

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING A BIBLICAL UNDERSTANDING OF LIFE AND CULTURE

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VOLUME 1, NUMBER 3

THE MARGINALIZATION OF THE UNIVERSITY

FASHION REPLACES ARGUMENT

In early February the Christian Study Center of Gainesville and the Department of Religion at the University of Florida sponsored a lecture series by Dr. John Sommerville, Professor of History at the University of Florida. Dr. Sommerville framed his talks on "The Marginalization of the University" under three headings: "Fashion Replaces Argument," "Culture War Replaces Debate," and "News-Consciousness Replaces Wisdom." The following is an abridged version of the first of these lectures. You can find the unabridged version of Dr. Sommerville's lectures on our web page. (See page four for details.)

Last year the journal *Church History* inaugurated a new feature, which was to let prominent historians submit "thought pieces" that told what they thought should be the direction of future scholarship. The first person they chose was David Hollinger, an intellectual historian at Berkeley. They chose him because he is not in sympathy with religious history and they thought this might prove challenging.

What Hollinger said in his article is that religious historians ought to study secularization more. It's a topic they've been avoiding. They should especially take up the question of why American universities are thoroughly secular, but American society is not. Why is the country out of phase with its intellectual leadership? It isn't that way in Europe, Hollinger noted. As he put it,

Where in the university would you go to find out how to spend your money?

why does secularism win all the arguments, but religion still win the votes? He is thinking of the rightward drift of American politics in the last twenty years. I wrote a response to Hollinger, which *Church History* will soon publish, and this talk is a version of that article.

I'm going to try to make two points. (1) That the American university has become marginal to the intellectual life of the country, such as it is. And (2) that we are in a "post-secular" condition. Not secular, but post-secular, which I define as a situation in which fashion has replaced intellectual argument or debate.

What does it mean to say that the American university has become marginal? It's bigger than ever, better funded, and producing more of whatever it produces. Young people think they need higher education of some sort to participate in society fully. What I mean, when I say that the university is marginal, is that the university has been slipping in the area of intellectual leadership and political and cultural leadership. I would agree that universities are a major institution for training folks for our very technical society. But they are not really where we look for answers to life's questions. This is the sense in which they are marginal.

The way I put it to my students is to ask, Where in the university would you go to find out how to spend your money? There are lots of programs that tell you how to make money and how to be useful to the economy. But where would you go to learn how to spend your money? That is, where would you go to learn what is valuable in and of itself. What is the point of money, after all? The answer to this question is not self-evident, although we increasingly treat it as such.

A century ago, when American universities were taking over from the colleges, they talked about their "civilizing mission." Universities would bring everything together, the sciences and social sciences, the arts and humanities, and the professions. At that time, around 1900, many people seem to have thought that the liberal arts would replace the more overtly religious core of the colleges, and academics would replace clergy as the official authorities on life's questions. Among other things, the purposes of money would become clear as the university would help identify the proper ends of life.

Although this view had a certain amount of success, a century later, we can see that it hasn't worked out. The liberal arts core of the university has been hollowed out in two ways. First, a dwindling percentage of students graduate in the liberal arts. At the University of Florida, for instance, the percentage is falling from a third to a quarter of the overall student body. The vast majority of students are now in professional programs, learning how to make money and be useful but barely ever bothering to consider what the end of money might be. Second, the liberal arts themselves have changed. They have turned into technical specialties. They are addressing questions nobody is asking and giving answers nobody can understand.

Academics continue to ask questions that would only interest other academics. Why should we not ask each other, "Would you have trouble explaining your current project to the seat mate on your next flight?" That seat mate is a taxpayer, paying your salary. More

important, she has questions about what is important or valuable. What will she conclude about academics if it all comes out in jargon? Students, likewise, are often disappointed in the humanities when the point does not turn out to be appreciation of culture, but only criticism. This was exactly the reason my daughter dropped out of Indiana's fine program in Russian literature after her Master's degree. Her interests in literature, that were rooted in the appreciation of that literature, were not those getting attention.

