



Review: *The Secularization of the Academy*¹

Ted Ward

Sadly, the Christian in the United States seems only vaguely aware of its steadily diminishing influence in higher education. Occasional bursts of complaint about the amoral and “godless” condition of the major universities seem more intended as endorsements of separate and exclusive forms of education than as motivations for positive action toward re-establishment of Christian influence in “secular” higher education. Indeed, the secularized state of things is generally accepted as an inevitable and even proper consequence of taking seriously the doctrine of separation of Church and state.

Happily, the scholarly literature concerned with the issue of historical and philosophical Christian foundations in higher education is on the increase. In a belated effort to close the barn door after the horse has been stolen, historians are asking how Christianity, in general, and Christians as faculty, students, and as the custodians of the legacy of a collection of small universities and colleges, got into such a posture of alienation from the mainstream of academia. What lies behind the virtual concession by Christians that the fact of God as creator of the universe and the recognition of the Bible as the rudimentary source of basic human values should be systematically excluded from the curriculum of liberal education? What can explain the changes during this century in which Christian doctrine and historical foundations have been rendered anathema in the higher forms of academic scholarship?

G.M. Marsden and B.J. Longfield, assisted by D.G. Hart, are joined by five other scholarly historians to examine the condition of the universities of North America with special regard to the past and present Christian influence within and through them. The eleven chapters form an anthology of essays on aspects of the common theme. Each piece appears to have been written for the book, and each respects the task and its themes in altogether compatible and complementary ways.

This anthology helps substantially to offset the elitism and politically partisan interpretations of contemporary education that are represented in Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* (1987). It will not be so popular, but it is much more substantial and even-handed.

Terminology is always a stumbling-block in the study of education. The title of this book, *The Secularization of the Academy*, reveals two biases shared by its several authors: that *secularization*, while held to be an inadequate word, is used by default as the best choice to describe succinctly the recent historical processes in popular democracies. Second, higher education is taken as *the academy*. In contrast to the position taken in this book, some might prefer to interpret the so-called secularization of higher education as a consequence of negligence, rather than of an intentional process as, for example, the weathering and rotting of an abandoned house is more the consequence of neglect than of some deliberate plot of nature.

¹ Ted Ward. Review of George M. Marsden & B.J. Longfield. *The Secularization of the Academy*. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1992). In *Trinity Journal*. Vol.14 (Spring 1993) pp. 85-88. Used with permission.

The relationship between the Church and the universities has changed substantially. Whether the academy as universities or the academy as common schools are, more or less, remote from the experiences of the Protestant Churches is open to question; but as the church has become alienated from its universities, its stakes in reference to the common schools, especially elementary and secondary education, have been more carefully claimed. The neglect of the university sector of the academy may, indeed, derive from the gradual devaluation of its importance to the common people of the church.

One other persistent problem emerges early in Marsden's analysis: even if higher education constitutes the essence of the academy in definitive and determinative ways, is it wise to assume that the Christian origins of certain parts of certain university structures were, at some early time, truly exemplary of the values of the kingdom of heaven? Much more work needs to be done to comprehend the syncretism that has come into the church because of the allegiance to pre-Christian Hellenism demonstrated by the past two centuries of so-called Christian higher education.

To his credit, Marsden avoids hand-wringing. He does not equate secularization with decline; instead, he makes an important distinction:

Even though in the Protestant culture of the United States the rise of universities was associated with the lifting of Church controls, it also involved a shift from a relatively narrowly defined Christianity to a broadly defined liberal Christianity that could be equated with civilization itself. This shift to liberal Protestantism can be seen not primarily as a secularization, strictly speaking, but as a sacralization of the entire enterprise of higher education. (p. 5)

Perhaps the most provocative question in the entire collection of papers follows from this context: Since the reasons for excluding religious perspectives in the first place have proven faulty, is there any way now to allow them? (p. 7) But a nagging doubt hangs over the whole thing. In the latter part of the book, while describing the ascendancy in 1922 of H.P. Whidden to the chancellorship of McMaster University (Hamilton, Ontario), G.A. Rawlyk's data remind that there is often a hidden agenda: "Whidden had been chosen . . . because of administrative gifts and not because of his spirituality . . . as just the man to lead the university out of the dark forests of theological backwardness into the North American mainstream of success and respectability" (p. 295).

