

RECONSIDERATIONS

EXPLORING CHRISTIAN THOUGHT IN THE UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

DECEMBER 2011

VOLUME 11, NUMBER 1

RECENT CRITIQUES OF THE UNIVERSITY

C. John Sommerville

The following essay comes from an address John Sommerville gave to the retired faculty seminar at the University of Florida in late 2010.

On May 14, 2010 the *New York Times* ran an article called "Plan B: Skip College." Three days later, *The Atlantic* had an article under the title "Should More People Skip College?" Then we saw a flurry of articles derived from these.

The articles saw universities the way American society sees them: as job preparation, plugging our "human capital" into their slots in the economy. The problem is that we can imagine job training being done more efficiently in other ways. People could be shaped for their roles without General Education requirements, without basketball teams or student unions or capital campaigns or academic CEOs. Yet the critics all share the feeling that college should be more than that, a place of personal growth of some kind. I can't allude to all the dozens of recent critiques, but they do seem to fall into six categories, and we can consider each of these at least.

- 1) Blaming a lazy attitude on the part of students and faculty, which is a cultural critique of a permissive society,
- 2) blaming our economic obsessions, a social critique,
- 3) blaming what is called postmodernism, an intellectual critique,

- 4) blaming the research ideal, a deeper intellectual critique,
- 5) blaming secularism, which is actually a political critique,
- 6) blaming the university's professionalization, which is a structural/functional critique.

I should say at the outset that there is not a very coherent argument developing among these works, since the books largely ignore one another. This points up one of the failures of our universities today, as the academic playing field has become so vast. These works appear, but others don't necessarily read them before writing their own version, or they only read reviews. But though there is little progress in the discussion, I thought I detected a certain trajectory in the critiques.

First, there is complaint of a general slackness among both students and professors. Grade inflation, campus distractions, tenure, remote administrators, all contribute to educational underachievement by faculty and students. This is the main theme of a collection of essays by disgruntled faculty, *Declining by Degrees* (2005). I sense that the authors are not as hard on colleges as on universities, suggesting that educational success is better served on the more human scale of colleges. The book's foreword is by popular author Tom Wolfe, who had just written that

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corrosive novel about college life called *I am Charlotte Simmons*. Wolfe thinks that students begin slacking off about the time they are admitted into the school of their dreams, or aren't admitted to the school of their dreams. As to how to return to greater seriousness, perhaps it would take some national emergency.

Criticism of American permissiveness is not just aimed at the university, but at society in general. And likewise the second critique, of an economic mind-set. There is a widespread feeling that university administrations have an economic fixation. The majority of books make this their main theme, contrasting it with a traditional ideal of liberal learning. Martha Nussbaum's *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (2010) is a recent example.

Nussbaum, at Chicago, is a prominent classicist and public intellectual. Here she says that classical humanism is something very precious, which is being threatened around the world and neglected here at home. The ancient Greeks that she admires didn't think education existed for the economy. Quite the opposite. They thought that society and the economy were organized as they were in order to support some few lucky ones who could devote themselves to lifelong education and personal growth. And they left a legacy unlike that of any other ancient society. But what is society organized for now? Accumulation? Where does that stop?

Nussbaum is glad that our economy has reached the point that it needn't be just a small elite who can learn to understand themselves and the world. But without a liberal arts education we never get started on this quest for wisdom, for seeing things in the widest perspective.

The trouble with Nussbaum's critique is that she wants to be properly multicultural. Humanism isn't really multicultural. It's not interested in cultures for their own sake, since there are some pretty inhumane cultures out

there. The Greeks certainly weren't multiculturalists, in their disdain for barbarians. Classical humanism wants to find and affirm the positive qualities of cultures.

This is awkward because the values that humanists actually use to judge the human good are largely Jewish and Christian, more even than they are classical. Nussbaum likes to criticize the Religious Right, but she does so on the basis of Christian values. Respecting the dignity of every individual and charity toward outsiders sound like commonplaces now, but they went against classical values.

Many who quote Socrates on "knowing thyself," go on to imply that the main point of education is to estrange students

from their heritage. To be more coherent, they might say that education is to help students understand their heritage and assumptions, and build on those or critique them from within. But that would go against our current disdain for what are called "western values."

