

THE INCOHERENT UNIVERSITY

George Marsden

George Marsden, the Francis A. McAnaney Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame, is the author of seven books, most recently The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship and The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief, both published by Oxford University Press. Professor Marsden has taught at Calvin College, Duke Divinity School, the University of California, and Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

THE THESIS THAT AMERICAN SECULAR RESEARCH universities are intellectually and morally incoherent may seem, at least in some circles, so much a self-evident truism as to require no defense. Yet, as much as has been written on this theme, it does not seem that the universities themselves, the public who support them, nor the students who attend them take seriously the implications of this thesis, if it is indeed true. Particularly, they seldom face the implication that such universities are not usually the best places to go to get an education, if education is to involve a constructive moral dimension.

This thesis is, of course, open to a number of objections. First is the practical matter that such statements are liable to be abused by anti-intellectual populist legislators, who use such sentiments to undermine support for the university education generally. Critics of higher education need to recognize the many values of universities, including moral value, and to preserve the ideal of free inquiry. By the same token, friends of universities should not consider arguments that universities are morally incoherent as off limits simply because such arguments may be abused. Rather universities are the very places within which to make such arguments and to face their implications.

The second immediate objection to the claim that universities are morally incoherent is that one person's moral incoherence may be another's moral ideal. The very thing the university should be doing, the objector might say, is to let students find their way in the maze of intellectual and moral choices that shape the real world. The very experience of feeling lost in the maze will teach them, if nothing else, that there are no absolutes and the value of tolerance. If the students are particularly fortunate, some such objectors might say, they will find themselves in a course in literary theory or philosophy where they address the issues head on and learn how to dismantle any traditional moral claim.

There is probably no way for those of us who do not share the views just expressed to convince their proponents that such are not the optimal moral ends of education. Although we might point out some internal inconsistencies of such positions, they likely can do the same for our views. So perhaps the best we can do is to ask them to take seriously their own affirmations that moral standards are relative to communities and traditions and so to respect ours. To ask them to do that is not equivalent to affirming that moral standards are ultimately relative or that there are no rational grounds for arguing about them. Rather it is to ask the contemporary culture of tolerance to be more tolerant of some traditional moral claims.

By recognizing that one person's moral incoherence is another person's moral ideal, I am conceding that not everyone will share my estimate of what I shall depict as a sad state of affairs. I am speaking from the perspective of an Augustinian Christian tradition and specifically a contemporary Reformed version of that tradition. At the same time I have been shaped by traditions of the larger American culture, which I attempt to appropriate selectively and critically according to how well they fit with my higher Christian commitments. For instance, on the one hand, I value many aspects of the pragmatic *polity* of American liberalism, such as the separation of church and state, mutual tolerance, and democratic participation. On the other hand, I find modern secular pragmatic liberalism, despite its many virtues, ultimately hollow as a *creed* by which to guide one's life.¹ Many people, including many from other Abrahamic faiths, share something like my views, and my analy-

sis will attempt to articulate how contemporary universities might be viewed by *one group* of people.

Let us turn then to the question of how and why most contemporary universities are morally incoherent. It is not the case, as some conservative writers imply, that our secular universities are lacking in moral principle. In fact, in the universities, as in the larger public sphere, there is considerable moral concern. Universities, for instance, maintain high standards to protect the integrity of scholarship. They also try to maintain fair principles of hiring and firing and usually try to protect academic freedom. They also limit what can be said and taught. While they do not often discourage private sexual behavior among students, as they used to, they do have codes precluding sexual harassment. University teaching also often reflects many moral concerns, such as those for appreciating other cultures, being concerned for justice, being concerned for gender and racial equality, being responsible citizens, cultivating individual freedoms, tending the environment, and caring for the poor. Many students participate in volunteer programs. This is only a partial list, but it makes the point that universities are places filled with moral concerns, most of them commendable.

Still, there is a strong case that universities are morally incoherent. By morally incoherent I mean simply that universities are not places where it is likely that students will receive coherent moral training. Although it is likely that some students, especially students in humanities courses, will be exposed to some strongly advocated moral agendas, it is unlikely that even that minority of students will find resources within the curriculum adequate to provide coherent accounts of the moral positions they themselves adopt.

To better understand this state of affairs, let me mention two of the most determinative features in the development of university culture that bear on the question of moral coherence: technology and plural-

¹ I attempt to spell out how Christians might negotiate between pragmatic liberal polity and their higher Christian commitments in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

ism. These factors are familiar, but only because they are of inescapable importance for understanding questions of this sort.