I'd like to go on to my second point, which is that we are now in a "post-secular" situation. If secularism is a condition characterized by argument, led by elites, post-secularism is the triumph of fashion over argument. It is the emergence of a true cultural democracy in which "the marketplace of ideas" is an apt metaphor for our situation, and even for the university. Arguments, remember, depend on settled reference points you can hold your opponent to. Proving something means appealing to your opponent's assumptions, and showing that consistency requires him to accept your conclusions, based on those same assumptions. A marketplace, by contrast, does not depend on reasonable arguments but on advertising, the ability to move people from one fashion to another.

One thing that this move toward fashion encourages is much careless talk about tolerance and diversity. We used to talk about truth, but now we talk about tolerance. These concerns are not incompatible. Indeed, rationalism discovered tolerance and relativism as means in the search for a many-sided truth. But as truth recedes, tolerance and relativism are ceasing to be means and are threatening to become ends in themselves. We see this in the widespread suspicion of people who insist on "truth." They are suspected of being bigots of some kind.

Tolerance and relativism were once used to cast doubt on religious assertions. But they work on rational assertions as well, which rest on assumptions after all.

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The general public seems to find this a congenial situation; no one can tell them what to think. In a cultural democracy everybody has a vote in philosophy as well as in politics.

Another result of the move toward fashion is trendiness, and it is not just the public that goes in for fashionable trends these days. Last year the president of the American Historical Association polled prominent historians about their professional conventions, and the most common complaint was that they were too "trendy." Hardly surprising. The American Historical Association announces a theme for each annual convention, setting the style. This year the theme was *Frontiers and Empires*. For the past few years it's been in this area of globalization. The flavor of the month, we say.

Journalists talk about the globalization of business and labor and pop music and disease, and historians don't want to be left behind. So we try to show that globalization has always been our situation. If you mean by globalization that the most natural unit of study is the whole globe, that still isn't true today, except in economic terms. And it wasn't true of anything before European imperialism. But in our enthusiasm for the new buzz-word, some are trying to revise the basic survey to make globalization the theme throughout. It will have its fifteen minutes of fame, as we now say, and then it will become one more of those once fashionable terms. Now, when you see these formerly fashionable words--like conjuncture, mentalitie, *longue durée*--it surprises you to remember being all agog over them. But "that was then, this is now," in another of our fashion-conscious phrases.

You might also use post-modernism as an example of a fashion. It didn't begin as a fashion, but rather as a true paradigm shift. Now paradigm shifts are not popular, at least, not at first. If your field were hit by a paradigm shift it would call all your training and your career into question. Paradigm shifts are not caused by boredom and restlessness, like fashions. They are caused by a wrenchingly new perspective. And this is

what post-modernism brought. The various things that go under the heading of post-modernism highlighted things we hadn't noticed before.

It is a different thing, however, when people begin posturing as post-modernists, new historicists, deconstructionists, and so forth, simply because they need a brand name in the marketplace. The important thing is for various approaches to co-exist and cross-pollinate, but instead, one fashion replaces another in endless succession. It reminds us that fashions tend toward absurdity and exaggeration, and it suggests that academics is part of the entertainment world.

Even the university's attempts to reassert its leadership role and to challenge public fashions has become a fashion. It has brought a predictable reaction. A colleague in the College of Art recently reported on threats from the public and from public officials to obscene art in our displays. The art offends people, and they exercise power rather than argument, to take art off the walls and close the shows. Why are we surprised? Radical artists have been saying that art is about power, like everything else. Now we're finding that there are much more direct forms of power than art. What the artists needed were settled standards of beauty to hide behind. They might have educated the public to recognize these standards, so that they could make compelling artistic statements.

Can we sum up, and offer any prescription? I'm not sure I can. In effect I've been saying that the secular university was a flawed concept from the beginning. We expected it to offer information and skills, and also to answer our ultimate questions about life. It has done the former. But we have learned that it can't translate information into action, that it doesn't provide guidance or purpose. This is where religion and one's ultimate values and concerns come in. As we were saying, a century ago colleges recognized this connection between knowledge and decision. But an officially secular institution must not acknowledge it.

When academics think of religion they may assume

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NEWS FROM THE CENTER

WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT CHURCH

DR. HUGHES OLIPHANT OLD

On January 18, 2002, Dr. Hughes Oliphant Old kicked off the Center's winter program by offering a lunchtime lecture on the meaning of the church. With pastoral experience in Indiana and adjunct teaching experience at Westminster, Princeton, and Reformed Seminaries, Dr. Old has been a member of the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton since 1985. He is best known for his writings on the history of worship and has recently completed four volumes of a seven volume series on *The Reading and Preaching of Scripture in the Worship of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998-2002). In his lecture at the Center Dr. Old reflected as a historian and built on his interests in practical theology in speaking about the challenges facing the church today.

