

The Outrageous Idea of  
Christian Scholarship

GEORGE M. MARSDEN

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✎ Chapter Three ✎

Christian Scholarship and the Rules  
of the Academic Game

Stanley Fish, the *enfant terrible* of postmodernism, provides one of the most provocative critiques of the proposal for liberal inclusiveness to be extended to Christian perspectives. Commenting on works of Stephen Carter and Michael McConnell, as well as *The Soul of the American University*, Fish insists that our brands of Christianity are far too tame. Though secular himself, Fish cites the authority of John Milton to argue that true faith in God changes everything else. Reason, says Milton, following Augustine, is subject to prior faith. The world will look very different to those who start with faith in God in contrast to faith in self or in material contingency. It follows, Fish argues, that Christians, if they are serious about their faith, should not compromise with liberalism, which is built on antithetical principles:

To put the matter baldly, a person of religious conviction should not want to enter the marketplace of ideas, but to shut it down, at least insofar as it presumes to determine matters that he believes have been determined by God and faith. The religious person should not seek an accommodation with liberalism; he should seek to rout it from the field, to extirpate it, root and branch.<sup>1</sup>

More moderate critics have expressed a milder version of the same concern. They worry that if we open up the mainstream academy to religious concerns we may be inviting the very sorts of attitudes that Fish advocates.

Such critics are uneasy about the subjectivism, fragmentation, and contentiousness that may undermine some of the hard-won achievements of the liberal academy. Granting that so-called Enlightenment models of scientific detachment do not provide the degree of objectivity once imagined, they are concerned as to what will happen if we encourage the religious viewpoints of those who will attempt to subvert liberal standards of academic discourse and civility.<sup>2</sup>

Fish's extreme view of how religious belief must subvert liberalism is particularly welcome because it provides an opportunity to explain where such reasoning goes wrong. While it is certainly true that some religious believers wish to destroy the pluralistic academy, there are many other religious viewpoints, including some theologically conservative ones, which harbor no such desire. It is perfectly possible, for instance, to hold, as I do, an Augustinian view that faith in God, rather than faith in self or material contingency, should shape one's essential vision of reality and yet to support the rules of liberal society as a God-given means for accomplishing some limited but immensely valuable goals.

Nor am I, as I have emphasized, advocating a sort of postmodernism in which, because precommitments condition reason, "anything goes." Rather, the problem as I see it is how 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. Traditional religious viewpoints, I am saying, can be just as hospitable to scientifically sound investigation as many other viewpoints, all of which are ultimately grounded in some faith or other. Hence religious perspectives ought to be recognized as legitimate in the mainstream academy so long as their proponents are willing to support the rules necessary for constructive exchange of ideas in a pluralistic setting.

THE VALUE OF THE LIBERAL  
PRAGMATIC ACADEMY

William James, in his famous essay "What Pragmatism Means," provides a helpful image of how a liberal pluralistic society ought to work. James describes pragmatic liberal discourse as

like a corridor in a hotel. Innumerable chambers open out of it. In one you may find a man writing an atheistic volume; in the next someone on his knees praying for faith and strength; in the third a chemist investigating a body's properties. In a fourth a system of idealistic metaphysics is being excogitated; in a fifth the impossibility of metaphysics is being shown. But they all own the corridor, and all must pass through it if they want a practicable way of getting into or out of their respective rooms.<sup>3</sup>

find this image quite congenial. Essentially my position is that in a public society we have little choice but to accept pragmatic standards in public life. I am not, as some might suppose, challenging pragmatic liberalism as the *modus operandi* for the contemporary academy.<sup>4</sup> Rather I am arguing for that limited role, but arguing that there is no adequate pragmatic basis for marginalizing all supernaturalist religious viewpoints as *idiot*. There is no basic reason why the intellectual implications of particular religious beliefs may not be explicitly brought into public discourse. I would be happy, in fact, if someone like William James were in charge of setting the rules for these corridors, as I think he would have appreciated the point.

What I am wary of, however, is of having the spiritual descendants of Dewey in charge. The tendency of twentieth-century liberal culture has been to absolutize the pragmatic method. The absolute, that value than which there is none higher, is that which promotes civil discourse. Virtues such as tolerance, openness, dialogue, agnosticism, mutuality, equal opportunity, scientific method, truth-seeking, charity, and love of beauty might form a list of "the top ten" commandments. John Dewey recognized the essential religious functions of such a liberal polity and even attempted to describe it as "a common faith."<sup>5</sup> So absolutized, liberal pragmatism has no tolerance for traditionalist religions that challenge the pragmatic virtues.

However, pragmatism (and liberal polity generally) is recognized as not an absolute, but simply as a relatively good method for dealing peacefully and with equity among diverse peoples, then those for whom the public domain is not ultimate can readily support it as they should support relative good.

CHRISTIANS, SCIENCE, AND PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE

Is there something peculiar, though, about self-consciously Christian scholars that make them particularly likely to violate the essential canons of scientific investigation of the mainstream academy? Regarding most of the technical scholarship that makes up the vast majority of academic inquiry, there is no reason to expect such a difference. In the corridors of the pragmatic academy Christians and non-Christians can readily share basic standards of evidence and argument. These standards work in separating good arguments from bad, and on many topics they can establish a sort of "public knowledge" that persons from many ideological sub-communities can agree on and which are not simply matters of opinion. Christians and non-Christians likely will use precisely the same methods in determining the date when George Washington crossed the Delaware to attack the Hessians at Trenton. There is no reason why persons of conventional religious convictions might not be thoroughly expert at employing the scientific academic conventions that lead to the establishment of such widely attested beliefs.<sup>6</sup> The issue here is not essentially different from that of whether a conventional Christian might not be an excellent private detective, as G. K. Chesterton and his character, "Father Brown," were among the first to illustrate.

The fact is that explicitly Christian convictions do not very often have substantial impact on the techniques used in academic detective work, which make up the bulk of the technical, scientific side of academic inquiry. Christians, just as other scholars, must employ the requisite degree of detachment in order to weigh evidence judiciously. And even though they may be passionately motivated to do the best job of truth-seeking, they must be duly dispassionate in order to think clearly and to present their results effectively, without tendentiousness.

It might be objected, however, that if Christian scholarship involves anything that makes it distinctive beyond such technical knowledge, it will violate rules essential to the mainstream academy in just those respects. What would make it distinctively Christian is likely to depend on claims of revelation, or sources of knowledge not shared by others. Hence it would violate rules essential for promoting fruitful public discourse. This is

newhat different objection from that dealt with in the previous chapter that all knowledge in the academy must be empirically verifiable. As we have seen, such a rule would exclude far too many beliefs that academics hold dear. The present concern is more analogous to the problem of introducing special revelations into a court of law. It simply does not reduce the discussion to argue on the basis of an authority that some will regard as supreme and others regard as bogus.

This seems to be a valid concern as far as it goes. In a pluralistic public sphere it makes sense to have a rule that representatives of various religious groups do not argue on the basis of the authority of their special or private revelations. It simply does not advance the discussion to introduce an authority that other people do not accept.

#### SCHOLARSHIP THAT IS SHAPED BY BACKGROUND RELIGIOUS COMMITMENTS

There is, however, another category of scholarship that relates revelatory information to one's research but which should not be objectionable. One's worldview may be fundamentally shaped by beliefs that ultimately rest on revelation or other sources of authority not shared by most people. For instance, one might believe that all warfare is wrong because it violates a command of Jesus. Or one might think that Jesus' commands require that one should take a stand for racial justice or care for the poor. Others might hold that God's revelation shows that humans are naturally sinful and that one should be suspicious of utopian hopes that presume a general improvement in human behavior. Still others may believe, on the contrary, that revelation shows that there is hope for a general improvement in human behavior.

Any of these viewpoints might be introduced into the mainstream academy for religious reasons, but defended with arguments and evidence that are publicly accessible. The approach would be equivalent to Catholic natural law arguments. Secularists themselves would not have to believe in the principle of a God-given natural law in order to accept arguments based on widely held beliefs. So their having a religious *source* does not automatically exclude one's views from acceptance in the academy so long as one can argue for them on other, more widely accessible, grounds.

