

## BOOK REVIEWS

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### **THE SECULARIZATION OF THE ACADEMY**

GEORGE M. MARSDEN & BRADLEY J. LONGFIELD, EDS. OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1992. (Out of print)

### **THE SOUL OF THE AMERICAN UNIVERSITY: FROM PROTESTANT ESTABLISHMENT TO ESTABLISHED NONBELIEF**

GEORGE M. MARSDEN, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1994.

### **THE OUTRAGEOUS IDEA OF CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP**

GEORGE M. MARSDEN, OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997.

*Reviewed by James Heft, S.M.*

Looking back on a long and distinguished career as a sociologist, Peter Berger remarked that he had had two key ideas about the shape of Western society—the social construction of knowledge and secularization—but that only one of them had turned out to be true. He once quipped that if India is the most religious country in the world and Sweden the least, then the United States of America is a nation of Indians ruled by Swedes. For the past decade evangelical historian George M. Marsden, the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, has argued that the elite universities of the United States are the least religious institutions in the country. Indeed, according to Marsden, they have become the centers of established nonbelief. Along with a number of other evangelical scholars, including Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll, Marsden has challenged the widely-accepted account of the history of higher education—the gradual liberation of learning from the narrow and oppressive anti-intellectualism of religious institutions—found in Rudolph's *The American College and University: A History* (1962) and Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University* (1965). Marsden's revisionist history of this subject has stirred a national

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debate and found a number of thoughtful supporters. Taken together, the positions laid out in the books being reviewed must be taken seriously by all who think about the future of religious scholarship in higher education.

Eleven papers presented by eight authors at a 1990 Duke conference convened by Marsden appeared in the 1992 volume *The Secularization of the Academy*. Marsden's lead essay sketches the argument that he would set forth at length in his 1994 history of higher education, *The Soul of the American University*. Bradley Longfield contributes two essays, one describing the changes in public universities during the 19th century and the other describing the "end of public religion" at Yale between the two world wars. D. G. Hart provides three chapters: first, a description of Daniel Coit Gilman's encouragement of scientific research at Johns Hopkins; second, the post-World War II shift from theology to religious studies as a form of humanism; and third, a six-page annotated bibliography on Christianity and the university in the United States. James Turner's essay on the religious roots of the secular humanities curriculum provides an excellent genealogy of the rationales for curricular changes in leading universities during the last half of the 19th century. Robert Wood Lynn documents how the colleges of the Northern Presbyterian Church attenuated their affiliation with their founding church during the last 40 years. David Bebbington and G. A. Rawlyk provide a comparative dimension by describing, respectively, the secularization of British universities since the mid-19th century and a similar process in a number of Canadian universities. Gleason (1995) looks at U.S. Catholic universities and colleges over the past 50 years, an essay that would form part of a chapter of his magisterial study of the history of Catholic higher education, *Contending with Modernity*. Taken together, these essays, written mainly by Protestants, constitute a growing body of scholarship that describes the disestablishment of religion within the academy.

In December 1992, Marsden gave the presidential address at the American Society of Church History entitled, "The Ambiguities of Academic Freedom." The address, covered by the national press, would reappear in a somewhat expanded version as chapter 16 of *The Soul*. After retelling the story of Lafayette College's 1913 dismissal of moral philosopher John Mecklin, one of several such dismissals in the first part of the 20th century that prompted 2 years later the formation of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), Marsden explained how the AAUP proceeded to defend an idea of academic freedom that disdained religion, sped up the professionalism of the professorate, and created a body of national experts that ignored local cultures.

Thus, when 2 years later Marsden's major work, *The Soul of the American University*, appeared, many in the academic community were already primed for the national debate they rightly expected it would provoke. This book provides nothing less than a history of American higher edu-

cation, beginning appropriately with Harvard College, and ending with a "Concluding Unscientific Postscript," in which Marsden takes off his historian's hat, passionately criticizes the modern academy, and offers his own prescriptions for its improvement. While critics differ over whether the historical changes Marsden documents have been to the academy's benefit or detriment, few can challenge the quality of his scholarship: many, however, have challenged the postscript.

Marsden begins his book by noting a "striking paradox": though "the American university system was built upon the foundation of evangelical Protestant colleges," by the 1920s these institutions had become "conspicuously inhospitable to the letter of such evangelism" (1994, p. 4). In subsequent years, "the paradox turns into an irony" (p. 4) in that liberal Protestantism eventually turned against the liberal Protestant establishment, and our nation's leading universities ended up excluding any religious influence, except as chaplaincies or divinity schools, both perceived as no longer a part of the core business of the academy.

