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The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship

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The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship by George Marsden tackles the reality of academia's abandonment, if not rejection, of religion within the academic setting. As a Christian scholar, Marsden emphatically challenges any notion implying that one's religious or Christian perspective indubitably taints true intellectual comprehension. Mr. Marsden confronts such implications in a series of introductory inquiries, such as: "Why, in a culture in which many academics profess to believe in God, do so few reflect on the academic implications of that belief?" "Why are there no identifiable Christian schools of thought in academia to compare with various Marxist, feminist, gay, post-modern, African-American, conservative or liberal schools of thought?" "What is it about the dominant academic culture that teaches people they must suppress reflection on the intellectual implications of their faith?" George Marsden attempts to address these questions, among others, in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*.

Marsden begins his exploration of this subject matter by first detailing a historical explanation as to why mainstream academia has come to trivialize and minimize religion's influence inside the university. In what he defines as his "Historical Argument," Marsden proposes as his central theme the notion that academics today are suspect of Christianity because of Christianity's historically authoritarian role in higher education. Whereas Christianity focused on the more particular and parochial, America's pace-setting, Protestant universities of the post-Civil War era focused on conformity and free scientific inquiry. Such an approach, in the liberal Protestant's view, would lead to a unified national culture of high ideals.

As liberal Protestant universities prospered throughout the early twentieth century, institutions became increasingly secular. This secularization continued throughout the 50s, 60s and 70s, until 1980, when clear prejudice against religious perspectives occurred. Now, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, we find religion to be on a "short leash," contained within a department or confined to the realm of the extracurricular.

Why have our campus environments become void of religion? Marsden cites three factors affecting the secularization of the American university: academia's mutu-

ally exclusive perception of science and religion; the rise of multiculturalism in America; and the gross distortion of the true constitutional meaning behind the phrase "separation of church and state."

Mainstream academia has adopted a philosophy claiming that scientific exploration is the most valuable standard for truth. This standard, Marsden claims, is perceived by academics to be contaminated when religious faith is introduced into the arena. Marsden, however, discredits this belief on a number of fronts, but most importantly because it "unduly favors scholarship based on purely naturalistic presuppositions." Such scholarship, like Freud's theory on religious origin, is fabricated from a biased premise.

The era of multiculturalism has reinvigorated fear of imperial Christianity resurfacing in society and squelching the voices of the less represented. Marsden suggests that such a belief is erroneous because today a more moderate, diverse Christian population exists -- rather than the feared, ultra-conservative, one-minded Christian population of yesteryear.

Marsden considers the anti-establishment clause of the First Amendment to be widely misinterpreted, with abhorrent results. What was originally meant to protect against a national religion has been manipulated over the years to define any expression of religious perspective within a university system to be unconstitutional. Marsden argues that a teacher's religious viewpoint, if relevant to the subject material, is necessary for a complete presentation of facts and critical to the pursuit of truth.

How, then, should Christians participate in an academic environment? According to Marsden, we are to become "resident aliens," obeying the "laws of the land" as long as they do not conflict with our higher allegiances. As such, we must guard against tendentious scholarship by offering a refreshing alternative to the partisanship prevalent throughout academia. We must be critical of our own heritage as much as we are critical of others. In so doing, we learn to communicate more clearly the significance of Christianity and its necessary presence in academia.

Critics may say that Christianity cannot play a significant role in academia because its theories and principles are inapplicable to many academic specialties, such as the technical and mathematical fields. Marsden undoubtedly disagrees with such a notion. He does concede that the more a scholar relies on empirical observation, the less apparent the relevance of faith. However, Mr. Marsden believes faith affects all scholarship in four distinct ways. First, it may be the motivating factor for scholars to succeed in their particular endeavors. Second, one's religious faith may affect the applications one has for his or her scholarship, such as altruism. Third, scholars may define a specialty related to their faith perspectives. Lastly, faith may play an important role in a scholar's reflection on the wider implications of his or her work and its subsequent place in a larger framework of meaning. Marsden believes faith perspectives, once introduced into mainstream academia, expose the "myth of a liberal neutrality" in higher education and challenge academic reductionism.