The Technological University

The first reason that universities are morally incoherent is that most of what they do is so concerned with narrow technical questions or with teaching technical skills that broader intellectual and moral issues seldom arise. A century ago a fair amount of a university program, outside of the technical and agricultural schools, would be in the humanities. Today most universities are essentially technical schools, though they still sustain liberal arts colleges for those students who want to take advantage of them.

Perhaps more significant is the degree to which the technological impulse controls what happens even in the humanities. Even in the humanities the tenure and promotion system is driven by the ideal of the specialized technical study. This ideal arose in the late nineteenth century, when natural science replaced the classics as the preeminent model for scholarship. The ideal continues to prevail today, even though it is difficult to see what its justification is.

Particularly absurd, it seems to me, is the type of scholarship that pours out of the university presses. Almost none of it is suited for anyone but other specialists in a field. And even if one is a specialist in the field, there are now so many specialized studies that one has really to be a specialist in an increasingly narrow subfield. For example, in a field like my own, American history, there is no common core of literature that one might assume most scholars in the field have read. That situation is far different from what it was when I entered graduate school in 1960. Are universities, the disciplines, or the world they are supposed to serve, better places due to the vast increase in scholarly publication? Of course, there have been some break-through books, as there are in every era. And there *is* some value in being able to find a specialized study on any topic one may be interested in, but if one is interested in the big picture, one is in danger of being drowned in information.

Because of the tenure and promotion system, most humanities scholars spend the first halves of their careers writing nothing but such specialized studies for other specialists. Most of them are by then so set in their ways that they never learn to do anything else. Generalists are seldom rewarded, either for writing or for teaching. Despite the vast increase in numbers of academic books, we seem to have fewer public intellectuals than we had forty years ago. This means that at the same time that the humanities have become far smaller in relation to the entire university enterprise, relatively fewer scholars in the humanities are addressing issues of moral import in ways that are intelligible either to the public or even to other academics not in their own subfield.

Pluralism: A Strength That Is a Weakness

The other major factor that contributes to the intellectual and moral incoherence of today's secular universities is an ironic development. One of the great accomplishments of American universities and public culture has led to one of its great weaknesses. To understand this development it will be helpful quickly to review some history.

The most illuminating dimension of the history of American universities, especially considered in their moral dimensions, is that they were until at least the 1960s essentially liberal Protestant institutions. By liberal Protestantism I mean the more inclusive side of the Protestant establishment that dominated much of American culture from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. After the disestablishment of official state Protestantism in the revolutionary era, evangelical Protestants built a powerful informal cultural establishment during the first half of the nineteenth century. Evangelical Protestants dominated almost all American colleges and universities of that era. Even the University of Virginia, which had been founded on Jefferson's principles of liberal Christianity, was effectively infiltrated by his Presbyterian rivals by the eve of the Civil War. Most other state universities were more thoroughly evangelical Protestant. These schools claimed to be "non-sectarian," but that meant that they would include Methodists and Baptists, as well as Presbyterians, Congregationalists, or Episcopalians on their faculties. Catholics and Jews, of course, were excluded.

After the Civil War this informal Protestant establishment was in the business of national consolidation, of which new or modernized universities were a key part. By the 1920s the recognizable antecedents of our present universities and their curricula were in place. The universities had also taken on their classic liberal Protestant form. While the universities were still friendly to mainstream Protestant Christianity, they had banished formal worship to the voluntary sphere and removed biblical references from the classrooms. The essence of Christianity, they emphasized, was a universal morality, suitable for making the nation safe for democracy, as university president Woodrow Wilson might have put it. The humanities and the Western classics were to be the chief bearers of this moral heritage. A good bit of the universities' business was scientific and technical and not much touched by these concerns. That was especially true in the state Land Grant technical schools and in medical schools. In prestigious undergraduate education, however, the humanities still held pride of place as the loci for moral training.

The great moral dilemma of these liberal Protestant universities was that they wanted both to remain "Christian" and to serve the whole nation. Yet, being liberal Protestant, they were anti-Semitic and strongly anti-Catholic. Jews could teach in the sciences but seldom in the humanities, especially not in literature, in the more prestigious schools.

After World War II, the universities responded to these anomalies by broadening their view of the moral essence of religion to emphasize the inclusiveness of the Judeo-Christian heritage, along with its other democratic, consensus-building, and non-ideological virtues. They accepted Jews into humanities faculties² and, after Kennedy's election in 1960 and after Vatican II, they cooled their anti-Catholicism.³

² See David A. Hollinger, *Science, Jews, and Secular Culture: Studies in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Intellectual History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

³ This historical summary is based on my book *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

The great moral triumph of these now vaguely liberal Protestant institutions was racial integration. Liberal Protestants, for all their faults on this score since Reconstruction, were now at the forefront in promoting integration, joining hands with black leadership in such campaigns. For this achievement they deserve to be celebrated.