In practice, however, the academy does not work on such a consistently rational basis. Most history departments would be more uncomfortable with a fundamentalist dispensationalist (who believed that God had ordained a special role for Israel in the end times) teaching modern diplomatic history than they would with a deeply religious Jew who saw comparable significance in the Israeli cause.<sup>7</sup> It is hard to see why there should not be room for both as long as their work is of a high quality and can be evaluated by the usual standards. Nonetheless, examples such as this point out that there may be special prejudices against certain views. Consider, for instance, someone whose religious beliefs lead her to maintain that abortion is a kind of murder, or that homosexual relationships are sinful. Whatever the source of such beliefs, there is going to be strong resistance to relating them to one's scholarship in the mainstream academy. Sometimes the reason given for such resistance will be that people should not let their religious prejudices intrude into their scholarship. That argument, however, is a red herring since it is not consistently applied. Indeed, there is no way that it could be applied without excluding too much. No one, for example, is going to rule out of bounds for the mainstream academy the views of a pious liberal Episcopalian psychologist who holds that homosexual relationships may be important to human fulfillment, even though that view may ultimately have a religious origin. On the other hand, the views of an equally competent but very conservative Episcopalian psychologist who argued that homosexual relationships are likely to be destructive would be much more likely to be dismissed as illicitly religious in origin.<sup>8</sup>

One should also notice that the operative rules in the pragmatic academy do not exclude all background beliefs or authorities that are not shared by most academics. Any such rule would, like the rule that all beliefs must be empirically verifiable, exclude far too many beliefs. For instance, such a rule would exclude many minority opinions on moral issues. Before they became widespread, beliefs such as that slavery is wrong or that women and men are equal would have been ruled out because they were based on authority of moral principles that were self-evident only to some people.

It seems to follow, then, that minority religious beliefs, like minority moral beliefs, should be permissible as background beliefs in the academy. As background beliefs, these are not ideas that we would normally introduce into the pragmatic academy as the *evidence* for our views. For that we



d look to other beliefs that we share with persons from differing ideological camps, so that we could argue on common grounds. Some of the persons who early opposed slavery may have done so for primarily religious reasons, but they argued their case in Enlightenment terms of equality. Today, as then, religious people might argue their cases by pointing out internal inconsistencies in the belief systems of others. They might point out, for instance, that contemporary academic dogmatism on questions of equality and justice is inconsistent with the affirmation of purely scientific Darwinism. They would thus be arguing their case on grounds that could be widely shared.

In spite of the fact that we do not articulate some of our background beliefs as evidence or arguments in pluralistic academic settings, they may still play a significant role. Nicholas Wolterstorff refers to these significant background beliefs as "control beliefs." Such beliefs, even if not directly addressed, act as significant controls on what other beliefs and theories we are willing to entertain. The presence of these beliefs in our web of beliefs also affect the relative importance that we assign to other beliefs that are held.

It is, of course, fair game in academia to smoke out and to attack the background control beliefs that account for a fellow academic's dogmatism. If I can show that a colleague's controversial opinions are grounded in blind allegiance to racism, Marxism, liberalism, humanism, anything else, or to a religious dogma, I may have a reason to be suspicious of her views.

Nonetheless, in cases of allegiance to ideologies such as those just mentioned, the love for one's basic commitments is not necessarily blind. On the one hand, each of these views rests on foundations that are ultimately religious, rather than scientific. So do liberal pragmatic views. On the other hand, there are versions of each of these viewpoints that are carefully considered and weighed against other sources of knowledge and which can be shown to rest on no shakier ground than do some of the most widely held views in the academy. If representatives of such views, including religiously based views, are willing to play by the other rules of the academy, there seems no reason why their views should be discredited just because they involve some background dogmatism.

The main point of this line of argument, then, is to say that religious beliefs might legitimately serve as important background control beliefs

for tamed academics in the mainstream academy, it might be asked what the fuss is about. Such modestly held beliefs do already form the background for the work of many academics. There is little evidence of prejudice against scholars who happen to have such religious views. So what really is at stake?

#### MAKING RELIGIOUS PERSPECTIVES EXPLICIT

What is at stake is whether religious scholars should be virtually required to keep their religious views hidden. Should religious views be put in a special category of "personal beliefs" that scholars are not encouraged to think seriously about? Would only the self-indulgent reveal those thoughts in public?

Thomas Bender, a leading American intellectual historian, in a thoughtful review of *The Soul of the American University*, puts the case for the academic privatization of religious belief this way:

The privatization of belief is not the same as its dissolution. Our private beliefs are not diminished by being disestablished. They are relocated and shorn of formal authority, but they are not isolated from public culture. As our daily experience reveals, private beliefs contribute to the making of a particular thinking self that offers an individual and distinctive contribution to the public discussion of scholarship.

Bender goes on to argue that there is not much evidence of prejudice against religious belief in academia because in fact many academics are personally religious and their religious views inevitably bear on their academic work.<sup>10</sup>

Bender goes beyond many observers in his recognition of the legitimacy of religious perspectives implicitly shaping scholarship. Yet one has to wonder about his conclusion that implicit influences are sufficient and not a diminishment. If religious beliefs are relevant to understanding one's other beliefs, it seems as though it would be valuable in a pluralistic setting to reflect openly on that considerable dimension in one's intellectual makeup. Otherwise the intellectual implications of one's beliefs are less likely to be rigorously developed. One would not likely say to feminists, Marxists, neo-

ervatives, gay advocates, and representatives of other viewpoints that privatization of their viewpoints would not be a diminishment. The question, as I see it, is whether there is a compelling reason why all religious viewpoints should be placed in the private category.

It is worth repeating that what we are talking about is largely a matter of self-censorship. Younger scholars who are Christian quickly learn that senior professors hold negative attitudes toward open religious expression and that to be accepted they should keep quiet about their faith. So rather than attempting to reflect on the relationship between religious and their other beliefs, they learn to hide their religious beliefs in professional settings. Such self-censorship by its very nature proceeds quietly but the attitudes it fosters are pervasive.

It is essential to reiterate that the alternative being proposed is that there is room for explicit Christian points of view (just as there are explicit Marxist or feminist views) for those who will play by the other rules of the diverse academy. Most often when people rule out religious activities they miss this latter qualification. They assume that the proposal involves opening the academy to all sorts of additional ideological activism and preaching that would cut off intellectual exchange rather than promote it. As I have emphasized, that is a danger with any strongly partisan position and it is always a struggle to keep some partisans within the bounds of fair discourse and argument. Recognizing that, I am simply proposing that the same rules apply to all. No matter what commitments one brings into one's academic work, one would have to argue for one's early interpretations on the same sorts of publicly accessible grounds that are widely accepted in the academy. I have already argued this point with respect to background beliefs. I am now proposing only the addition of arguing that scholars are not transgressing the integrity of public intellectual life if they occasionally identify or reflect upon the religious sources of their views. In many cases I think that would be helpful to others in the academy in aiding them in understanding the roots of one's position.

Even though religious people should honor the rule that they cannot cite their special revelations as the public evidence for their views, they should still reflect on the implications of such revelations within the bounds of the mainstream academy by talking about them conditionally. That is, it is perfectly legitimate to ask an academic question in the form of "if this religious teaching were true, how would it change the way we look at the

subject at hand?" Some versions of that question may not interest most scholars. For instance, if one asked what difference it would make if it were true, as most of the major religions claim, that the universe is a product of an intelligence, it would have a major bearing on many topics. We shall discuss those differences in the next chapters. For the moment, however, the point is that the mainstream academy typically operates only on the basis of the opposite conditional statement. It operates on the basis of the conditional "if we assume there is no creator god, what sense can we make out of reality?"

While debates over such fundamental issues should not be excluded from the mainstream academy, they have to be conducted with a degree of restraint that is sometimes difficult to delimit precisely. For instance, one of the rules for religious people, as for other committed scholars working within the mainstream academy, is that they must not be simply proselytizing. Since proselytizing is so central to many religious movements and since many people adamantly oppose anything that might be construed as state promotion of religion, this issue is one to which religious scholars should be especially sensitive. It is, of course, difficult to avoid trying to persuade others of the merits of one's own views. Christians can and should be allowed to explain and defend their own viewpoints and, in the proper settings, attempt to persuade others of their superiority, just as advocates of feminist, Marxist, liberal democratic, neoconservative, or purely naturalistic views often do. In classrooms, especially in state-supported schools, teachers must present such viewpoints only as relevant to the academic subject and with great deference and respect for opposing viewpoints, especially opposing religious views. Discourse on religious topics in the pluralistic academy must be conducted with willingness to listen as well as to speak. Such standards of civility are not always respected by nonreligious scholars in the current academy, but they nevertheless represent a moral ideal that religious scholars should be conspicuous in supporting. Otherwise academia will be reduced to a sort of Hyde Park Corner where every evangelist or ideologue has his own soapbox.