Theological perspectives, according to Marsden, often provide intellectual rationale where secular academia falls short. Christian theism, with its unambiguous perspectives on Creation, the Incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and the human condition,

provides legitimacy to support moral intuitions that many academics share. This theological presence protects against the tendency to absolutize the relative and holds us accountable to a higher allegiance.

What strategy should we adopt to implement a Christian perspective into academia? Marsden believes several things can be done by large and small institutions to ensure the representation of Christian scholarship in higher education. First, he suggests institutions must bring together scholars concerned with faith and learning. Secondly, schools with a Christian heritage must take specific steps to combat the process of secularization. Thirdly, communal worship, fellowship and camaraderie should be cultivated and promoted throughout the institution. By enacting these measures, Marsden concludes that a religiously diverse and healthy culture will create an intellectually superior culture.

I find many of Marsden's theories and arguments significant and applicable to the current condition of higher education. First and foremost, I concur with the author's critique of the public's perception of an authoritarian Christian perspective. Although a present-day classification of the Christian perspective as authoritarian may be inaccurate, it remains clear that the historical, ultra-conservative institutions of long ago created lasting impressions that do not easily dissipate. To combat such impressions, I agree that we as Christians must lay down our guard and enter into the academic arena without parochial, partisan concerns. We must, to reestablish trust in our perspective, be willing to look back upon Christianity and critique its failings as much as we celebrate its achievements. Perhaps then we will find the public arena more accepting of a Christian viewpoint and less inclined to cry "foul" when such a perspective is introduced.

Marsden argues that universities and colleges have embraced three false positions that have been attributed to an increased probability and rate of secularization. Specifically, he finds academia's perception of scientific exploration, multiculturalism and church and state to be erroneous. He argues that each has worked independently to disengage academia from the critical concepts and philosophies of Christianity. I agree wholeheartedly with Marsden's critique of these factors and wish to address one of these factors more intimately.

After receiving a degree in biology and having attended medical school, I am comfortable in defining science and religion as mutually inclusive rather than the more prominent, less accurate notion that the two are mutually exclusive. How can I make such a claim? I do so by embracing the revelation I experienced during my six years of scientific inquiry. First, I found that the more I discovered through scientific exploration, the more I became aware of my dependence on an omniscient Other. In medical school, my colleagues and I would often discuss the limits of our intellect. I remember multiple evenings when my colleagues and I "crashed" for some coffee and comfort after many hours of intense study and exploration of our cadavers in Gross Anatomy. The complexities and brilliant "architecture" present within the constructs of the human body are compelling. We declared ourselves "significantly insignificant" when reflecting on our experiences, and all of us gave credence to God for the magnificence of human creation. As Marsden suggests, this incident serves as an example of how a the-

ological perspective can provide intellectual rationale where secular academia falls short.

Marsden presents a clear and substantial argument detailing the false concept of liberal neutrality. He provides substantial evidence describing academia's tendency to lean toward a philosophy naturalistic reductionism. In so doing, each branch of academia aggrandizes its own perspective without acknowledging the role of God. Evidence of this exists on my own campus today as we find "God-talk" becoming confined to specific classes, majors or functions. In fact, our top administrators have recognized this truth and have actively encouraged administrators and faculty members to comply with *Ex Corde Ecclesia*. This papal document addresses the dilution of catholicity and encourages a restoration of genuine Christianity throughout Catholic colleges and universities.

In summary, I conclude that Marsden has sufficiently and accurately detailed the history and condition of Christian scholarship within academia. I find his observations and suggestions to be extremely helpful in assessing my own Christian academic environment. I am confident that, through adherence to his recommendations, Christian scholarship can prevail in the private and public arena as we embark upon the twenty-first century.