The body of the book is divided into three parts. The first and shortest part describes that antebellum establishment of colleges that was very much at home with a pervasive Protestant influence, despite the University of Virginia's exception of Jeffersonian "infidelity" (Marsden, 1994, p. 79). Dedicated to serving both the community and the Church, these colleges were clearly religious institutions:

In 1840, four-fifths of the college presidents of denominationally related colleges were clergymen, as were two-thirds of state college presidents.... Most faculty...were expected to be generalists who could teach almost anything. Even if they were not clergymen, they were expected to be pious. (Marsden, 1994, p. 81)

The second part of the book describes the huge impact of modern science on these institutions. Marsden devotes individual chapters to institutions now considered elite, showing how the impact of Enlightenment thinking and the near-cult of research-based science transformed, in the matter of 50 years, the once-religious institutions into institutions of established nonbelief. The classicist curriculum of the antebellum colleges was outmoded, and the experience of the Civil War opened the way to more practical needs. Republican reform "combines commitment to industrial expansion with moral idealism" (Marsden, 1994, pp. 99-100). Men, mainly from the Northeast, worked to place colleges with universities whose first concern would be American leadership and prosperity. The final part of Marsden's history explains how the vision of late 19th-century liberal Protestant university presidents—Charles W. Eliot of Harvard, Daniel Coit Gilman of Johns Hopkins, and Andrew Dixon White of Cornell—combined Christian and national interests, and

eventually embraced enthusiastically “value-free scientific inquiry” (Marsden, 1994, p. 265), an approach to academic work that quickly came to dominate elite universities. In his 1876 inaugural address, Eliot confidently declared: “A university can not be built upon a sect” (Marsden, 1994, p. 116) and proposed science as the best means by which the humanistic (typically described as “nonsectarian”) ideals of Christianity could be realized. Gradually, religion was consigned to private spheres; and Christianity as an intellectual force, a force that was hardly powerful in colleges of the previous centuries, simply disappeared.

In his postscript, Marsden argues for the re-entry of Christian scholarship in the academy. He does not advocate the return of Protestant hegemony; he recognizes that colleges with strong religious traditions both in the past and now often ignore due process and conduct only mediocre scholarship. What Marsden does advocate is the sort of scholarship done by Christians who are willing to follow the rules of “procedural rationality.” Elite institutions should embrace such scholarship for at least two reasons: given the basic argument of postmodernism that neutral scholarship is impossible, religious viewpoints carefully argued should be welcomed by the academy, as are the viewpoints, for example, of feminists and Marxists. Second, given the modern academy’s commitment to pluralism, those scholars who do Christian scholarship, so evidently absent from the elite academy, should receive some sort of affirmative action in hiring.

Many of Marsden’s critics doubted that there is any defensible “Christian scholarship,” unless it refers to theology or is in some way about religion. In the light of these doubts, he wrote still another book, a slimmer volume, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, that appeared in 1997. It opens with the blunt assertion: “Contemporary university culture is hollow at its core. Not only does it lack a spiritual center, but it is also without any real alternative” (Marsden, 1997, p. 3). He reiterates his confidence that postmodern epistemology makes the exclusion of faith-based scholarship indefensible, and he states confidently that the Enlightenment is over. He offers examples of how three Christian doctrines can contribute valuable insight to scholarly work: Creation helps scholars see a plausible basis for moral judgments; the incarnation links the material and the spiritual realms and makes finding truth in the midst of contingency possible; and original sin helps scholars understand the ever-present evils of society in a way that does not lead to despair. He concludes his argument by pointing to examples of first-rate scholarship, mentioning Charles Taylor, Eleonore Stump, Alvin Plantinga, and Nicholas Wolterstorff among others, and by underscoring the great need “to build and strengthen institutions that bring together scholars concerned with faith and learning” (Marsden, 1997, p. 102).

Marsden’s overall contribution to the discussion of the relationship of faith to learning has been enormous. His revisionist history of American

higher education is well on its way to being accepted as conventional wisdom. His challenge to the secular academy to open its departments and curricula to Christian scholarship is long overdue. The sheer volume of criticism and commentary his work has generated over the past decade make it clear that an academic nerve has been deftly touched. And the quality of his historical work has been, on the whole, widely lauded, even by those who deeply disagree with his prescriptions for Christian scholarship. We are all deeply in Marsden's debt.

Some exceptions to his historical narrative, though, complicate the current scene. A few evangelical colleges have withstood the push to secularization—among them Calvin College, where Marsden taught for some years, and Wheaton College—and can boast of high academic achievements. Would that there were more. Most evangelical colleges that have retained a strong religious identity have paid a heavy price; namely, low academic quality and theological stagnation.

