
New Dogmas for Old In the American University

James Blount Griffin

La Lumiere School

The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief, by George M. Marsden. *New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.* xii + 462 pp. \$35.

The secularization of the College is no violation of its motto, '*Christo et Ecclesiae.*' For, as I interpret those sacred ideas, the cause of Christ and the Church is advanced by whatever liberalizes and enriches and enlarges the mind.

—Frederic Henry Hedge
Harvard Divinity School, 1866

In discussing the queen of the sciences, John Henry Newman noted that unless one limits God to the role of "constitutional monarch" in the kingdom of nature, theology must remain at the center of university studies, for without theology as a balance, all other forms of scientific inquiry become ends unto themselves. Thus in 1852 he foresaw how Western universities established for the teaching of both human knowledge and divine wisdom might instead become godless hydras of research specialties.

George Marsden's latest work exam-

ines how Newman's fears were realized in this nation's most prestigious institutions of learning. Marsden's purpose is not to turn back the clock on the modern campus, but to investigate why American higher education underwent such a major transformation not with a bang but a whimper. Detached but lucid, his book is an episodic tapestry which jumps from school to school over three centuries to show how modern intellectual movements changed America's colleges from lettered societies of a loosely Christian culture into secular technocracies of an industrial state. Blinded by millennialism, college presidents and overseers confused the progress of scientific knowledge with the advancement of the kingdom of God, and thereby set American higher education on a secular path. The search for moral truth became tertiary to research and fundraising.

In composing this narrative,

Marsden focuses on trends rather than exceptions, and so looks most closely at America's flagship universities, private and public, enriching his story with tales of faculty feuds and student riots. He concludes that from the founding of Harvard in 1636 until recent decades, a dual purpose existed within most of America's leading colleges: to be both guardians of Christian culture and servants of the public interest. This duality was scarcely noticed as long as Protestantism dominated American culture, but posed a major dilemma once Hegel's idealism, Emerson's transcendentalism, Bentham's utilitarianism, Darwin's theory of evolution, Spencer's positivism, and other *Weltanschauungen* challenged the central place of Christianity in Western civilization. As Protestant orthodoxy gave way before the new secular faith in scientific progress, America's elite colleges sacrificed traditional learning to maintain their positions of leadership in an industrial society. Three of Marsden's examples illustrate this point adequately: Harvard, Johns Hopkins, and the University of Michigan.

Harvard's curriculum during its first two centuries emphasized classical studies, biblical languages, and philosophy rather than theology. In essence, as early as the eighteenth century, Harvard was not, as often imagined, a Christian school but a liberal arts college operated by Christians; the nature of inquiry was guided less by religious dogma than by New England's cultural inertia. Daily chapel attendance and other customs went by the wayside after 1869 as President Charles Eliot instituted progressive reforms. The schools

of divinity, law, and medicine became separate graduate departments, and the number of doctoral students of arts and sciences multiplied. The elective system was implemented, making every student his own academic dean, and this led to the establishment of new areas of study, most notably William James's psychology. Whereas Harvard in 1850 might in some ways be described as medieval, Harvard by 1900 had become more like Johns Hopkins.

Johns Hopkins was founded in 1876 as America's first research university based on the German model of academic freedom and graduate studies, rather than in the English tradition of Christian humanism. Though its major benefactor was a Quaker, the university was explicitly nonsectarian. Its first president, Daniel Coit Gilman, a Congregationalist and Yale graduate, concurred with the trustees that the free inquiry of the scientific method must remain central. Therefore, one of the first guest lecturers invited was Thomas Huxley, and Gilman likewise recruited faculty according to academic, rather than religious, credentials; Christian piety was desired but not required. G. Stanley Hall and George Sylvester Morris, for instance, taught the history of philosophy, and both worked to divorce philosophy from theology, an idea which would lead to a theory of knowledge inimical to religious belief.

Having been founded later, state colleges such as Michigan lacked the ancient traditions and original orthodoxy of Harvard and Yale and thus grew rapidly and easily into research universities. Michigan's president from 1871 to 1909, James Burrill Angell, was as

evangelical for Christ's moral teachings as for science, but he and the liberal Protestants of his generation agreed more on the sureties of the scientific method than on church doctrine; moreover, the next generation of scholars, especially those trained in Germany, demanded that holy writ too be put under critical scrutiny. At Michigan in 1894 John Dewey wrote: "because science represents a method of truth to which so far as we can discover, no limits whatsoever can be put, . . . it is necessary for the church to reconstruct its doctrines of revelation and inspiration, and for the individual to reconstruct . . . what spiritual truth is and the nature of its authority over him." For Dewey, despite his Calvinist upbringing, traditional religion was to be replaced by progressive public schooling, which would serve as the universal church in the democratic future.

Thus, at these three universities and dozens of others discussed by Marsden, a general pattern may be discerned. First, denominational theology was neglected or renounced for non-sectarian moral philosophy. Second, moral philosophy was estranged from the traditional theology of revealed religion. Third, as philosophy became detached from theology, each scientific discipline was thereby free to develop its own theory of inquiry, and from that point, each science could itself become a sort of religion, making the university simply an administrative organ for specialists accountable only to peer review.

Marsden's achievement is to trace this thread in the development of American education and thus illustrate colorfully the multiple ironies on the

modern campus, where Marxist professors condemn the political economy which funds their own salaries and publications, and deconstructionists turn the conversation of culture into relativistic gibberish. However, most discombobulating to the author, who calls himself a "fairly traditional Protestant of Reformed theological heritage," is the modern assumption that religious faith is a handicap for a scholar; certainly such a premise is not only bigoted but contrary to the spirit of Western learning during the past two thousand years.

Unfortunately, *The Soul of the American University*, despite its solid scholarship and publication by a major university press, will probably be ignored by the author's own generation of academicians because it truly is radical; that is, it goes to the roots. Since 1914, the progressives' faith in scientific advancement as the door to the millennium has come to appear naive if not ridiculous; nevertheless, the university has developed no alternative dogma. If civilization is to survive the technologies and dogmas developed through the modern university, it may have to revisit an older understanding of education. Marsden himself does not offer a detailed solution to the problems of modern academic culture, only a pluralistic vision that religious viewpoints ought to be given the same respect in the university as those of other minorities. Nonetheless, his citations of Newman's *The Idea of a University* and his discussion of natural law as the Catholic alternative to liberalism suggest a philosophical source for reviving Christian humanism in Western education.