The rule that religious scholars should follow here is, I think, some version of the golden rule. How would we want scholars holding other strongly ideological convictions to act in the mainstream academy? Traditional Christians, for instance, might ask how they would want Mormon scholars to act, or Marxist scholars, or feminist scholars. They

ld not argue that just because some other groups violate the rules for discourse, Christians should as well. Rather, Christians should be els of what it means to love and respect those with whom one differs, as they may debate their differences.

is, I think, the analogy of religious scholarship to feminist, Marxist, an-American, or gay advocacy scholarship that leads many liberal ars to be wary of opening the doors to religious perspectives. They ne that what we are proposing is the admission of all sorts of addi- l brands of tendentious scholarship. That is, of course, a danger, but I only repeat that this is not what I am proposing. I do not favor ten- ous scholarship, whether it comes from religious scholars, advocates of iculturalism, or liberals. All these groups are prone to tendentiousness, n none of them is it necessary to their scholarship.

y own view is that scholarship that is simply tendentious is in the long self-defeating. Often it has an impact in the short run, enlisting cers who are willing to substitute formulae for original thought. npions of such scholarly causes can gain considerable political power. ie long run, however, they lose their credibility. Their views become rily predictable, and other scholars cease to take them seriously. etheless, even if some scholarship in the academy inevitably is tenden- , it is better that the sources of the tendentiousness be identified so they can be the more easily discounted. The convention of insisting all scholars and teachers pose as disinterested observers is more mis- ng than a general rule of frank identification of one's biases.

more mature version of ideologically oriented scholarship will de criticism of its own tradition rather than a simple celebration of rone and everything that is on one's side. Christian scholarship ought ially to be marked by such traits. Christians, after all, are taught to be al about their own saints, as the Bible abundantly illustrates. Those take seriously that salvation is by God's grace should not be surprised rd all sorts of failings even among the best of Christians and their utions. Ideally, then, Christian scholarship should provide a refreshing rative to the sorts of partisanship that mark the outlooks of many nunities.

y ideal for Christian scholarship is one that not only looks for the ng of one's Christian convictions on one's academic thought, but also ts some Christian attitudes that shape the tone of one's scholarship.

Not only should Christian commitments lead one toward scholarly rigor and integrity, they should also encourage fairness and charity toward those with whom one differs. Representatives of many other religious traditions would say the same thing. Scholarship with these qualities will ultimately have the greatest impact in the academy and the greatest chance of being accepted.

#### CHRISTIAN SCHIZOPHRENIA?

Finally, we come back to the objection raised by Stanley Fish, an objection also heard from some strongly religious people. Have we not conceded too much, they ask, in order to get a hearing in the mainstream academy for no more than occasional discussions of the implications of such broad frames of reference? Are we not saying, in effect, that one has to water down religious faith and witness so that it will be acceptable to the diverse pragmatic academy? Does that not make a religious person schizophrenic, advocating and perhaps proselytizing for a life-changing worldview in one part of his life, but playing by rules that are not consistently Christian the rest of the time? Are we not saying in effect that on one day a week we say, "Choose you this day whom you will serve," and on the other six we serve the rules of the pragmatic academy?

Here I think the answer is that it is in the very nature of human life that every day we routinely move from one field of activity to another, each with its own set of rules. Such adaptability to the subordinate communities in which a Christian may operate is fully consistent with Christian commitment. It is the principle, I think, behind the saying of Jesus that we should "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." It is also the fundamental principle of Augustine's *City of God* which posits that, although our primary allegiance is to the City of God, we also have subordinate and limited allegiances to human governments, which necessarily run on sub-Christian principles. We should think of ourselves as "resident aliens," as some of my friends say, but as resident aliens we should obey the laws of the land of our sojourn to the extent that they do not conflict with our higher allegiances.<sup>11</sup>

I think it is helpful to view these adaptations to the rules of various institutions of the larger society as analogous to games that religious peo-

may play. Christians often spend hours playing by the rules of basketball, for example. Literally applying the ethics of Jesus, passing the ball rally to your opponents as much as to your teammates, would not do ch for the game. Or try playing chess with someone who does not at to gain at the expense of his neighbor. In fact in the game situation best way to show love to your opponent is to play fairly by the com- itive rules of the game. So when religious people play by the rules of various games of society—the rules of law, the pragmatic rules of the ited States Constitution, the rules of the market, or the rules of main- am academia—they are not necessarily violating Christian principles temporarily accommodating themselves to those rules.

At the same time, there are limits to one's allegiance to such rules. ristians cannot play some of the games of society and they cannot ept some of the prevailing rules of other games. Nonetheless, there are ny social conventions to which Christians can give limited allegiance. en engaged in such activities, the situation of the religious believer may analogous to a doctor who is playing softball. So long as she is in the :ball game, she tries not to break its rules. If, however, she sees a car ident on a nearby street, she will stop running the bases and go to help. e rules of doctoring take precedence over baseball rules.

So with religious people in the academy. They are free to play by the demy's rules to the extent that these do not conflict directly with their ristian commitments. As I said earlier, many of the pragmatic rules for ting along with our diverse neighbors and even with our enemies are sorts of rules that Christians should readily adopt for such limited, ough important, purposes. They are, like civil government, ordained by d to keep the peace and should be valued accordingly.

Some of the rules for getting along equitably in a pluralistic academic ation are different from the rules within the Christian church, but not rtradictory to them. So what may be appropriate to a church gathering y not be appropriate to an academic gathering. Preaching sermons and ublic prayer are not appropriate to teaching in state universities or speak- to a session of the American Historical Association. The Body of rist, however, has many members, and Christians may have many call- s. That means not only that some Christians are called to one task and ers to another, but also that each Christian may be called to work in erving settings at different times. Some scholars may be called to serve

strictly in the church and in its schools. Such academic communities are invaluable and can sustain a depth of sophistication regarding the implica- tions of faith and scholarship that is unattainable in diverse settings. Nonetheless most Christian scholars today have good reason also to be participating in pluralistic enterprises such as mainstream scholarship. In such settings it would be self-defeating to insist that the only rules one will follow are those that would be appropriate to the church. When one wants to speak to diverse audiences, one must be willing to accommodate to the language and rules designed for that community—to be all things to all people. As one Christian scholar remarked to me, "when in Rome, do as the Romans do. When in academia, use academic conventions."

#### SO HOW OUTRAGEOUS IS IT?

What has been said so far could be read as sending two conflicting mes- sages. One, as argued in the first two chapters, is that there is a longstand- ing and deeply seated antagonism between the modern academy and the more traditional forms of Christianity. The other message, suggested in this chapter, is that even very traditional Christian perspectives need not be so outrageous after all, but can fit in nicely with the current rules of the academy if only those rules are applied equally to religious and nonre- ligious views.

Both these points are true and each needs to qualify the other. Christians must remember that, much as they may value liberal institu- tions, they are participating in them on an ad hoc basis, limited by higher allegiances. They must keep in mind that ultimately there is an inherent "offense" in the Gospel and so there will be deep underlying mutual opposition in relation to some other points of view. At the root of that opposition is the question of highest allegiance. Christians have been and should be critical of some of the assumptions on which liberal academic culture has been built and it is not surprising that the favor is returned. The same applies to the relationships between Christianity and other currently popular academic ideologies. Even when Christians are sympathetic to them, they are likely to give them only limited allegiance. So, as Stanley Fish has suggested, we cannot solve the problems of religion and public life by saying, "Why can't we all just get along?"<sup>12</sup> Ultimately we do not solve



all the problems of pluralism by better communication and more “dialogue.” The more we understand each other the more likely we are to also discover some fundamental differences.

That being said, there is nothing wrong and a lot right with trying to get along better, and that is one of the things that the rules of the liberal academy help us do. Deeply religious people should be participating fully in that academy and they should be working to improve its rules, particularly those that tend to marginalize their own views. The rules of the academy are not fixed or inevitable. They are constantly evolving and as they do they may not be self-consistent. Religious people should point out those inconsistencies and suggest how the rules might be improved.

It may even be, as some people will argue, that if religious people observe all the other requisite rules of the academy they will find little prejudice against explicitly religious views. I suspect this is often true. One should not underestimate the legacy of historical antagonism between some elements in the modern academy and traditional Christianity, but here is no doubt that some proponents of various Christian orthodoxies have always been highly regarded in the mainstream academy. So there is no hard and fast rule against relating faith to learning. That may be all the more reason, however, to ask why so few scholars in mainstream academic settings work to relate their deeply held religious commitments to their intellectual lives.

## Chapter Four

### What Difference Could It Possibly Make?

Having affirmed that Christian perspectives need not subvert the essential standards of the mainstream academy, Christian scholars are likely to be confronted with the opposite sort of objection. If Christian academics are as tamed as I have described—if they are not quoting Bible verses or claiming to read God’s providence—what difference could Christian scholarship possibly make?