In more recent years, Marsden has pointed to the Catholic colleges and universities as institutions that have “preserved a distinctive academic culture” (Marsden, 1997, p. 103) but still have not become strong as research universities. In a 1998 address given at a Catholic university, he suggested that a good case could be made that Catholic universities today are in much the same situation as leading Protestant institutions were in the 1930s and that steps must be taken now so that the autonomy and freedom appropriate to universities be determined by these institutions in a distinctively Catholic way. A number of pressures on Catholic colleges and universities, not least of which has been John Paul II's 1990 Apostolic Constitution on Catholic higher education, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae*, have raised the issue of these institutions' distinctive religious character. Had Marsden spent more time exploring some of the best colleges that are exceptions to the secularization narrative, he might have made clearer some of the alternatives to the established nonbelief so characteristic of our leading institutions.

Also, despite his efforts, Marsden's definition of “Christian scholarship” remains unclear in some basic ways. How is scholarship to be understood as Christian? Can it be done only by believing Christians? Does it refer only to the attitude with which one does one's scholarly work, or does it also affect the substance of what one studies? Would Christian scholarship have relevance mainly in the humanities and social sciences and not in the natural sciences? Is there a Christian understanding of meiosis, as one critic asked? In the humanities, is there a distinctly Christian approach to writing history?

Marsden surely assumes that the dedicated Christian scholar, like himself, employs the best scholarly methods. Therefore, the faith of Christian scholars does not exempt them from being consummate professionals, accepting fully “the standards of evidence and arguments” (Marsden, 1997, p. 47). While distancing himself from the more radical forms of postmod-

ernism, Marsden seeks “to balance the advocacy implicit in all scholarship with academic standards that are scientific or ‘reasonable’ in the sense of being accessible to people from many different ideological camps” (Marsden, 1997, p. 45). This means, among other things, that Christian scholars will not “argue on the basis of the authority of their special or private revelations” (p. 48). By accepting these rules of the secular academy, that is, doing one’s scholarship by employing only a “procedural rationality,” Marsden believes that a Christian scholar should find a hearing. But at this point in his argument, he may be giving too much away. “Procedural rationality” is one of the Enlightenment bases on which the modern university has been built. Its employment means, among other things, that theology, which accepts revelation as true, as opposed to religious studies which, if it does that, only describes revelation, could never be done in the modern university. Another step is needed: the expansion of the forms of legitimate rationality just as rigorous as the procedural rules of the Enlightenment, but more capacious as to what might be admitted as evidence. Liberal Protestantism leaders in elite universities promoted “procedural rationality”; if only those methods are permitted, the robust character of Christian scholarship is not likely to be realized.

Marsden sometimes makes an observation that seems to privilege the epistemology of Christian scholars. For example, he states that “only a Christian, I think, is likely to take questions about piety as seriously on their own terms as Hambrick-Stow does” (Marsden, 1997, p. 65). While it would be incorrect to read Marsden as saying that Christians, solely because they are Christians, do better Christian scholarship than non-Christians, he must be carefully understood on this point. Otherwise, those who are skeptical of the entire idea of Christian scholarship will continue to exclude it from the academy. A more fruitful argument for Christian scholarship could perhaps be made by avoiding any suggestion of special “insider insights” by believing academics (except in doing theology), and exploring more subtle and generous forms of rationality than only procedural ones.

Marsden’s judgment that the Enlightenment is over may be underestimating the number of academics, and not just those in the natural sciences, who continue to do their work with full confidence that their methodologies produce objective knowledge. As long as the empirical methodologies do not become metaphysical methodologies, as long as academics realize that the results of their careful empirical investigations describe an important part of, but not all of, important reality, the accomplishments of the Enlightenment can be welcomed. Recent writings of thinkers like Casanova and Taylor on the Enlightenment help us understand that some of its achievements are not only quite positive, but they would not likely have happened had the churches remained in control of both society and the academy and had asked how modern science might enrich, for example, Christian theology. What

Chesterton said of Christianity might also be said of the Enlightenment: it hasn't been tried and found wanting so much as it has been found difficult and in too many respects untried. But what we still need in the academy is the recognition of multiple methodologies, all of which should carry within them rigor and an expectation of precision appropriate to the subject matter studied.

To assume that the Enlightenment is over, and then to base an appeal for the admission of religiously informed scholarship into the academy on the examples of feminist and gay scholarship, may well be to build a place for Christian scholarship on sand. Having witnessed first-hand Stanley Fish's English Department at Duke may have suggested this appeal to Marsden. But identifying feminist and gay studies as examples of legitimate forms of committed scholarship runs a risk of lumping Christians with a form of identity politics that may be out of fashion soon. Moreover, many advocates of diversity are secularists, or at least are hardly in favor of promoting religious scholarship. Marsden's argument for the inclusion of scholarship about Christianity might have been better made by pointing to the extensive and multi-formed influence of Christianity in the United States, to say nothing about its influence worldwide. We should have already learned through recent experience that ignorance about religions makes understanding politics and movements in the world much more difficult. And though the shape of the modern university is very different than that of John Henry Newman's Oxford at the beginning of the 19th century, Newman's argument that theology—not just religious studies—should be an integral part of the curriculum remains cogent, though we are only beginning to work out that inclusion.