Thus, the transformation was formalized. What had been a university declared by its chancellors to hold that "our connection with Christ [is] the supreme element in our lives . . ." and that since the motive of the university is "not knowledge alone but that knowledge rightly articulated to the work of Christ," (p. 290) it, therefore, existed "for the teaching rather than the pursuit of truth," (p. 285) has now announced itself to be positioned in "the newer sciences"—not the Bible, not Christ, not fundamentalism . . . , thus now able to bring about "the modern 'emancipation of the mind'" (p. 297).

G.A. Rawlyk contributes a jewel of a chapter. In "Protestant Colleges in Canada: Past and Future" he provides a succinct scan of the establishment, demise, and now-emergent reaffirmation of Christian modes, forms, and substance in a democratic nation's higher education sector. In many ways, the Canadian experience is prototypic, affording all readers a clearer view of the processes at work.

D. Bebbington's chapter, "The Secularization of British Universities since the Mid-Nineteenth Century", provides a picture of overt attacks and deliberate undermining of Christian representations

within higher education in Britain. At first glance, the American reader may gain some small sense of relief; things could be worse. But a more careful reflection on Bebbington's historical survey will bring into focus one of the key problems of the book as a whole: that cultural differences in the structure of society and the roles played by the universities from place to place, and even from era to era, cry out for an anthropological and sociological analysis to match the excellence of the historical analysis offered.

The presupposition that the universities are *culture-shaping* institutions rather than *culture-reflecting* institutions needs more careful study. Throughout this collection of chapters, the university is assumed to be invested with enormous power. While the power in the aggregate should not be doubted, it may be a power derived from the society it serves more than it is visited upon that society. A small point, perhaps, but any hope that something constructive might be done toward the re-discovery of Christian source and virtue by the people who control these establishments would seem to depend on how they are understood. Even a small degree of misunderstanding, especially if it contributes to the presumption of formidable impenetrability, would add to the discouraging scenario.

In "Secularization and Sacralization: Speculations of Some Religious Origins of the Secular Humanities Curriculum, 1850-1900", J. Turner rightly identifies the indebtedness of American higher education to Scottish common-sense philosophy (p. 75). This excellent chapter well demonstrates one of the important themes of this book, that many of the plagues that have driven Christianity out of higher education have their sources in the sort of Christianity that gave rise to the institutions in the first place. Thus, a warning can be generalized from Turner's carefully defined hypothesis: if the motives of Christian higher education are based on syncretistic values that are alien to Biblical Christianity, for example, personal and institutional meritocracy, greed, pride, and the separatism that isolates the Christian into a ghetto of anxious self-congratulation, the product will be of little worth in a world already over-supplied with similar educational resources.

Technically, the book avoids many of the weaknesses endemic to historical and philosophical anthologies. These authors do speak a common language, and the parts they contribute fit together with a minimum of overlap. The reader will find excellent editing and substantial scholarly helps, aside from occasional misspellings of authors' names and an incomplete index. This latter is substantially more important because Marsden provides no composite bibliography, and some sources identified in the text are incomplete.

These shortcomings are well balanced by an exceptional bibliographic essay by D.G. Hart. Within it he notes: "Educational historians have been hard-pressed to look at the rise of universities from a perspective other than the warfare perspective because of prevalence of older interpretations of the impact of Darwinism" (p. 305).

As if all the contributors to this volume had been given this bibliographic foundation and the assertion above as warning, the book successfully provides fresh and provocative reflections throughout. Thankfully, the starting place for all chapters is several steps above the naïve assertion that, since our "oldest university," the King's College (Harvard,) was in the business of educating ministers for the church; our American heritage of higher education is best represented as having been Christian. The book does not indulge in the rhetoric of "all is lost," either. In short, these eight authors have contributed most substantially to the sparse scholarship of Christian higher education. Historiography well done still holds a commanding role within sound scholarship.