The next two chapters explore this issue. This chapter responds to some of the most significant questions that are likely to be raised regarding the possibility or advisability of developing identifiably Christian scholarship. It also sketches some of the *types* of ways in which we should expect Christian perspectives to have real impact. The next chapter builds on that base to suggest how some central Christian theological affirmations might reshape some of our other academic thought.

Many thoughtful people, including many Christians, are simply puzzled at the suggestion that, if scholarship measures up to the other usual standards of the mainstream academy, Christianity should make it somehow different. Here, for instance, is one of the more passionately stated versions of this frequently heard objection:

It is hard to believe that Marsden actually means what he says, and it occurs to me that he has not thought through clearly the claims that he makes. Does he think that at his university, Notre Dame, they teach



a Roman Catholic chemistry? Or that Aryan biology would be sanctioned at his former university, Duke?

This carries over into the social sciences and history as well. Would Calvin College actually devote itself to Presbyterian anthropology or worry that Episcopal psychology should get a hearing? Should historians of the Reformation be primarily identified as Protestant, French, or female? As I have said, there are serious issues to be confronted here. But the perspectivalism that Marsden appears to defend demeans his vision of the university.<sup>1</sup>

This is a helpful passage because it states so forcefully the most common line of argument against the very idea of Christian perspectives. The argument is that there are lots of academic topics which Christian perspectives, or in this case denominational perspectives, do not seem to change substantially. Hence it seems that we must be chasing a phantom.

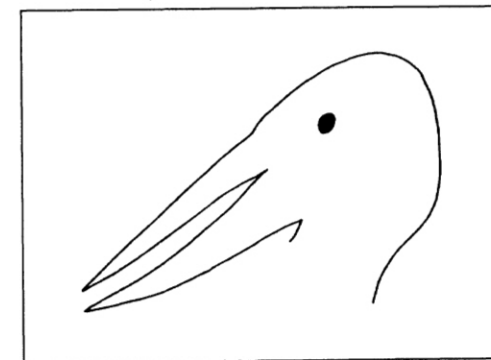
Yet even the examples from this very strong version of the point do not self-evidently lead to that conclusion. For instance, the question of whether the primary identification for historians of the Reformation might be Protestant, French, or female is one on which there is much current debate. Certainly many would think that a *relevant* identification for historians of the Reformation would be whether they are Protestant or female. Even knowing that an historian is French may be a clue that we are in for some heavy weather on the interpretive front.

Even some denominational differences can have relevance to interpretation. It is easy to see how there might be (in fact there is) a Mennonite view of political science or a Roman Catholic view of nuclear war, labor and capital, or medical ethics (all subjects of recent pronouncements of Catholic bishops or the Pope). In fact, conservative Presbyterians and other Reformed Christians, such as those at Calvin College, *do* have a view of human nature (and hence of anthropology in both its classic and modern senses) that distinguishes their outlook from the more optimistic views of many other Christians and secularists. One would not call this the *Presbyterian* view, since some Presbyterians do not believe in “total depravity,” while many non-Presbyterians do believe in it, but such a belief does have relevance to many scholarly interpretations.

For those of us who have been part of a Christian scholarly community such as Calvin College the suggestion that faith-informed perspectives do

not make a real difference to scholarship is as puzzling as is the contrary for some critics.<sup>2</sup> In such academic communities there is constant alertness to Christian perspectives and what differences they may or may not make.<sup>3</sup> Everyone recognizes that the differences will not be apparent in the technical dimensions of their work, but that implications of the faith may sometimes have an important bearing on their theories and interpretations. Even mathematicians or technical scientists will be able to point out some faith-related considerations that have relevance to the foundational questions affecting the frameworks of their disciplines or the applications of their work. It simply does not follow that, because there is no special Christian view of photosynthesis, there is therefore not a Christian view of biology.

I find that a helpful image for explaining the apparently elusive idea that there can be both many commonalities and important differences between Christian and non-Christian scholarship is that of a gestalt picture, like the one that seen one way looks like a duck, but viewed another way seems to be a rabbit. Gestalt images fit well with prevailing descriptions of how the human mind works. We organize experience according to available patterns that the mind has at its disposal. To some extent the patterns that we use to organize our perceptions seem to be nearly universal among humans. We can all perceive individual trees in the midst of the massive influx of data that we receive when we look into a forest. Other patterns, or aspects of patterns, are culturally conditioned. A premodern person who looked into an airplane cockpit would see a bewildering assortment of



Duck or Rabbit?

shapes and lights. Most of us might see only a control board pattern. An experienced pilot might perceive a entire flight situation and a possible emergency shaping up.

As the gestalt images suggest, our perception of these patterns is based not on a logical deduction from sorting through all the data (the way a computer might process it), but rather from a few clues that trigger the whole pattern. It also illustrates how different people can perceive completely different overall patterns, even while each is looking at identical data. Almost all of our experience is organized in this holistic way.

This model of how we perceive helps us understand the similarities and differences between Christian and non-Christian scholarship. To the extent that we deal with many aspects of individual "facts," our scholarship will be identical. If we are measuring, for instance, the ratio of black to white in the duck/rabbit picture, we will use identical procedures and, with the proper definitions, come to conclusions with which everyone can agree. At higher levels of interpretation, however, we might differ radically on the overall meaning or relative importance of the facts. What is a bill for those who see the duck pattern are the ears for the rabbit school of thought.

In contemporary scholarship, we see comparable patterns of similarity and difference all the time. Two scholars might be able to agree perfectly on the details of the Battle of Little Bighorn—where and when it took place, how many people were killed on both sides, even (perhaps) who fired the first shot. What they can plausibly say is limited by the evidence. Nonetheless, one scholar might see the battle as Custer's heroic last stand in a fight to bring peace to the American West; another might see it as a triumph in the Native American fight to resist barbaric invaders. While at one level such differences might look like mere partisanship, at a deeper level they have to do with large-scale beliefs about what the world is, or should be, like.

As we have observed, background beliefs will have a vast influence on which pattern we see when we look at "the facts." Perhaps we can more clearly see how this works if we go beyond the somewhat limited analogy of the gestalt picture and think of the pictures as including some revealing clues that are colored in such a way as to be visible only when wearing a certain set of glasses. Again there are good analogies to common academic controversies. As long as most Americans looked at the relationships of whites to Indians only through the lenses of nationalism, scholars seldom

saw the Indian wars from Native American perspectives. Once moral sensitivities to the oppression of minorities became widespread, a new generation of scholars saw the same information through a new set of glasses. The evidence had not changed, but now the advance of the white settlements of America was more often understood as an "invasion."

Often, the interpretive differences are not so dramatic, however, thus helping to account for why some scholars fail to see them. Serious religious beliefs help shape not only our overt ways of valuing things, but also our priorities. What do we see as important to study? What is it about that subject which makes it interesting? What are the questions we ask that will organize our interpretations of this topic? What theories do we entertain as relevant to our interpretations? What theories do we rule out?

#### SCHOLARLY AGENDAS

The broadest way that Christianity, or any other religious faith, makes a difference to scholarship, then, is in the scholarly agendas that faith will help set. As the discussion of the duck/rabbit gestalt image suggests, the degree that the relevance of the faith will be apparent will vary greatly with the topic. The more amenable a problem is to tightly controlled empirical observation, the less the apparent relevance. Yet as any topic, including empirical investigation, touches on questions of wider significance or meaning, faith becomes more obviously relevant. So on topics that have the most to do with interpretation and with the larger significance and meaning of humans in relation to each other and the universe, faith-related perspectives will have the most bearing. Such implications are more often apparent in the humanities and social sciences than in the hard sciences. Philosophers are likely more often to be able to identify the pertinence of religious perspectives for their work than will historians or social scientists, who in turn will be able to point to religious influences more often than will chemists or physicists.

Nonetheless, even in largely technical disciplines religious faith can have an important bearing on scholarship in at least four ways. First, it may be a factor in motivating a scholar to do her work well. That is not to say that nonreligious scholars may not be just as motivated to work with just as much integrity. For any particular scholar, however, religious faith may be

an important motivator. Second, religious faith may help determine the applications one sees for his scholarship. One may do technical work in anything from epidemiology to engineering with the hope that it may contribute to the well-being of others. Again, that many nonreligious people are also altruistic does not negate the religious contribution to altruism. Third, such motives may help shape a sub-field, specialty, or questions one asks about one's work. Fourth, when on occasion the technical scholar is asked to reflect on the wider implications of her scholarship, faith may have an important bearing on how she sees the field, or its assumptions, fitting into a larger framework of meaning.

