By all accounts higher education—including Christian higher education—is in crisis. In *A Theology of Higher Education*, Mike Higton offers a Christian theological account of higher education, showing that the DNA of the university as a species contains uniquely Christian traits. Higton is Academic Co-Director of the Cambridge Inter-faith Programme and Senior Lecturer in Theology at the University of Exeter, so he is well situated to offer this analysis, not least because of the explosive push-back being felt in the Oxbridge context. Instead of turning the book into “a diatribe, or into a melancholy, long withdrawing roar of retreating academic faith” (2), Higton crafts an argument meant to rehabilitate confidence in university education by celebrating what it does well, or could do better.

Part I of the volume traces the evolution of the university through the histories of the universities of Paris, Berlin, Oxford, and Dublin. Typically, the tale of these great universities is construed as the shedding of the constraints of religious orthodoxy in favor of the emancipation reason offers, the triumph of reason over tradition and freedom over authority. Higton contests this myth, arguing instead that in genesis of the university, “reason emerges not over against Christian devotion, but as a form of Christian devotion” (13, emphasis original). Practices at the University of Paris, for example, could only make sense in the context of certain theological assumptions. “It was assumed that to discover that harmonious ordering was not simply an intellectual game, but one of the means (or part of the means) for discovering the good ordering of human life before God, including the good ordering of the social life. It was assumed, moreover, that this discovery of good order was possible only through a certain kind of conformity to it: the good ordering of the scholar’s life in humility, piety, and peace—and this both as
a prerequisite to learning, and as something deepened and established through learning” (41-42, emphasis original).

Following his exegesis of the history of the universities under examination, Higton brings his account in conversation with contemporary theological voices. Thus, chapter 4, becomes a bridge between the historical interpretation and the contemporary application. This chapter engages the familiar, if diverse, views of the university offered by George Marsden, Dallas Willard, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Steve Holmes, Stanley Hauerwas, Dan Hardy, David Ford, Roman Williams, and Timothy Jenkins.

In Part II of this volume, Higton explores several Christian aspects of university education against the backdrop of his own Anglican theological tradition. Learning, he argues, is a form of discipleship. Likewise, learning for the Christian is a form of participation in the cross and resurrection, in so far as it breaks and remakes us as we cultivate the fruit of the Spirit. Christians are even able to learn from non-Christians. So he says, “Christians are called to a practice of hospitality, to welcoming the stranger not as an exercise of our own generosity but as a recognition of God’s own generosity in giving the stranger to us, and the stranger’s generosity in allowing himself to be welcomed. We can expect to learn (and to go on learning) from any stranger, precisely to the extent that the stranger is one of God’s creatures—as so, whether the stranger knows it or not, a participant in the infinite generosity of God” (167-168).

In the following four chapters, Higton offers a new vision of the university: the virtuous university, the sociable university, the good university, and the negotiable university. “All these claims involve both an affirmation of what universities are already, at their best, and a desire to work on those universities until they become better at what they properly do” (255).

As a person who has taught at a large state university, two seminaries, and now, a private Christian liberal arts university with attendant professional schools, I resonate deeply with nearly everything Higton says. University life, even in the most secular of universities, can be a place for intellectual discipleship and
spiritual formation in the lives of both students and faculty. For the Christian, one’s theological assumptions make it so, especially the affirmation that “all truth is God’s truth.” Faculty may live faithfully in many of those contexts without fear of reprisal.

The challenge in some contexts is how to participate in one’s academic guild(s) without forsaking certain theological commitments. Philosophical naturalism is so virulent in some university departments that it is nearly impossible to achieve promotion and tenure without submitting to its tyranny. Nevertheless, where universities genuinely appreciate diversity among faculty, and where Christian faculty members do good work, higher education can be a very satisfying calling.

This is a very important book, not least for faculty development. I fear that the cost will render it inaccessible to many who would profit from its argument. Hopefully, Oxford University Press will issue a more reasonably priced paperback version soon.

C. Ben Mitchell
Graves Professor of Moral Philosophy
Union University