This suggests the third of our critiques, a critique of what used to be known as postmodernism.

Postmodernism is essentially the idea that all cultures are basically equal, because they are equally artificial. Cultures are socially constructed rather than found in the nature of things. And our proudest values are just a disguise for the power of dominant groups. Our so-called values restrict us, at the same time they also give us power over others. Both are regrettable.

Stanley Fish is prominent in his critique of postmodernism, as in his *Save the World On Your Own Time* (2008). Fish was a professor of English literature, and particularly of the poetry of John Milton. Why study Milton? No reason. Unlike Nussbaum, Fish doesn't claim that the humanities are "worth" anything, they're just interesting, and that's what's so great about them. Asking what the humanities are for is like asking what people are for. It's just a given. We don't cultivate the humanities in order to get

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something else. They are ends in themselves, the furniture of a truly human life.

Actually, the idea of “what people are for” is no longer just a given to everyone in the academy. Peter Singer, the bioethicist at Princeton, is trying to figure out what people are good for, or why we think we are special. He is trying to figure out which human beings should be allowed to keep on living, on some utilitarian or naturalistic basis. This is not going to be convincing to those from a Western heritage, where the dignity and equality of the human individual is axiomatic.

So what does Fish think universities are for? They are where one can study human creativity, including the human creation known as science. And universities are where we learn how to contribute to these efforts in our turn. That’s what they’re good at. Faculty aren’t good at being “moralists, therapists, political counselors or agents of global change.” The point of studying Milton is not so you can argue with him or call him names, but to see what a really gifted person thought. Then we can make our existential choices on our own time.

The problem with Fish is that he shows no sense of what universities are in a sociological sense. He doesn’t seem to recognize that they have professional schools. Maybe he thinks they shouldn’t. You can’t ignore all this and really be talking about the American university. All professional programs without exception serve some notion of the human good, of human flourishing. If humanity is never considered, then the program is just job training.

At the end of Fish’s book, he mentions a work that was critical of him, Anthony Kronman’s *Education’s End: Why Our Colleges and Universities have Given Up on the Meaning of Life* (2007). Kronman’s book is the best example of our fourth critique, a critique of the research ideal. While Fish criticized universities for wandering from their earlier purpose, Kronman attacks that earlier purpose. He questions the “research ideal” that was the very basis of secular research uni-

versities, adopted from nineteenth century German universities. This research mission means that, while colleges exist to teach students, universities are essentially to advance knowledge.

Kronman’s is a more radical critique than any we’ve seen so far. It is not blaming society, or the waywardness of academics, but the dominant academic paradigm. Kronman complains that undergraduate education is being submerged by the research emphasis. He remembers as a student at Williams learning that “the meaning of life is a subject that can be studied in school.” He says academics now dismiss the subject as juvenile, so that “churches now monopolize the authority to address [the question of the meaning of life].” He views that as unfortunate, given his hostility to religion. And he thinks even churches have declined intellectually because there is no sensible secular humanism for them to oppose.

By “the meaning of life” Kronman means “What, in the end, should I care about?” “One cannot live a meaningful life unless there is something one is prepared to give it up for.” He talks about ultimate concern, ultimate care, and ultimate value, and admits that these are essentially religious concepts – they are

existential, going beyond facts to our choices and life purposes.

He fears that universities like his own, Yale, don’t have the resources to address them. The “research model” has made humanities departments try to become technical specialties. Western ideas about human nature or human values are now viewed only as dogmas. A genuine secular humanism, which would consider all values on their merits, is now dismissed as oppressive by the politically correct. For when every tradition is considered equal, there’s nothing to discuss.

Kronman’s plea is to revive a true “secular humanism,” an open, pluralistic, prolonged and serious discussion of life. Questions about the human are what the university isn’t dealing with. Respect for science may stand in the way, if we

The central concern of universities is something we’ve almost lost the language to discuss.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT

Graduate Roundtable

When George Marsden wrote *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* in 1998, he made waves that pushed in multiple directions. In that short book, he made a case for religiously informed academic work to be offered in the university as a legitimate voice among a multitude of perspectives. More to the point, Marsden argued that Christianity has a wide and deep body of knowledge associated with it that makes it, at least in part, an intellectual tradition. Scholars who identify with that tradition should bring it to bear in their work, where there are connections, and when they do they should not be discounted merely because the tradition is a religious one. So, Marsden's point was really that the idea of bringing one's Christian perspective into scholarly work is not all that outrageous after all, given the tenor of the modern academy which has lots of competing frameworks grounded in a variety of intellectual traditions.