As one comes to disciplines that deal with interpretations about humans and their relationships to the world and to others, the last two of these four factors rise in relative significance. As we have seen in the discussion of background beliefs, such significance is not always explicit, obvious, or uniquely Christian. It is there, nonetheless, shaping the very topics on which scholars choose to work. One commentator, attempting to undercut the analogy between Christian perspectives and feminist perspectives, asked "whether Christianity is generating a number of exciting new research programs, as feminism has proved able to do."<sup>4</sup> His implication was that Christian scholars were not producing such work. In fact, they are. Christian motives often determine what fields people go into, what topics they study in those fields, and what questions they ask about those topics. The big difference from feminism is that the Christian factors that shape such agendas are largely kept secret and underground. Often the scholars themselves have not reflected much on the influence.

The most obvious manifestation of Christianity shaping research agendas is in direct examination of the cultural roles of Christianity itself. Christian scholars will often ask questions about how Christian beliefs influenced or were influenced by some other dimensions of human behavior. Much of the work of Christians in the field of literature has been of his sort. Many literary studies have been written about how Christian themes have been manifested in the works of various writers, and often these studies grow out of the scholar's own religious commitments. In my own field of history there are a number of striking examples of such fruitful agendas, for instance, Charles Hambrick-Stowe's *The Practice of Piety*, a wonderfully crafted and highly admired account of Puritan piety.

Only a Christian, I think, is likely to take questions about piety as seriously on their own terms as Hambrick-Stowe does. Nathan Hatch's much acclaimed *Democratization of American Religion* is built on insights arising from decades of an insider's reflections on the relationship of evangelicalism to democratic culture. Dale Van Kley's ground-breaking studies of the religious origins of the French Revolution have offered much discussed challenges to interpretations that offered only secular explanations for an event that had notoriously secularizing results.<sup>5</sup> Once again an insider's sensibilities to both the force and the ambiguities of religious influences were pivotal to a creative research agenda.

Christian influence on scholarship is not confined, however, to the study of Christianity itself. As is true of any tradition of thought, it involves a characteristic set of questions and larger perspectives which, while not always taking formal shape, permeate inquiry in many subtle ways. Robert Wuthnow, a Christian and a distinguished sociologist, has referred to this effect as "living the question." He writes:

I have borrowed the much-used phrase "living the question" because it seems to me that Christianity does not so much supply the learned person with answers as it does raise questions. It has been said of Marxists that even apostates spend their lives struggling with the questions Marx addressed. The same can probably be said of Christianity. It leaves people with a set of questions they cannot escape, especially when these questions face them from their earliest years.

Wuthnow explains further:

The particular questions are likely to vary. What Christianity does is add seriousness to the enterprise: it says, in effect, these are serious questions that people have raised in one way or another from the beginning of time; do your part to keep them alive. . . .

Putting it differently, we might say that Christianity *sacralizes*—makes sacred—the intellectual life. It gives the questions we struggle with in our work and in our lives a larger significance.<sup>6</sup>

These are important points about the subtle but pervasive influences of faith on a Christian's scholarship.

BUT SHOULD WE MAKE A POINT OF IT?

Wuthnow also raises some of the most serious insider questions about Christian scholarship. For all his affirmation of these differences, he is reluctant to go beyond these subtleties. In the essay just quoted, he is willing to identify himself as a Christian, but he also makes clear that such openness is by far to be the exception rather than the rule. Wuthnow spells out these reservations in a review of Mark Noll's much-discussed *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.<sup>7</sup> Noll, whose agenda resembles mine, calls on evangelical Christians to develop more credible Christian scholarship. Wuthnow puts his reservations this way:

On the one hand, he [Noll] argues that evangelical Christians should be addressing their disciplines from a distinct Christian framework that privileges Christian assumptions about human nature, God, Christ, redemption, and eschatology. On the other hand, he seems to be suggesting that the best scholarship is done by people who simply take the created order seriously enough to study it with as much care as anyone else. I am more in sympathy with the second view than with the first. . . . The harder task is to take one's subject matter seriously enough to understand it from many different perspectives. For if that is the goal, then good Christian scholarship may be virtually indistinguishable from scholarship done by anyone else. In my own discipline of sociology, for instance, studies of impoverished families, community service, personal morality, health reform, sexuality, and values have flourished in recent years—much of it is compatible with a Christian worldview, and yet little of it flaunts that perspective.<sup>8</sup>

This passage is worth quoting at length because it comes from a serious Christian whose scholarship is renowned for its judiciousness. If someone who is so sympathetic to the cause of Christian scholarship believes that the best such scholarship may be indistinguishable from non-Christian scholarship, one cannot write it off as the result of prejudice.<sup>9</sup>

One important dimension of Wuthnow's critique is his choice of the term "flaunts" to describe making Christian views explicit. Clearly he and some other Christian scholars find it embarrassing, in bad taste, or perhaps

just a little pretentious to have scholars trying to identify the "Christian" view of this or that. It may be perceived as claiming divine sanction for one's point of view, or as claiming that one's scholarship is automatically superior to the scholarship of others. Perhaps most seriously in many academic circles, if you say your scholarship is "Christian," people will immediately ask whether that means that it is opposed to that of other religions. Is it anti-Jewish, for example?

These legitimate issues suggest that the question of identifying one's work as "Christian" should be handled with discretion. In many pluralistic settings it would not be something to which one would call attention. When one does, as was suggested in the introduction, it might be best to refer to one's scholarship with the more modest "faith-informed," while readily identifying oneself as a Christian. Graduate students, for instance, are usually best advised to master their disciplines and the art of communicating with diverse audiences before parading their "Christian" critiques which are supposed to revolutionize the field. On the other hand, a Christian perspective should not be treated as a dark secret to be suppressed. Rather, one ought to be cultivating it and reflecting upon it as part of one's scholarly identity, and it should be a proper part of occasional scholarly self-disclosure—a modest way of saying, "This is where my scholarship is coming from," or "Many of my background beliefs are shaped by my Christianity and I am attempting to understand what implications they may have for my scholarship."

Thus occasionally identifying Christian sources in one's thought is quite different from claiming that it represents *the* Christian view and hence by virtue of divine sanction trumps all other views. Of course, all scholars should be aiming at discovering and defending the truth as best they can, and need not pretend that they think all points of view are equal. But as Wuthnow argues (in his own exemplary Christian way), the best scholarship sympathetically sees what the subject looks like from numerous perspectives. It can therefore set a tone of such fairness as to obviate accusations that one is operating from a biased viewpoint. Certainly Wuthnow's own scholarship is much admired for displaying just such traits.

If one sets up as a standard for Christian scholarship something like such Wuthnovian fair-mindedness, as opposed to flaunting Christian perspectives or using them as substitutes for sound scholarship, then his position overlaps substantially with Noll's and mine. As his list of examples of topics



of recent sociological study that fit with Christian perspectives suggests, Wuthnow recognizes that the questions Christians ask have substantial bearing on their work, and this influence goes beyond just adding seriousness (although that is the only point he emphasizes). Christian perspectives help determine both the very topics that scholars study and questions they will ask about those topics. Wuthnow prefers to play down the substantive influences of Christian commitments, while I want to encourage more open reflection on their intellectual implications. Nonetheless, if one looks at just the titles of some of Wuthnow's own recent works, the marks of substantive Christian concerns are evident, even if their fair-minded tone makes them seem indistinguishable from what a non-Christian might write. These titles include: *The Restructuring of American Religion* (1988), *The Struggle for America's Soul: Evangelicals, Liberals, and Secularism* (1989), *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social Structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (1989), *Faith and Philanthropy* (1990), *Rediscovering the Sacred: Perspectives on Religion in Contemporary Society* (1992), *Christianity in the Twenty-First Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (1993), *God and Mammon in America* (1994), *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (1994), and *Learning to Care: Elementary Kindness in an Age of Indifference* (1995).

#### IS IT DISTINCTIVE?

Is there, however, anything *distinctively* Christian in all this? Christians sometimes talk about "distinct Christian principles" shaping scholarship. Yet there is no reason in principle why a person of another faith or of no formal faith might not come up with these same topics.<sup>10</sup> Or ex-Christians might ask just about the same questions as do Christians (thus illustrating, by the way, Wuthnow's point that we never entirely escape questions of the faith with which we are raised).

The problem is in what is meant by "distinct." Often when we say "Christian scholarship" people assume that we mean *uniquely* Christian scholarship. That impression is reinforced by the fact that some Christian scholars themselves speak of "distinctively Christian scholarship" as though they meant *uniquely* Christian scholarship. Often what they really have in mind is that Christian scholarship should reflect commitments to some

distinct set of Christian teachings, including doctrines like the Trinity, the Incarnation, or Jesus' resurrection from the dead, as opposed to a general religious moralism. However, when it comes to applications to scholarship outside of theology itself, these distinctive Christian teachings seldom dictate scholarship that is distinctive in the sense that a non-Christian might not say more or less the same thing on a given topic.