THE MARGINALIZATION OF THE UNIVERSITY

DR. JOHN SOMMERVILLE

One of the ways that the Christian Study Center of Gainesville hopes to serve the university community is by bringing scholars to Gainesville who are known for their scholarly contributions and also for the fact that their scholarship and lives are rooted in biblical understanding and Christian faith. Our expectation is to invite such scholars annually and to give them the opportunity to reflect freely on areas of personal and scholarly interest, particularly in the Humanities and Social Sciences. We also know that we need not leave Gainesville to find such scholars.

We are very pleased, therefore, that on the afternoons of February 4 - 6 in the beautiful Keene Center on the campus of the University of Florida, Dr. John Sommerville, Professor of History at the University of Florida and a member of the board of the Christian Study Center, offered the first of these lectures. Author of *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith* (Oxford Press, 1992) and *The News Revolution in England: Cultural Dynamics of Daily Information* (Oxford Press, 1996), he is well qualified not only to analyze university culture but especially to respond to David Hollinger's challenge for church historians to study secularization.

We especially want to thank the Department of Religion at the University of Florida for cosponsoring this lecture series with us.

NEWS FROM THE CENTER

BLAISE PASCAL: PRE-MODERN PROPHET FOR POST-MODERN TIMES

DR. RICHARD V. HORNER

Beginning Monday at 7:30 p.m. on March 11, and on Tuesday at 9:30 p.m. on March 12, Dr. Horner, the Center's director, will teach two short courses on the work of Blaise Pascal. Given the sort of impasse in university culture that Dr. Sommerville describes, this early modern thinker will have a lot to offer to those of us who have come along late in the story of modernity. For more information call the Center at 352-379-7375 or visit our web page at christianstudycenter.org.

INTERVARSITY CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP'S
GRADUATE & FACULTY MINISTRIES &
THE CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

PRESENT

THE 2002 GULF STATES COLLOQUIUM ON FAITH AND SCHOLARSHIP

SATURDAY - MARCH 23, 2002 • 9:00 A.M. - 5:00 P.M.
THE CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

This one-day colloquium will be for graduate students and faculty who are interested in exploring and better understanding the relationship between faith and scholarship. It will also be a great opportunity to meet Christian colleagues in the area.

PLENARY SPEAKER: Dr. Richard Horner - Director, Christian Study Center of Gainesville

TOPIC: "The Paradoxes of Christian Scholarship"

The Plenary Address will survey central, inter-disciplinary themes concerning the integration of faith and scholarship. Following the plenary address will be two faculty panel responses, a graduate student response, and discussion groups organized by general disciplines.

TO REGISTER: Register online at: <http://gfmse.org> under Colloquium link. Registration deadline: March 18, 2002. \$10.00 per attendee, payable day of the Colloquium. Make checks payable to: InterVarsity Christian Fellowship.

For more information, go to <http://gfmse.org> or call the Christian Study Center at 352-379-7375

The Christian Study Center of Gainesville is located at 112 NW 16th Street • Gainesville, FL

– BOOKS WORTH READING –

Not the Way It's Supposed to Be;

A Breviary of Sin

Cornelius Plantinga, Jr. (Eerdmans, 1995)

As one who has the privilege of caring for those with cancer, I am constantly faced with one of the most troubling aspects of human existence. Suffering, fear, pain and death are a routine part of my day-to-day life, and so I am forced to try to understand these experiences in the light of Biblical truth. This is why I have found Cornelius Plantinga's candid recognition that this is *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be* to be so helpful. Plantinga is right. Whether we are mourning the loss of someone who lost her battle with cancer, or viewing the repeated airing of film showing the crashing of jets into the World Trade Center, something inside us is screaming "this is not the way it's supposed to be!" This is the classic Christian view, and we do well to remember that the only way both to endure and understand our world, is to remember that things were not always as we experience them today. Plantinga articulates this classic Christian understanding of our situation in a beautiful and fresh way.