In the years since *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* came out, it has served as a lightning rod for some, and for others it has been an impetus for thinking about the ways that being religious might impact a scholar's work. Christian graduate student groups, especially, latched on to this idea and started talking about what it means to be a Christian scholar. At the Christian Study Center, our initiatives with graduate students have included a number of things over the years, but the most consistent effort has been the Graduate Roundtable, a reading group just for graduate students. It's safe to say that Marsden's book served as a starting point as one of our first selections for the Graduate Roundtable several years ago.

Like the various reactions to Marsden's book, the Graduate Roundtable has taken on a number of forms with regard to the emphasis and nature of the conversation. Through an ongoing conversation based in careful reading of important texts, we want to foster reflection and dialogue on the nexus of religion and academic discourse in a way that enriches graduate students as they embark on their academic career. To give a fuller picture of the Roundtable, it would help to mention a few bullet points that should clarify how this initiative fits into the Center's work.

The nature of the conversation: a central idea of the Graduate Roundtable is that religion really is at the heart of some of the most pressing issues in academic work, whether it is acknowledged or not. Through our readings we hope to tease out where religious

ideas are in play or could make a difference if brought into light. While we are most concerned with how Christian frameworks intersect the wider conversation, we also value the role of other perspectives.

The topics and disciplines: the Roundtable probes the issues in the academy where there is potential for religious perspectives to be in view, with special attention given to the humanities and social sciences. We limit this purview because of the common thread that runs through everything we discuss - the concept of the human. This begins with shared human experience, moves to questions and quandaries that emerge, and seeks understanding grounded by a commitment to the flourishing of humans and the world they inhabit. While the professions and hard sciences certainly address things related to this, it is in the humanities and social sciences 1) where the human is most in view and 2) where the idea of the human is most contested. It is our hope that renewal within the humanities and social sciences will offer much to the other disciplines. For this reason, all disciplines are welcomed to the Roundtable, though our conversation will be rooted in the humanities and social sciences.

The idea of two reading lists: it has been said that a scholar who grounds her identity in Christian understanding has two reading lists. The first list contains the texts in her specific discipline that will make her knowledgeable in her field. The second contains readings that shape and inform her Christian understanding. Ideally, these reading lists will intertwine in ways that each can inform the other, but ultimately, the second is that which creates a framework from which the scholar works in her field. The Roundtable will emphasize the second reading list, while engaging with the first as is fitting for inter-disciplinary conversation.

Highlights from 2011 readings:

- Wendell Berry, "The Loss of the University"
- Alasdair MacIntyre, "The End of Education: The Fragmentation of the American University"
- Annette Aronowicz, "Nothing Human is Foreign to Me"
- Makoto Fujimura, "The Aroma of the New"
- Flannery O'Connor, "Revelation," "A Good Man is Hard to Find"
- Poems by Czeslaw Milosz

Todd Best, formerly Director of Programs, continues to coordinate the Graduate Roundtable. He currently works as an academic advisor at UF.

POETRY FOR ADVENT REFLECTION

Some History Behind *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*

O come, O come, Emmanuel
and ransom captive Israel
that mourns in lonely exile here
until the Son of God appear.

(Refrain): Rejoice! Rejoice!
Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel!

O come, Thou Wisdom, from on high
and order all things far and nigh
to us the path of knowledge show
and teach us in her ways to go.

O come, o come, Thou Lord of might
who to thy tribes on Sinai's height
in ancient times did give the law
in cloud, and majesty, and awe.

O come, Thou Rod of Jesse's stem
from ev'ry foe deliver them
that trust Thy mighty power to save
and give them vict'ry o'er the grave.

O come, Thou Key of David, come
and open wide our heav'nly home
make safe the way that leads on high
that we no more have cause to sigh.