Yet here is the irony. Humans' greatest achievements, as Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out, often are turned into their greatest failings. A too confident sense of our virtues can often lead to our vices. This is precisely what I think has happened to our mainstream culture since the 1960s. Racial integration was the great cause of the early 1960s, and that unquestionably virtuous campaign became the model for much that has happened since. By the early 1970s, tolerance had become a virtue that could trump almost any other virtue. While many of the things that have come to be widely tolerated are worthy of toleration, others are less worthy. We can point to some real moral gains in the public and university culture of the past thirty years, as well as to some moral declines. The larger point is that the public culture that has emerged from the triumph of tolerance is wildly incoherent.

Tolerance is one of a larger triad of values that are widely touted as the supreme virtues in our public culture, whether it be the media or education. This triad consists of tolerance, free choice, and self-fulfillment. These are not, of course, the only virtues touted, but these three tend to trump or subvert the others. Perhaps the most basic is self-fulfillment, which is, of course, the driving ideological engine of our materialist and hedonistic consumer capitalist culture. Self-fulfillment typically is seen as intimately related to free choice—the core message of advertising. Tolerance is the principle of respecting other people's choices. These closely related ideals are likely to be near the core moral furniture of young people who are shaped largely by the values of TV, public education, and eventually the universities. In courses in the humanities, as much as on MTV, they are likely to be shaped by the dominating principle of choice, the idea that we should be guided by the ideal of maximizing individual freedom so long as it does not infringe on the freedom of others.

Yet the ethic that emerges from this consumer culture of choice is incoherent. Tolerance, for instance, will not bear anything like the moral weight that is put on it in our public culture. In combination with other ethical principles, it is invaluable; it certainly should be a prominent Christian virtue. Yet as one of the supreme virtues, essentially on its own, it is nearly useless for dealing with any hard cases. What are the limits of tolerance? There is no court of appeal. Self-fulfillment is no help, since when detached from higher virtues, it begs the question of what aspects of the self ought to be fulfilled and what parts controlled or suppressed. Free choice as a supreme virtue is equally vacuous. What are good choices? As former university president George Dennis O'Brien comments, regarding this phenomenon in his insightful *All the Essential Half-Truths about Higher Education*, "while choice is a condition of moral worth, it is not itself the content of moral worth."⁴

One instance of the moral rootlessness of much of contemporary culture is what we might call the "culture of 'whatever.'" Many young people, it is often observed, are detached, sometimes cynical, and unwilling to make commitments and moral judgments. For example, in an essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* in 1997, a literature teacher at a public college lamented that she could not get her students to condemn human sacrifice, which was the subject of a story they were reading. The students' attitude seemed to be: "Whatever." "Who's to say?" "What right do we have to criticize another person's choice?"⁵

Such moral rootlessness, of course, grows out of our larger national culture, government, business, and the media, rather than primarily out of higher education itself, but the problem is: What basis do the secular universities and colleges have to counter it? The old modernist or Progressive ideal that scientifically modeled education emphasizing individual freedom would provide new foundations for moral consensus

⁴ George Dennis O'Brien, *All the Essential Half-Truths about Higher Education* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998) 69.

⁵ Kay Haugaard, "Suspending Moral Judgment: Students Who Won't Decry Evil—A Case of Too Much Tolerance?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (27 June 1997): B4-5.

has not worked out. Postmodern critiques undermine such consensus models, but also make it nearly impossible to agree on any alternative. The same methodologies that are used to dismantle traditional moral claims can be turned on the moral claims that are asserted in their place.

Richard Rorty has been quoted as saying that “postmodernism” is a term “that has been used so much that nobody has the foggiest idea of what it means.”⁶ That seems to me largely correct, or at least it is surely correct that we cannot have *more* than a foggy idea of what it means. The trendy assemblage of diverse and sometimes contradictory ideas that have been identified as “postmodern” during the past quarter century are no help in addressing the problem of the incoherence of contemporary universities. To suppose that any one version of these approaches, which at their best acknowledge that they are self-referentially incoherent, will nonetheless provide a widely-held basis for checking the tendency toward moral incoherence in a culture seems to me to be whistling in the dark.

