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Williams, Vandenhoeck, & Ruprecht's "Divinings: Religion at Harvard From Its Origins in New England Ecclesiastical History to the 175th Anniversary" - Book Review

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George H. Williams
Divinings: Religion at Harvard From Its Origins in New England
Ecclesiastical History to the 175th Anniversary.

Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2014 hb 1303pp \$200
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When professor Samuel Eliot Morison published his classic historical work, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636–1936*, in 1936, he carefully avoided almost any mention of religion. Certainly, God was on the sidelines. George Williams makes no such omission. In fact, in *Divinings*, religion at Harvard is the organizing focus and central theme of this expansive three-volume set. In what began as a lecture to commemorate the 175th anniversary of Harvard Divinity School, Williams tells its story in remarkable detail—and so much more. It is, in fact, a history of the entire university, with particular attention paid to the role that religion played in the life of the university, and the relationship of the university with church and state (society). It is a remarkably old yet familiar tale for many academic administrators, highlighting a number of issues still at play in higher education today.

Divinings is really three books in one. Volume One, *First Light*, details the formation of Harvard College in 1636, including the development and understanding of now familiar phrases such as “a republic of letters,” “the culture of the college,” and “a community of scholars,” ideas and practices that still dominate the psyche of academics when they speak of academic life or being at college. These powerful educational ideas and ideals developed early under the guidance of Henry Dunster, Harvard College’s first president (1640 – 1659), certainly long before Cardinal Newman popularized them in his *Idea of the University* in the mid-19th century. In *First Light*, Williams strings together three motifs: the college’s relationship with church and state, an understanding of covenant theology (promise), and the necessity of personal and social reform (renovation). It is a complex task, thoroughly documented. In addition, his treatment of the development of the concept of institutional governance (with twelve overseers, six magistrates and six elders—a number with deep religious significance) is particularly interesting.

In Volume Three, *Calm Rising*, Williams chronicles the impact of three social movements on Harvard life in general, and the divinity school in particular, that came to full fruition in the 1960’s: the anti-war movement, the sexual revolution, and the civil rights movement. It is an inside look at what proved to be interesting and yeasty times in Cambridge. This volume also examines the twenty-year presidency of Derek Bok, and the role and influence of The Memorial Church as a significant moral presence inside the university.

Both the first and third volumes (each 300 pages) could and do stand alone in many respects. However, sandwiched between them is Volume Two, *The Augustan Age*, a colossal six hundred-page history, covering the years at Harvard from 1805 to 1971. This volume records in detail Harvard’s emergence as a prominent world-renowned institution, the founding and maturing of the Harvard Divinity School, and the formation and influence of The Memorial Church. Each of these strands of development brought pesky questions and issues regarding the separation of church and state, the inclusivity of other religions (and other theological and ecclesial traditions), the nature of personal and

social transformation, and the extent and practice of a social gospel. The scope and scale of the second volume alone is breathtaking. Only a scholar with Williams' knowledge, fortitude, and experience (he taught for almost 50 years at Harvard and the Divinity School) would attempt to pull off such a complex and demanding task. Williams did, and he did, with the assistance of many friends, scholars, and supporters even after his death in 2000.

I recently read an article about the life of Ernest Boyer, a former U.S. Commissioner of Education and President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. It was a scholarly piece, carefully done. However, there was no mention of Boyer's religious convictions that shaped almost every aspect of his professional life and work, including a belief in the connectedness of all things, the necessity of service and community, and the importance of every word, work, and person. It was simply incomplete, leaving the dots unconnected. The same is true of the story of Harvard College. It is an incomplete story if religion is omitted. Williams connects the dots. You can not understand how Harvard College developed over the centuries amidst the assortment of ongoing external and internal struggles without mention of theology, eschatology, ecclesiology, church polity and politics, and the extent of tolerance and inclusion—not to mention just plain old Christian meanness. For example, many histories report that the first president, Henry Dunster, lost his job because of his wife's poor cooking and his excessive enthusiasm when disciplining students. While these may have been contributing factors, Williams points out that he lost his job principally because he moved away from the accepted Puritan stance on infant baptism, thus undermining his support from key individuals. His firing and subsequent self-imposed exile had more to do with his theology than his temperament. For this contribution, Williams has done Harvard a great favor, no doubt a labor of love.

Divinings also provides the most detailed history of the Harvard Divinity School (HDS) to date, set within the stories of the emergence of a private, world-renowned institution, a number of influential presidents and deans, and The Memorial Church. It is a careful, insightful work, but it suffers from a malady common to many institutional histories. There are simply too many names, dates, and activities. Without a deep connection or particular interest in HDS, a reader simply gets lost in the six hundred pages of the second volume, and there is still another volume to go!

The third volume, *Calm Rising*, a story of the legacy of president Derek Bok, and the storms and changes wrought in light of and in reaction to the civil rights movement, the sexual revolution, and the anti-Viet Nam war movement, was most interesting to me. This is an insightful case study, illustrating how the intersections of religion, politics, and social stress and change shape governance and leadership decisions in a major intellectual center such as Harvard. Certainly, religion played a key role in this age of upheaval and globalization, as Williams puts it. On a more local scale, these issues are still at work on many faith-based campuses today.

As I have noted, there is much to commend in this three-volume set. It is a major scholarly effort, but there are three aspects of this work that give me pause. First, it is simply hard to read. The narrative is so packed with facts, figures, and other parenthetical information that it does not move easily. In fact, it is arduous. And a thorough reading of the texts requires more than a passing knowledge of theology and church history. For example, here's a sentence from Volume One: "In the sixteenth century, "magisterial"

(territorial) Protestantism, as distinguished from non-territorial Protestantism, for example, voluntarist Anabaptism (though it, too, had broken away from the seven medieval sacraments), still continued two ordinances, baptism and the eucharist, as salvific, and hence as providing at once the means, the sign, and the seal of salvation or conversion to the redeemed and upright life” (p. 89). There are many such passages.

Moreover, the scope and complexity of the work make it difficult to follow. The embedded motifs and themes throughout the volumes that are confusing to track, and the work is, at the same time, a history of religion at Harvard, a history of Harvard Divinity School and The Memorial Church, all embedded within a history of Harvard College with detailed reviews of key presidents, deans, faculty, decisions, and key events along the way. There is an enormous amount of detail that only the most interested scholars of the history of Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School will find helpful or interesting.

Finally, in the Preface of Volume One, Richard Hunt makes mention of a term used by Williams, “luminous particularity,” He suggests that “Indeed, in *Divinings*, we find such luminous particularities and all of them elucidate the history of religion at Harvard but also the history of the university and the history of America itself” (p. x). Of course, Harvard is a central institution in the history of higher education in the United States, but there are many others, too. Certainly, those stories need to be told as well. To suggest that the history of Harvard sheds light on the history of America itself is correct in one sense, but terribly self-absorbed in another sense.

The editor has been congratulated for resisting the pressures to reduce this work to one volume. I think it would have been a good idea to do so. Certainly, I would like to see a shorter, more concise version of *Divinings*, amenable to a broader audience. Unless you are working on a dissertation or scholarly work related to the influence of religion in higher education or you carry a particular interest in the history of Harvard College and Harvard Divinity School, I do not recommend this three-volume set. It is difficult to read, arduous to follow, and a bit myopic, offering an insulated and somewhat isolated view of the history of America.

Patrick Allen