Plantinga reminds us, first of all, that things are actually worse than we think they are. Living as we do in a culture that refers to infidelity and lies as "lapses in judgment," where some social circumstance is always to be blamed for personal failure, and where moral terms such as "sin" are as likely to be used in reference to culinary excess as to substantive moral issues (e.g. certain desserts are "sinful"), we do well to reclaim a Biblical appreciation for the pervasiveness and appalling power of sin. It may well be that the only antidote to the trivialization of sin and evil, understood as mere social constructs uncoupled from any

transcendent standard, will be a deeper understanding of sin's power to corrupt, distort, pollute, rupture and destroy all that God intends.

In medical school, first year students study normal anatomy and physiology and then spend the entire second year studying a discipline called pathology. This study of disease details the way in which the various functions of the human body go awry. As a direct result of understanding in detail how disease deviates from the norm, we have developed many valuable treatments used to restore patients to health. So also this study of sin and evil will give the careful reader a profound degree of understanding, not only of the effects of evil in the world at large, but more importantly, of its effects in our own lives. The humbled reader of this book cannot help but have both a deeper, more unsettling conviction regarding the need for self-examination and a greater appreciation of the grace of God in our lives.

Just as the study of pathology points us back to what has been lost and forward to healing, so Plantinga's discussion of sin is rooted in what he calls "shalom." What we have lost is shalom, the Hebrew word frequently translated "peace," but which carried a far richer meaning in the minds of the ancient prophets. The state of shalom is one in which our world would no longer be tainted by sin and evil. To quote Plantinga, shalom is, "The webbing together of God, humans and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight." In short, it is the perfect world as God created it, before our first human parents brought it crashing down with their original sin.

As shalom-breaking is evil, and culpable shalom-breaking is sin, so restoring shalom in the lives of those we serve is our calling before the Lord. Thus, both in recognizing that the

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world is not the way it's supposed to be and in seeking shalom, we follow the example of our Lord Jesus. He understood more fully than anyone ever has that sin and evil are alien to God's creation. He is also the one who beckoned those who were "weary and heavy laden" to come to Him for rest, and he is he one who promises those who "hunger and thirst" after righteousness, that they will be filled.

*Jay Lynch,
President of the Board
Christian Study Center of Gainesville*

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that it only makes assertions and not arguments. They may not realize how much religion remains embedded in our thinking. We can't even discuss the concepts of wealth, health, the human, the humane, the humanities, without finding their irreducible religious dimensions. For these all involve

the question of what human life is all about, or what would be optimal for humanity. It is a question that simply silences naturalism. A century ago, it was understandable that we should try to restrict the university to questions we could answer definitively, to everyone's agreement. We are now finding that this means leaving out too much.

I don't think it is tragic that we have gone through secularism and come out the other side. Post-secularism represents a more level playing field, although the games we play may be a bit chaotic. We now recognize the limits on argument, even if we are sometimes embarrassed by fashion. But among other things, it points up the need for something like the new Christian Study Center, which is co-sponsoring these talks. The University needs to be in conversation with society. For it is society that will translate its knowledge into action.

*John Sommerville
Professor of History
University of Florida*

CHRISTIAN STUDY CENTER OF GAINESVILLE

WE'D LOVE TO HEAR FROM YOU

The Christian Study Center is funded solely through the generous contributions of those who share our commitment to serve the university community with a biblical understanding of life. We invite you to join us as a financial partner and thank you in advance for your consideration. We are also eager to expand the Center community and welcome your suggestion of others who might share your interest in our ministries. Thank you for checking with them before giving us their names.

Yes, I am excited about the work of the Christian Study Center and would like to become a partner with you. Enclosed is my tax-deductible contribution of:

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Please make your tax-deductible contribution payable to: *Christian Study Center of Gainesville* and return this form with your contribution to the Center at 112 NW 16th St., Gainesville, FL, 32603

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Here are the names of others who I know would want to be included on your mailing list:

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"Reconsiderations" is a bi-monthly publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville. Its purpose is to explore a biblical understanding of life and culture and to offer resources to those who seek to serve the Lord with a whole mind. If you do not wish to receive "Reconsiderations," please let us know by e-mailing us at info@christianstudycenter.org or calling us at 352-379-7375.

The Christian Study Center of Gainesville exists in order to encourage the university community in the exploration of a biblical understanding of life and culture.

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