A good bit can be said on behalf of American pragmatism. It has contributed to a dominant culture of non-dogmatic tolerance, which has some real benefits. If I were a thoroughgoing naturalist, I would probably subscribe to pragmatism and radical Kuhnian arguments, such as Rorty’s, as the best way available for humans honestly to face their own limitations. Nonetheless, there is a good historical argument that pragmatism works in our culture largely to the extent that it can draw on borrowed moral capital. If that is the case (or even if the historical argument is plausible), then pragmatists might well consider—à la William James—whether traditional religious beliefs, especially of the relatively benign kind that have flourished in post-Enlightenment North America, might be of substantial social and personal value—even if considered from a purely naturalistic point of view.

While the historical thesis that pragmatism works largely on borrowed moral capital cannot be proved, neither can it be disproved. It is at least

⁶ As quoted in “An Interview with James Davison Hunter,” *InSight* 1 (Fall 1999): 1.

very plausible to claim that twentieth-century American pragmatism was heavily (though, of course, far from exclusively) dependent on American religious heritages. For instance, many historians have suggested that the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century, in association with which pragmatism emerged as a public philosophy, was heavily dependent on the broadly “Puritan” moral heritage. Many middle-class Americans had a conscience. That broadly Puritan heritage, in turn, had been kept alive by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revivalism. So the post-millennial evangelicalism of Charles Finney can be seen as an important precursor to the reformist social optimism of a Walter Rauschenbusch or a John Dewey. Likewise the Civil Rights movement, which had a strong pragmatic component, was dependent on countless earlier African-American revivalist preachers, as well as on their white counterparts. The peace and justice wing of the essentially pragmatic Democratic Party today has a substantial Roman Catholic component. Correspondingly, the family values wing of the equally pragmatic Republican Party has a strong Catholic element. One could cite numerous similar examples throughout the history of American public life.

Religious Perspectives in the Universities

How does this translate into addressing the current state of incoherence in today’s secular universities? My argument is that universities would benefit by being more open to identifiably religious perspectives. There should be consciousness-raising regarding the legitimacy of thinking hard in a professional way about the relationship of one’s faith to one’s scholarship. I see the situation as analogous to that of gender scholarship in the 1960s. At that time gender was already a significant implicit factor in lots of scholarship, but there were not many people *thinking* about the implications of gender for scholarship. Today many people do think hard about this and, on balance, we all benefit from it. The same should be true regarding various religious perspectives. Scholars who are religious should be encouraged to think in a scholarly way about the relationship of their faith to their scholarship. How explicit they should be about this should be a matter of tact and tactics. Yet there should be no stigma involved with being identified as a Muslim, Orthodox Jewish, evangelical Christian, or conservative Catholic scholar.⁷

Doubtless this proposal could lead to some problems or excesses, as has gender scholarship. On balance, though, the universities would benefit from it. Would such a change in attitude toward religious perspectives resolve the problems of the intellectual and moral incoherence of secular universities? Clearly not. It would add to the cacophony of voices which the universities present to their students. It might encourage a few more scholars to try to address questions of larger significance, but it is not likely to reverse the trend toward narrow technical concerns dominating academic life. Nevertheless, while it would not cure the problems of the universities, it would do some good. It would, at the least, increase the choices, especially for students and faculty from particular faith traditions, to address constructively the problems of pluralistic society and its institutions.

Such encouragement for self-consciously faith-related scholarship in a pluralistic setting would benefit not only the university students and faculties, but also the faith traditions themselves and hence the larger society. Many American Christian traditions, for example, have not been intellectually responsible. They have been populist and often anti-intellectual. They have been susceptible, therefore, to simplistic quick-fix solutions to social problems.⁸ Such traditions would benefit by being brought into better touch with some of the more substantial Christian intellectual traditions. The larger society, further, would benefit from having such scholars wrestle with the issues of faith and scholarship in the pluralistic setting of secular universities, where scholars daily have to deal with people who differ from themselves.⁹

⁷ In *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, 44-58, I argue that religious scholars will have to play by the same academic rules as other scholars and be judged by comparable criteria. I also argue that there is no basis for a rule that tries to eliminate any scholarship based on a perspective of a religious faith.

⁸ See Mark Knoll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994).

⁹ In response to such proposals, some Christian scholars worry (with some legitimacy) that the universities may corrupt the Christian scholar, rather than that, as some secularists claim, Christian scholars may corrupt the universities. See D. G. Hart, "What's So Special about the University Anyway?" *Religious Advocacy and American History*, ed. Bruce Kuklick and D. G. Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997).

The universities would benefit as well—at least it is hard to see how they would be worse off with respect to how they serve the public in shoring up its moral resources. From the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century, universities presumed that they could contribute to a national consensus by replacing local and parochial values with universal and scientific values.¹⁰ It seemed plausible that such a consensus might be reached, since universities were dominated by elite white male Protestants who were shaped by some common heritages that combined classical, humanistic, Enlightenment, romantic, individualistic, scientific, evolutionary, democratic, and liberal Protestant ideas in ways that seemed to converge. The hope was that all “right-thinking” men could be brought more-or-less to agree. For such a project it was necessary that parochial and sectarian ideas be jettisoned.

