all Christian educators can find avenues for reflection and practices for implementation within this book. The dedication to a holistic vision of student formation, mentoring, teaching, scholarship, and service is a shared and unifying value across the diversity of Christian institutions today – and even as this vision is articulated and pursued in different ways, the Pietist vision offers a unique and compelling framework for contemporary application.

The Pietist Vision of Christian Higher Education is organized into four sections and includes an introduction and conclusion by Gehrz. Part one investigates the themes of teaching, scholarship, and community in the Pietist university. Part two explores how changed people change the world. Part three offers responses to the Pietist vision from the natural and health sciences. Part four then explores problems and proposals for putting the Pietist vision into practice. Each chapter is written by a different author, and this brings a refreshing collaborative tone to the entire volume. Even with seventeen different contributors, the book maintains a consistent tone and stays focused on Pietism's unique influence on Christian higher education.

The book is a testament to how the Bethel community deliberately embraces the "usable past" of their own Pietist tradition. Each author has a direct connection to the university, and this means that readers receive rare insights into the Pietist workings of an institution from many different perspectives, disciplines, and backgrounds. The downside to this institution-centric approach is that readers may be challenged by how to appropriate the uniquely-Bethel Pietist ethos to other institutional contexts. However, even though we now know what it means to foster Pietism's usable past at Bethel, other universities can and should glean from Bethel's insights as they explore the implications of their own usable pasts for innovation in the future.

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