These two senses of distinctiveness are easily confused. Distinctively Christian theological commitments do not usually lead to questions and agendas that other scholars might not share. Consider an analogy. One would hardly argue that because virtually any question or scholarly agenda that might be proposed by a Marxist scholar could be posed by a non-Marxist that therefore a distinctive Marxism was not shaping the scholarship. For Christianity the same applies.<sup>11</sup> Even on some questions of larger significance, distinctive Christian commitments do not necessarily produce agendas, questions, or conclusions that will not be almost identical to those of some other scholars. So Christians would do well to make clear that "distinctively Christian scholarship" does not typically lead to scholarship that will set Christians apart from everyone else.

This may be the place to emphasize that there is nothing inherently anti-Jewish in the call to reflect on the implications of Christianity for scholarship. Exactly the same general principles apply to practicing Jews or devotees of other faiths as should apply to various sorts of Christians. Those believers from the world religions that affirm the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures have reason to stand on virtually common ground on almost all the issues we have been discussing. In fact they may have far more in common intellectually with believers from kindred faiths than they will with those who have rejected the theistic tenets of their own religious heritage. Of course, standing on practically the same ground is no guarantee that believers of various faiths (or of the same faith) will agree. In any case, Jew and Christian rarely constitute the relevant divide with respect to the sorts of scholarly issues we are discussing. If questions of religiously based scholarship could be treated more as intellectual questions belonging to the quest for truth, rather than as political questions (which too often have plagued the relationships in the past), then scholars from these two faiths should increasingly see themselves as allies.

Another factor that constantly confuses the discussion of "Christian" scholarship is that there is no one Christian view on any subject, any more



than there is one Jewish, Islamic, or Buddhist view. Serious Christians (to say nothing of nominal ones) differ so thoroughly on so many subjects, that it seems bizarre—particularly to outsiders—to talk about *the* Christian view of this or that. What people usually mean when they talk *the* Christian view is the view of a particular sub-tradition of Christianity. Even then there are countless disagreements and mutually contradictory assertions. What all the schools of Christian scholarship do have in common, however, is just the sort of thing that Robert Wuthnow describes as fundamental in the relationship of a tradition to scholarship—they are asking some common questions that have a direct relationship to their faith. Among these is the crucial underlying question: “How should our faith relate to our scholarship?” Despite the lack of Christian consensus in answering this question, it often leads scholars in particular traditions and communities to just the sorts of academic debates that can lead to new insights.

The point is, then, that the differences that Christian scholarship makes will show up in so many ways as to defy classification and easy formulae. Influences vary with the type of Christianity, the type of individual, the field and sub-field of scholarship, and the types of traditions of interpretation currently available. Given the bewildering varieties of permutations that can result from these and other factors, it is understandable that people object to speaking of any one approach or conclusion as “*the* Christian” view. At the same time, however, the diffuseness of Christian influences should not be mistaken for an absence of Christian influences. Those who are living the question of what is the relationship of their faith to their scholarship will answer it in countless ways.

#### CHALLENGING WHAT IS TAKEN FOR GRANTED

Historian Harry Stout has reflected perceptively on the subtle yet substantive influence of particular theological commitments. Speaking of his own work in American Puritan studies, Stout observed that one certainly does not have to be a Christian to take Puritans’ beliefs seriously. In fact, two giants in the field who have done the most to rehabilitate respect for Puritan theology have been Perry Miller and his student, Edmund S. Morgan, both self-proclaimed atheists. Despite Stout’s great admiration for

these historians, he found his own work on Puritanism moving in some importantly different directions, reflecting his spiritual autobiography. First, the topic he chose was the history of the Puritan sermon. Despite the huge industry of American Puritan studies and vast manuscript resources of ordinary Sunday sermons, no previous scholar had bothered to delve deeply into these rich sources.

In addition, without much initial reflection on the theological roots of his interests, Stout found himself asking a different set of questions about these sermons and Puritan history than had been asked by previous scholars. Even historians so sympathetic to the Puritans as Miller and Morgan had been interested primarily in the origins of the American nation. Miller had talked about the New England “Mind” on the supposition that human ideas are essentially what history is. Stout, on the other hand, was more interested in the Puritan church than in the American nation, and he was interested more in “faith” than in “Mind” as a basic factor in human history. That meant that not only were Puritan theological debates of interest, but so were “other more interior themes of piety, spirituality, meditation, devotion, or conversion—all of which minimized conflicts and represented the stable bedrock on which an enduring Puritan religiosity was built.”

Stout went further to observe that such sensibilities carried him beyond simply being open to a different set of categories or questions. It also eliminated certain interpretive agendas common to the profession. For example, this meant “that an event such as the Great Awakening was not explored simply for its social or political significance, but as a spiritual phenomenon that could not be wholly reduced to naturalistic categories.” Anyone familiar with Stout’s scholarship will recognize that he is not lacking in sensitivity to social, psychological, and political factors in history. In fact, his much acclaimed biography of George Whitefield, the leading revivalist of the Great Awakening, has been criticized by some more partisan Christian historians for not sufficiently emphasizing spiritual and providential themes. Stout holds to the contrary that while Christians should be open to spiritual influences they must not pretend to read the mind of God in assessing spiritual significance. Furthermore, he points out, although there is a long Christian tradition of hagiography, the even older biblical tradition of writing history depicts its heroes as deeply flawed. Despite this realism, Stout insists that openness to spiritual influences

changes how Christians are likely to interpret Christian history itself. As he puts it:

In particular we are warned against the sin of misplaced reductionism that would have us interpret the church and the community of faith—flawed and incomplete as it is—as epiphenomenal. Christian historians must eschew the secular tendency to treat religion simply as the outward manifestation of deeper, more fundamental realities that can be defined and understood solely in naturalistic terms.<sup>12</sup>

#### CHALLENGING NATURALISTIC REDUCTIONISM

Stout's observations carry the discussion beyond differing scholarly agendas and questions, to another dimension of Christian scholarship—its function as a critique of current scholarly assumptions. Many scholars are oblivious to the first principles that they take for granted when they are initiated into contemporary scholarly communities. Despite the immense productivity of scholars examining everything else imaginable, relatively few of them look critically at the traditions of modern scholarship itself. Like Marxists, feminists, or postmodern deconstructionists, dissenters from the liberal mainstream, Christians have a place to stand that ought to lead them to reflect on which aspects of the current traditions fit well with their faith and which do not.

Although Christians have many reasons to appreciate and to support the rules and structures of liberal academia, they should be critical of what some have referred to as “the myth of liberal neutrality.” As Lee Hardy, a philosopher at Calvin College, points out, liberal polity has a definite ideological bias. Hardy writes:

The liberal project of tolerance was to construct a clean, open, and expansive public square based on rational consensus, while all weirdness and particularity is shuffled off and consigned to private chambers. In a liberal society people would be free to hold to any tradition-bound beliefs they like, as long as they agree not to act on them in public. But if the modernist presumption of common reason that underlies this method is itself a constituent of a particular tradition—

the western Enlightenment tradition—then the pretense to neutrality on the part of liberal tolerance begins to look more like a stratagem with a definite secular bias. The self-appointed referee turns out to be a contestant in disguise.<sup>13</sup>

Hardy's point that liberalism itself is an ideological tradition has been made by many religious philosophers, probably most effectively by the eminent Catholic thinker Alasdair MacIntyre, in *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (1990).<sup>14</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, one of the leading philosophers in the Reformed tradition, adds that the liberal tradition of what constitutes “the good” is shaped by the demands of capitalism.<sup>15</sup> Liberal capitalism creates a public interest in suppressing the authority of all traditions except liberalism itself. For our purposes, as we have seen in earlier chapters, the most relevant part of the liberal tradition is that it prefers secular accounts of reality. One can well understand why things might seem to go more smoothly with such accounts, and some would argue that considerations of the public good ought to outweigh concerns of particular religious traditions. Others would argue, as Wolterstorff does, that the liberal tradition is unable to provide a coherent account of “the good” for a diverse society, as our public schools illustrate. Whatever one's position in such debates, however, it is naive to think of the liberal polity as being ideologically neutral.