In the twenty-first century we face a very different situation. Universities are no longer white male domains. Faculties and students come from wide varieties of traditions. Science no longer is surrounded by an aura of authority outside of areas of narrow scientific and technical concern. Each of the other traditions, mentioned just above as formerly contributing to the expected consensus—classical, humanistic, Enlightenment, romantic, etc.—is fragmented and cannot command wide consent. Today, those who affirm a canon of authoritative “great books of Western civilization” are considered sectarian—in 1945 such was the centerpiece of the Harvard curriculum.

So if there is no authoritative core moral tradition to appeal to, where is the society to find its moral values? How are the universities to cultivate any positive values? The answer, it seems to me, is that the moral fiber for producing constructive citizens is going to have to come from subtraditions of the culture. Families, of course, are crucial, but constructive families themselves have to be shaped by subtraditions. We

¹⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre’s *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990) provides a particularly influential critique of these trends and is a fine model of Christian scholarship.

also need mediating institutions that support these subtraditions. Taking such subtraditions seriously seems to me to be close to the essence of cultivating a healthy pluralistic society.

Among the candidates for being constructive subtraditions in American society, the religious communities ought to rank high on anybody's list. Of course, we all like some religious communities better than others, or might think of some we might not want to encourage, but the vast majority seem among the best candidates to help produce constructive citizens. If that is true, or at least plausibly true, then it would be in the best interests of universities and of society generally to reverse the assumptions of a century ago that shaped their policies toward religious faiths. Rather than attempting to discourage serious consideration of the implications of religious faiths in the academic realm,¹¹ it would be in the interests of universities and of society to encourage faith-based perspectives.

Sociologist Alan Wolfe, a secularist himself, has become sympathetic to encouraging more faith-based perspectives, by considering the issue in relation to university students. Few of them, he observes, have any basis for their opinions. He writes:

It is not that I long for students to appear in my classroom who can cite chapter and verse from the Bible in defense of positions on which they will never reflect. But I would not mind an occasional argument, backed up by familiarity with at least one historical tradition, in support of a passionately held viewpoint on something—anything.¹²

O'Brien makes a similar point, recalling a remark made by David Riesman to the effect that the only persons who could benefit from the "delirious diversity" of the Harvard curriculum would be persons

¹¹ In the early twentieth century, universities discouraged academic perspectives of all faiths, *except* liberal Protestantism.

¹² Alan Wolfe, "A Welcome Revival of Religion in the Academy," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (19 September 1997): B4-5.

already formed by some dogmatic tradition, such as those trained by the Jesuits or in an orthodox Yeshiva.¹³

Since secular universities and colleges are not getting many such students, how might they better educate the students they do get? If the problem is that the university culture of freedom has reinforced the tendency of American public life to obliterate traditions, one solution is to use the universities as agencies for strengthening constructive American traditions. Most religious traditions are constructive in that they help produce citizens who have some intelligible way of talking about moral values. Many students already affirm a religious faith, but have been trained through years of schooling not to *think* about that faith in relation to anything else they learn about. Not every university professor would be in a position to address the concerns of such students, but it would make sense to attempt to ensure that there were *some* who did. In a truly pluralistic environment, it would make sense to encourage having more identifiably Catholic, Orthodox Jewish, Muslim, Evangelical Protestant, and African-American Christian professors, for example, to take their places among the professors of the many points of view now represented.

There is nothing about this proposal that violates the essential nature of secular universities and colleges as they are presently constituted. They are already on the record as favoring diversity, freedom of expression, and freedom for intellectual inquiry. Rather than violating these principles, it would be quite consistent to apply these principles to religious traditions and religious scholars.¹⁴

¹³ O'Brien, *All the Essential Half-Truths about Higher Education*, 67-8. "Delirious diversity" is O'Brien's phrase, paraphrasing Riesman.

¹⁴ State universities would, of course, have to guarantee freedom for religious expression in ways that did not amount to the establishment of a particular religion. This is best accomplished by treating all religious scholars equally, judging them on their scholarship, and not by their religious perspectives. Private schools would generally follow the same principles, but they already have well-recognized rights to favor a particular religious heritage. Duke, for instance, has a divinity school that is affiliated with the United Methodist Church and so appropriately has a disproportion of Methodist faculty. Notre Dame's theology department is predominantly Catholic. Such diversity among institutions is protected by the Constitution.