In addition to arguing for the inclusion of Christian scholarship in the secular academy, Marsden has done a great deal to exemplify the excellent scholarship. At the same time, his narrative of the secularization of higher education might have won over more of his secular audience had he spelled out in greater detail the ways in which various forms of Christianity have in fact not championed serious scholarship. It is not a question of Marsden not knowing this sad history; he established his reputation with his 1980 book *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. In fact, in 1981, to the dismay of a number of evangelicals and many fundamentalists, he testified as an "expert witness" against an Arkansas creation-science law which required that every discussion of evolution be "balanced" with "creation science" (Marsden, 1997, pp. 38-39). Besides falsely believing that evolution and creation are opposed, "creation science" says Marsden, is simply bad science. At different points in both his books, he concedes that conservative Christians have been anti-intellectual, and that their scholarly production has been unimpressive, as historian Mark Noll documents in his 1994 book, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*. Yet, on the whole, one finishes reading these books by Marsden with the impression that the fears of the secularists in the academy

have not been identified with sufficient forthrightness. As Mark Schwehn and Dorothy Bass of Valparaiso University commented in their review of *The Soul*, "those concerned about contact between higher learning and Christianity need to examine not only the condition of religion in dominant intellectual centers, but also the condition of intellect in dominant religious centers" (1995, pp. 293-294).

Not only evangelicals are at fault. Substantive prejudice against Christian scholarship exists among elite academics. In 1965, Harvard's Harvey Cox wrote that "the whole idea of a 'Christian college' or university after the breaking apart of the medieval synthesis has little meaning" (Marsden, 1994, p. 417). Stanley Fish stated that Marsden's proposal undermines what he should really want: not the inclusion of religious discourse in a debate no one is allowed to win, but the triumph of religious discourse and the silencing of its atheistic opponents. Wolfe wrote in 1996 that there are compelling reasons why "disestablishment is ultimately in everyone's interest, even the interest of the faithful" (p. 77). Wolfe has since left Boston University, has become more sympathetic to the possibilities of religion being a positive influence in society and in some forms even in the academy, and is currently director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College. Such reactions from prominent secular academics at major universities provide evidence that Marsden is not just tilting at windmills when he asserts that some in the academy are hostile to religion. Perhaps more to the point, most academics are simply ignorant of religion. Unlike most citizens of the United States, most faculty members in our universities are, as was noted at the outset of this essay, the most secular of persons.

What Marsden has been willing to confront, and what scholars who see an important if complex relationship between their faith and their intellectual work confront with him, is mainly ignorance and not hostility. Or, more accurately put, they confront a hostility that is largely based on a very narrow and prejudicial view of religion, one that sees in it only oppressive authority and anti-intellectualism. This is the nerve that Marsden has exposed, and for that we should be grateful.

The last chapter of Marsden's 1997 work does point to a way ahead. There, he talks about the importance of building networks of scholars (e.g., the Society of Christian Philosophers) and institutions that support excellent scholarship which is in regular conversation with religious traditions. The building of such institutions would contribute to the pluralism of higher education in the United States. The more such institutions are developed, and the more excellent the Christian scholarship that academics within them and within the secular academy produce, the less will the academy at large be able to claim ignorance of what religion can and ought to contribute to our knowledge of humanity, the world, and God.

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## CATHOLIC SCHOOLS STILL MAKE A DIFFERENCE: TEN YEARS OF RESEARCH 1991-2000

THOMAS C. HUNT, ELLIS A. JOSEPH, RONALD J. NUZZI (EDS.).  
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*Reviewed by Anthony J. Dosen, C.M., Ph.D.*

Thomas Hunt, Ellis Joseph, and Ronald Nuzzi, in their book *Catholic Schools Still Make a Difference*, have provided Catholic educators an excellent, comprehensive source of information about research in Catholic schools. It expands upon John Convey's *Catholic Schools Make a Difference: Twenty-Five Years of Research* (1992), tying together the various conversations that were begun in Convey's volume and providing new threads for students', practitioners', and researchers' reflection. The editors gathered a diverse group of scholars to examine the literature on Catholic school research and collaboratively developed a volume that will provide the reader with a wide range of information and resources about Catholic education.

Especially when read in conjunction with Convey's (1992) volume, *Catholic Schools Still Make a Difference* provides researchers, students, and practitioners with a wealth of information gleaned from over 35 years of Catholic school research as well as a history of the development of Catholic

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