The same point can be made with respect to many of the assumptions about scholarship that have emerged out of liberalism. As Stout's reflections illustrate, sometimes the differences in what is taken for granted result in subtle, but nonetheless substantial, differences in scholarship. In the field of history, for instance, the dominant liberal story has been some version of what shapes “the public good.” Interest in that important subject has tended to preempt other themes such as those that would recognize room for spiritual concerns. American history writing, whether shaped by older emphases on consensus and politics or more recent attention to diversity and the common people, has been overwhelmingly dominated by secular accounts of what contributes to the public good. Even though in recent years there has been much capable work by historians of American religion, such work has seldom been incorporated into the mainstream historical canon. American history textbooks are notoriously deficient on this score, especially when they deal with anything after 1740. Many of the

“best” history departments do not even offer courses on religious history, nor is it often dealt with in other courses. It is not that the leading historians who control such things think that religion is historically unimportant. If you asked them, most would say that it is important. Nonetheless, they have been so shaped by a culture which accounts for “the good” without reference to religion that they do not notice religion’s absence.<sup>16</sup>

In an earlier chapter we looked at how one of the most pervasive assumptions of modern scholarship—scientific naturalism—gained its sway. Scientific naturalism is, of course, a very useful methodological stance, which Christians employ all the time in the technical aspects of their scholarship. However, like the liberal culture of which it is a part, scientific naturalism is not ideologically neutral. Sometimes the bias of scientific naturalism against religious and spiritual concerns is made explicit, as by those natural scientists who use it as the basis for a metaphysical worldview. They proclaim that knowledge gained by empirical observation is the only knowledge there is. This is the view presented, for instance, by Carl Sagan in his famous television series *Cosmos*. He begins in almost biblical cadence, “The Cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be.”<sup>17</sup> What he means is that there is no reality beyond the physical universe. What Sagan fails to mention is that this viewpoint is not itself based on scientific evidence, but rather is a premise of modern thought.

Most scholars are not as blunt as Sagan and may not even believe that physical reality is all there is, but their scholarship is built around a tradition that operates as though that were the case. As Stout’s observations suggest, the difference for Christians has not so much to do with what other scholars include—such as social, economic, or political factors—as with what they exclude. Furthermore, the distinguishing feature of Christian scholars working in mainstream academic settings is not that they are going to identify the workings of the Holy Spirit in the Great Awakening or use God to explain any gaps in current scientific theory, but rather they do not believe that empirically demonstrable explanations are the only, or even the most important, explanations. This openness sets their calculations and theories in a different context and hence subtly changes their implications and relative importance. No matter how wonderful our scientific explanations of the working of the cosmos, we should not stumble into the unfounded conclusion that the physical cosmos is all there is. No matter how ingenious our explanation of how George Whitefield sparked

the Great Awakening, we will not likely tell the story as though that exhausts the explanation.

The larger issue is reductionism. Once we have a convincing explanation at the level of empirically researched connections we are inclined to think we have a complete explanation. The late Donald M. MacKay, a specialist in brain physiology, has provided some helpful reflections on this problem from the perspective of one who is both a scientist and a Christian. The physiological story of how the brain operates is vastly different from the subjective experience of its operation. Each account is in a sense true and complete at its own level. In another sense, however, it would distort our account if we insisted that only the level that we are working from provides the true story. In particular, the microscopic story that the brain physiologist can tell would be wildly misleading if it denied significance to the subject’s own account of her thoughts.

MacKay suggests as an analogy the various interpretations to which an electronic advertising sign, such as one might see on Broadway, might be subject. An electrician may be able to give a very accurate and thorough account of the electrical operation of the sign. We would not fault the electrician for failing to mention what the sign said—that is not part of his technical analysis. We would fault him, however, if he acted as though his was the only important meaning of the sign. To elaborate on MacKay’s image, let’s say the sign says “LIVE GIRLS.” Once we know that, the sign takes on significance at many other levels. We can imagine a group of sociologists discussing the social significance of the sign. Or next we see a group of economists debating its marketing significance. Experts on gender would see it as essentially about sexual exploitation. Politicians might worry about controversies it would generate. Ethicists would debate its morality. Linguists might discuss the ambiguity of the syntax. Aestheticians might debate whether it is kitsch or simply tasteless. And so forth. Each of these accounts may be complete at its own level, but if it denies the significance of the others it is incomplete and misleading. To describe the tendency of specialists to reduce their interpretations to “nothing but” what they can account for in their own disciplines MacKay uses the somewhat greasy, but memorable, label, “nothing buttery.”<sup>18</sup>

As a scientist, MacKay emphasized the complementary character of modes of knowing—that each is in a sense complete at its own level as long as practitioners acknowledge the validity of other levels. That model

works better in strictly technical disciplines than it does in our example of the electronic sign which can be analyzed in terms of many disciplines other than merely technical. Even though the economists may want to talk only about the economic significance of the sign, they should be listening to what the sociologists, political scientists, and others are saying about it. It is not even strictly true that the work of the electrician will be unaffected by the larger meaning. One can well imagine some of the gender experts and ethicists insisting that the electrician should refuse work on the sign because of its LIVE GIRLS message. Certainly if the sign said DOWN WITH JEWISH POWER most people would want the technicians to refuse work. So the principle is not that larger meaning never should alter technical work. Sometimes it will and should.

In the mid-nineteenth century, at the outset of the era of modern specialization, John Henry Newman provided one of the most insightful Christian critiques of academic reductionism. In his famous lectures, published as *The Idea of the University*, speaking as the founding rector of the Catholic University of Ireland, Newman reflected on how the modern disciplines were ignoring the relevance of theological perspectives. Newman argued that since a university's purpose was to deal with all knowledge, and since theology was surely a branch of knowledge, the university ought to have a place for theology. By this he did not mean simply that a university should include a theology department. Rather, he was arguing from the premise that all knowledge is connected. Truths from one realm of knowledge ultimately need to be qualified by those from other realms. "A true enlargement of the mind," he writes, ". . . is the power of viewing many things at once as one whole, of referring them severally to their true place in the universal system, of understanding their respective values, and determining their mutual dependence." Hence, for those who believe God is at the heart of reality, other knowledge is distorted if divorced from the context of theological truths.

The problem with the university as it was emerging, said Newman, was that each branch of knowledge tended to aggrandize its own perspective.<sup>19</sup> We can see the results much more strikingly today, although we tend to take them for granted. Practitioners of each academic specialty tend to talk only to members of their own discipline or sub-discipline and only in their own specialized language and categories. Psychologists may reduce all relief to responses to early psychic needs. Biologists may see only a strug-

gle for genes to survive. Anthropologists may interpret all human history in terms of evolutionary survival mechanisms. And so forth.

Even when reductionism is not so extreme, modern academia leans heavily toward what might be called naturalistic reductionism. Even when the big picture is taken into account, it is a picture that includes everything but God. So even if we do not have "nothing buttery," we are still left with "everything buttery."

It is easy to understand why competing theologies were excluded when trying to build a cooperative yet pluralistic academia. But that is another question. Now we are talking about whether that exclusion makes any difference in day-to-day academia. Surely the big picture would change for academics who believe that God is at the center of that picture. And many of their other academic insights would be affected if they developed the habit of asking how they fit into that big picture.

The problem of recognizing the day-to-day significance of this factor is aggravated by the difficulty of talking about something that is missing. Not only is it missing, but its absence is taken for granted. Recently I talked to a television reporter who was working on a story on religion in higher education but having trouble convincing her producer and anchorman that there was any story. How do you portray something that is missing? Students who are attuned to theological perspectives can tell when professors are analyzing things in ways that exclude spiritual dimensions or diminish religious outlooks. Often, however, like the dog that did not bark, the differences are not noticed.

#### CHALLENGING THE TRANSCENDENT SELF

The scientific naturalism of the past century has typically been accompanied by lavish celebrations of humanity. A characteristic example of the subtle challenges to traditional faiths that are likely to be encountered in university classrooms can be seen in the recent PBS television series *The Human Quest*, a popular summation of some current academic trends. This series brings together in philosophically sophisticated ways some of the latest thinking from a variety of academic fields to tell the story of the ongoing human quest for successful evolutionary adaptation. Despite many helpful insights, ultimately the story that it tells is that of the triumph of



the scientific imagination. At the same time, however, the series assures viewers this scientific outlook is not opposed to spiritual values or even the search for God. The commentary points out that Einstein, after all, believed in a God who produced orderly laws of nature. "Science is not an assault on the human spirit," it assures over a musical background including "Hallelujah" chorales, "but an expression of the human spirit."

This assurance that the spiritual or even what we call "God" is not excluded by science masks the underlying message that traditional religions are passé. As one Christian commentator puts it, "*The Human Quest* seems to rest on the slightly veiled assumption that religious traditions are among those human adaptations that, according to science, the evolutionary process has selected against." That message is not presented in any overtly offensive way; yet for that reason it may be all the more effective.<sup>20</sup>

One of the most common outlooks in contemporary academia is something like that underlying *The Human Quest*. Strictly speaking this common point of view is not anti-religious. It may grant room for the spiritual or for "God," but these are treated as human creations, ultimately explained in naturalistic terms. From a traditional religious perspective, such an outlook might be seen as an alternative theology—one in which humans are at the center. Even if a particular version of this theology does not include any reference to "God," it is at least religious in celebrating transcendent values—although purely human ones. Reflecting ideals that have been current since the rise of nineteenth-century Romanticism, the human spirit is supreme in this view. Science itself is an expression of those higher human values that we find within. This can be an inspiring and productive ideal. As far as the question "What difference does it make?" is concerned, however, it should be apparent that this prevailing academic big picture is much different from that of traditional theologies.