O come, Thou Dayspring from on high
and cheer us by thy drawing nigh
disperse the gloomy clouds of night
and death's dark shadow put to flight.

O come, Desire of nations, come
and bind in one the hearts of all mankind
bid every strife and quarrel cease
and fill the world with heaven's peace.

In singing this familiar Christmas carol, we participate, perhaps unwittingly, in the ancient Christian tradition of meditating on particular aspects of Christ's lordship. Each verse is a shortened version of an antiphon (a call-and-response type of song or chant) used throughout the Middle Ages during Advent. The early medieval church had established a set of antiphons for use in prayer services in the evenings leading up to Christmas. The list below shows the date that each antiphon was to be recited, the title of Christ's lordship on which it concentrates, and the passage of Isaiah on which it is based:

December 16: *O Sapientia* (Wisdom), Isaiah 11:2-3; 28:29
December 18: *O Adonai* (Lord), Isaiah 11:4-5; 33:22
December 19: *O Radix Jesse* (Root of Jesse), Isaiah 11:1, 10
December 20: *O Clavis David* (Key of David), Isaiah 22:22; 9:7
December 21: *O Oriens* (Dayspring), Isaiah 9:2; 60:1-2
December 22: *O Rex Gentium* (King of the Nations), Isaiah 2:4; 9:6

These "O Antiphons," as they became known, appear in the writing of Boethius, a 6th century philosopher, indicating that they were most likely a part of early church worship. Since then, Christians have used them to meditate on the many ways that God has related to his people through his incarnation. In the later middle ages, an anonymous composer set metrical versions of these antiphons to a traditional French tune to produce *Veni, Veni, Immanuel*. The version we have today, *O Come, O Come, Emmanuel*, still uses this tune and appropriately begins with the antiphon for December 23, O Emmanuel, and then starts from O Sapientia (Wisdom), each verse concentrating on the respective attribute of Christ. Singing this and other Christmas hymns can serve as a fruitful exercise as we reflect on their Biblical references and their arrangement around the one they proclaim.

PS. This spring, we will begin a reading group around short selections of medieval theology and spiritual writing. We plan to discuss brief selections like this one in a reading group format. Watch our website for details.

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imagine it can make all our choices for us. Religions are also a threat since he thinks they are essentially dogmatic, not allowing doubt or questioning. Their talk of “faith” sounds to him like a sacrifice of intellect.

Oddly enough, our fifth critique takes issue with just this point of Kronman’s. It is a critique of the university’s secularism. Secularism is more than mere secularization. Secularization only means that religion no longer rules the university, but has become one viewpoint among several. Ideological secularism means that religion is ruled off the premises.

Around 1900 when the secular research university got started, religion fell by the wayside. Things were going to be decided on “rational” grounds. But since that time the concept of rationality has become distinctly fuzzy. Philosophers like Alasdair MacIntyre have shown that there are *various* rationalities. Like logic, rationality is now seen as the *consistency* of systems, rather than what we might call their *truth*. Rationalities are found to be based on presuppositions. So St. Augustine’s principle, that one has to begin in faith in order to *understand*, turns out to be true of science as well as theology, as philosophers of science like Michael Polanyi now acknowledge. That is, any successful search must first have an idea of what it’s looking for, and of its significance. The search must begin in assumptions, like what Einstein called his faith.

The point in this fifth critique is that there is no way to discuss our foundational assumptions without dealing with ultimate perspectives. For example, Jürgen Habermas, called “the single most important public intellectual in Europe,” is not religious, but has famously admitted that we cannot discuss political theory or democracy authority without using religious concepts. He lists about a dozen such. It is becoming clear that our prohibition on religious speech in tax-supported institutions is not intellectual but political. It hampers discussions of the human good, where our terms are bound to involve ultimate commitments, like the dignity of the individual.

There has been debate on all this in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and elsewhere. The Social Science Research Council is funding a study

of whether it is possible to make liberal arts education entirely secular, without simply censoring all religious concepts in advance. Such points were raised as far back as 1996 by George Marsden of Duke in his *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*. Books continue to appear along this line, including mine called *The Decline of the Secular University* (2006) and the forthcoming *Religion in Higher Education* (Oxford).