Christian scholars, at least those with more traditional theological perspectives, should be critical of this absolutization of humanity. Christians, of course, have long emphasized human significance and the value even of those humans who may seem least significant. Yet such affirmations have been made in the context of recognizing human limits. As Pascal put it, humans' greatness lies in knowing we are wretched. Whatever the particulars of their views of human nature, Christians have traditionally been united in proclaiming that the heart of human sinfulness is the illusion that

we can be our own gods, a law unto ourselves, creating and controlling our own reality.

This view of humanity, which originates in the Hebrew Scriptures, ought to transform religiously committed scholars into dissenters from many theories taken for granted in academia today. It should make them critical of viewpoints, especially prevalent in the arts and literature, that emphasize human freedom and creativity as supreme values. Although of immense worth, these human gifts will reach their highest expression when exercised within a sense of the limits of the individual in relationship to the community, the created order, and ultimately to God. Individuals who act as though they were a law unto themselves or who proclaim there is no law are apt to destroy those around them. Granted, excessive religious zeal is a danger as well. That does not change the fact that current philosophies which absolutize the self pose a real danger of fostering lawlessness.

Such philosophies pay their dividends in popular and celebrity culture, another area ripe for critique by scholars who see more to life than the self. Here again, as on MTV, creativity knows no limits, but not because the artistic goals are so high. Cynicism has become a cliché. Similarly the world of advertising and mass culture has no shame in exploiting the ideals of unlimited freedom in a way that cashes out as sensuality and self-indulgence. Scholars from all sorts of traditions might critique such cultural trends, but scholars with a theological perspective are more likely to see them as part of a larger pattern of almost cultic self-worship.

A number of Christian scholars have dwelt on such themes as they riddle our cultural life. Quentin Schultze and his colleagues examine this motif and others in popular culture in *Dancing in the Dark: Youth, Popular Culture, and the Electronic Media*.<sup>21</sup> In *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, Paul Vitz presents a sharp critique of this pervasive theme in his field. Perhaps the best-known critique, which although not presented explicitly as Christian scholarship certainly includes Christian themes, is that of Robert Bellah and his colleagues, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*.<sup>22</sup> Charles Taylor in his influential *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* traces the rise of modern ideas of the self, growing out of Christian sources but then taking on a life of their own as a major myth of modernity and postmodernity.<sup>23</sup> The work of



Roger Lundin, discussed in the next chapter, emphasizes similar themes in literature. These and other comparable works illustrate how a variety of Christian perspectives, some more and some less explicit or developed, provide rich resources for cultural critiques.

#### MORAL JUDGMENTS

So far we have managed to spell out the differences that a Christian perspective might make without developing a point that some assume is the whole of the discussion—that it will help shape moral judgments. Scholars, like all people, are moralists. Nothing is more common, as least in scholarship having to do with human behavior, than moral judgments, whether explicit or, more often, implicit. Moral judgments, like other commitments, help determine what subjects people study, what questions they ask about their subjects, and what answers they will give to those questions. This point seems so obvious that it is puzzling that scholars should raise questions, such as those cited at the opening of this chapter, about the relevance of faith to scholarship.

Probably the main reason why seemingly evident moral influences are missed is that people fall into the trap of confusing influence with uniqueness. Christians, they point out, have no monopoly on moral judgments. Furthermore, any moral evaluation that a Christian might make might just as well be made by a non-Christian.

One can appreciate why the point that Christianity makes a difference in moral judgments eludes some people of good will. Often, perhaps more often than not, Christians' moral values look remarkably like other currently prevalent sets of values. The agenda of one group of Christian academics will look much like the Democratic Party platform. That of another group will be conservative Republican. Liberationist Christians often sound like Marxists. And so forth. Christianity does not seem to be the variable.

One reason for such overlapping of moral judgments is that Christianity has played such a large role in shaping the moral principles that have become standard parts of the Western cultural heritage. Christian morality, usually wed to other traditions, has often taken on a life of its own without reference to its original theological parentage. So one of the great ironies

in Western cultural history of the past two centuries is that many of the most effective attacks on traditional Christianity have taken place in the name of what amounts to a secularized Christian morality. Since at least the Enlightenment, critics of Christianity often have claimed the high ground of morality, presenting themselves as more humane, more just, more compassionate, more inclusive, and as the true champions of liberty and equality, of fraternity and sorority. All too often there has been some justice in these claims, especially those directed at Christian establishments. As a result, the lines between Christian and non-Christian morality are further blurred. Non-Christians often draw on the spirit of Christian morality to launch effective attacks on the forms of Christianity that provide sub-Christian rationales for established power.

Such attacks have been effective because in practice the morality of professing Christians has so often been compromised by too great a dependence on political, social, and economic establishments. Throughout history one can find debacles resulting from the identification of political causes with the cause of Christ. Those who cite the Crusades, the Inquisition, or Cromwell's excesses as arguments against Christianity are pointing to instances in which the faith has been coopted and corrupted by temptations to power.

This irony, that those who reject traditional theologies sometimes seem to follow principles consistent with Christian morality while Christians often do not, contributes to the confusion over the moral influences of Christianity on scholarship. In each case people are being shaped by the multiple cultural traditions of morality with which we are surrounded. Christian moral influences do not come to us unmixed with other concerns, interests, and beliefs. In our highly politicized age, we are particularly likely to have our moral agendas set by public opinion, which itself reflects a multiplicity of traditions of moral discourse. Self-interests further complicate the picture.

Yet all these ambiguities do not add up to an argument that Christian commitments either do not or should not make a difference in the moral agendas that so shape our scholarship. What the ambiguities suggest is that Christian commitments frequently do not make the sort of difference that they can and should. Often part of the problem is the very kind of thing we have been talking about, that Christians have often been too slow to challenge the conventional wisdom of their age. The past failure of

Christians consistently to follow the moral principles of their faith is a reason for them to cultivate more critical Christian thinking, not abandon it. If during the past century many of the best academic minds had been wrestling with the implications of their faith for scholarship, rather than shying away from the subject, perhaps we would have less unthinking appropriation of whatever moral conventions are currently in vogue.

Moral judgments are not the whole of Christian influence on scholarship. Rather they are part of a larger pattern of values that will set a scholar's academic agenda. Christian commitments make a difference to scholarship because scholars are whole people and the various aspects of their belief systems are interrelated. As the example of the gestalt images suggests, many particular aspects of a Christian scholar's work will look much like the work of a colleague with another nontheistic set of commitments. Yet the relative importance that we assign to things, the central questions we ask about them, and the assumptions that lie behind these questions will all vary according to what makes up our larger picture of reality. The differences in the larger picture for the religious person are ultimately theological differences. They are beliefs about God and how God relates to us and the rest of reality. So to get to specific examples of the positive contributions of Christianity to scholarship we must explore the ways in which a context of theological beliefs changes the way we value other things.

## *Chapter Five*

### The Positive Contributions of Theological Context

Scholars do not operate in a vacuum, but rather within the frameworks of their communities, traditions, commitments, and beliefs. Their scholarship, even when specialized, develops within a larger picture of reality. So we must ask: What is in that larger picture? Is there a place for God? If so, does God's presence make any difference to the rest of the picture? Does that presence change the relative proportions of the picture as a whole? A picture of reality in which there is a being great enough to produce and to oversee the universe is, after all, quite different from one in which things operate sheerly through impersonal forces. If we affirm a reality that includes a being of immense intelligence, power, and concern for us, every other fact or belief will have some relationship to that being. At the least the presence of that being should alter our view of the relative significance of the other aspects of reality that we deal with in our scholarship.

While God and theology should be considered as factors in our scholarship, we do not want to reduce our subjects to just their theological dimensions. (By theology here I do not mean primarily the discipline of theology, but rather any serious thought about God and God's revelation according to a particular religious tradition.) Such theological principles, important as they are, are just one point of reference that we should take into account in thinking about the significance of our work. So Christians can do the bulk of their academic work according to the standards and perspectives of their discipline, just as long as they are willing to keep in mind the context of theological concerns and be open to reflecting on their implications for larger questions.<sup>1</sup> When addressing the diverse acad-