Harvard recently debated including a religion requirement in its new GenEd program. But that would only have been studying *about* religion, and we already do that. We’re talking here about discovering religious assumptions informing many *other* subjects. This isn’t arguing from religious first principles or doctrines, but about finding them at the end of our analysis. Whenever courses touch on our choices, ultimate values come into view. For, while facts *inform* our choices, it is values that decide matters. University courses may not tell us what choices to make, but they should allow discussion of the range of possible approaches, many of which will be religious.

Finally, just last year a sixth critique appeared, a structural and functional one, in books like Louis Menand’s *The Marketplace of Ideas* (2010). Menand goes beyond a criticism of the research ideal in general to show how that ideal has deformed the humanities. The underlying problem, he thinks, is the university’s professionalization.

Menand shows how English Departments like his at Harvard have pulled out of any “marketplace” by professionalizing its activities. Just as doctors and lawyers don’t let others dictate their methods or reward systems, academics want to govern their activities internally. Above all, professionalization means restricting the production and credentialing of other members of the guild. In short, university faculties today see their main job as reproducing themselves. Anyone around universities knows how eager graduate students are to learn the jargon of their fields. Their loyalties are no longer to society or to their students or colleges, but to professional organizations and grant agencies.

Menand’s description of the group-think of university faculties is depressing. It makes it easier to understand why universities are becoming

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marginal to American politics, business, culture, and public opinion. Faculty seem to take pride in being out of step with society, politically and ideologically.

Like Kronman’s, this critique comes from the very center of the university. A structural/functional critique also comes out in *Higher Education? How Colleges Are Wasting Our Money and Failing Our Kids and What We Can Do About It* (2010), by Andrew Hacker and Claudia Dreifus at Columbia. They agree that universities have become worlds unto themselves. How they use the money from student loans, research grants, rising tuition, and alumni giving doesn’t seem to have much to do with education. Over 600 colleges now have football teams while only 14 of them actually turn a profit. So funds must be diverted from somewhere. Since 1980 the ratio of administrators to students has doubled, and on most campuses, the authors claim, there are as many administrators and staff as faculty. Their job titles don’t suggest that they are vital to an educational mission. Nor does it seem that university presidents’ inflation-adjusted salaries, which have doubled or tripled in the last 20 years, really reflect some economic law. As tuitions rise, instructional budgets shrink, with more teaching done by adjuncts and TAs.

These economic facts affirm Menand’s point that universities have cut themselves off from the

marketplace. *US News* is quoted as saying that “if universities were businesses, they would be ripe for hostile takeovers, complete with serious cost-cutting and painful reorganizations.” Meanwhile, our actual for-profit institutions – the University of Phoenix for instance – now account for 12 percent of students and are growing.

None of these critics think society can do without the many things that universities do. But if they are all housed on one campus, the assumption is that they have something to do with each other. Otherwise they might thrive better separately and without the distractions of the old physical plants and academic culture. Perhaps we could agree that the common item in everything the university does is an interest in the human good. That is what was enshrined in the core courses or GenEd requirements that are a matter for puzzlement now. The central concern of universities is something we’ve almost lost the language to discuss. Without that common concern, any idea of unity in the university may no longer be realistic.

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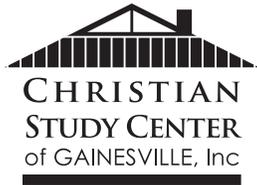
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by **C. John Sommerville**

Several authors have offered critiques of the American university system in the past few years. UF Professor Emeritus, John Sommerville, assesses the arguments.

Program Spotlight: Graduate Roundtable
by **Todd Best**

The graduate roundtable has recently focused on issues concerning religion and the academy. Roundtable discussion leader, Todd Best, recounts some of the main topics of conversation and gives highlights from the reading list.

Advent Reflection: O Come, O Come, Emmanuel
by **Sean Hill**

Study Center graduate assistant Sean Hill offers some history and thoughts on the familiar Christmas carol.

Reconsiderations is a publication of the Christian Study Center of Gainesville which explores the intersection of Christian thought and academic discourse.



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