

Reconnecting faith and scholarship

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One of the aims of CASE is to challenge Christian scholars to consider more fully the relationship of faith to their scholarship. In doing this CASE encourages the expression of views across a wide range of fields of study that are informed by faith in the Christian gospel. Such an agenda runs counter to the prevailing wisdom that matters of faith and scholarship should be kept separate. We owe a great debt of gratitude to Professor George Marsden who over the last decade has been responsible for creating lively debate about the legitimacy of seeking to inform one's scholarship by religious teachings and matters of faith.¹ Institutions like universities which once encouraged a close relationship between faith and learning, assume today that research, scholarship and learning must be divorced from religious conviction. While most pre-20th Century universities were founded as religious institutions in which students explored the classics and the sciences alongside religion, today there is often little place for such parallel considerations of faith and learning. As Marsden argues, in today's universities "...the only points of view that are allowed full academic credence are those that presuppose purely naturalistic worldviews".²

Marsden suggests that as a consequence of the separation of faith and intellectual scholarship universities have become 'morally incoherent'. "Contemporary university culture is hollow at its core. Not only does it lack a spiritual centre, but it is without an alternative".³ In the twentieth century we have witnessed the gradual removal of studies of religion from the core of inquiry to the periphery, and then eventually to separate religious institutions. A basic premise of CASE is that matters of Christian faith can inform scholarship, and should shape the engagement of Christian intellectuals with their world. Bodies like New College that are located on university campuses and that exist to serve the institution, have an added responsibility to at least remind members of university communities that faith has a significant relationship to what we think we know and how we apply this knowledge to life.

How is this to be done? Firstly, with great caution and respect for the views of others. Because universities are not places that see themselves as places of moral training any more, some are suspicious of those who talk of faith, particularly Christian faith. Perhaps

most would see that the separation of the church from university life has been a good thing, freeing academics and their students to explore knowledge unencumbered by religious beliefs. In the case of institutions like New College we are invited guests at the university and are bound by rules and policies that enshrine respect for and plurality of beliefs, not to mention numerous implicit cultural values that see strident truth claims from individuals and institutions as undesirable. Of course, another major cultural icon of the modern university is that of intellectual freedom and the right to express any view. At times Christians have felt that this central value has had a footnote that says “except if you are a Christian”.

When we consider the teachings of the Bible that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not something to be ashamed of (Romans 1:16), and that we should “always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have” (1 Peter 3:15), it would seem that Christian scholars and teachers have a number of responsibilities in the academic arena. Alvin Plantinga, a philosopher from the University of Notre Dame, suggests two. First, Christians must be committed to “consciousness raising”, what he calls “Christian cultural criticism”.⁴ We need to suggest that there are other ways of viewing the world. Second, we should engage in scholarship in ways that are appropriate from a Christian or more broadly theistic point of view. We need to consider how our faith affects the very things we study. As George Marsden points out, most Christian academics have separated their academic and Christian worlds, seeing their primary role as a Christian academic to be simply that of being the best academic that they can be.⁵ In fact, their faith makes a distinctive contribution to the university as a whole.

To this Yale’s Gregory Ganssle adds a third concern, that of the well being of the institution itself. He argues that it isn’t just individual Christian scholarship that is important; we need to be concerned for the institution and our mission to it. Being a Christian scholar should include thinking about the institution of the University redemptively. Ultimately we seek to benefit the lives of colleagues and students, as we establish the relevance of the gospel to the contemporary world.⁶

In my academic work as a researcher interested in how people learn language, I have been challenged in recent years to reconsider much of what I wrote. When I revisit my publications from the 1980s and early 1990s I recognise that my work was only implicitly influenced by my Christian faith. This has led to a healthy reconsideration of my writing

and how I see the social purposes of language and literacy. It has also led me to consider more critically the ideologies of many writers whose work I have accepted in the past. For example, in recent times, I have been exploring the impact of multimedia and new forms of digital literacy on how children learn. In doing so, I have questioned the work of a number of colleagues whose work has been making claims about the role that language plays as an agent of social oppression and the potential that new ‘multiliteracies’ might play in overcoming what they see as the injustices brought by the written word and significant cultural texts such as the Bible.⁷

It has been exciting (indeed liberating) to continue to engage as a researcher in reading, analysing, critiquing and responding to the work of others, while at the same time considering how my world view, centred on the gospel of Christ, makes a difference to the arguments that I feel compelled to raise.

As a Christian, writers like Marsden, Plantinga and Ganssle have challenged me to consider how I use my scholarship in the university context. Plantinga suggests that we work and engage in an arena in which a conflict is being played out between a “theistic perspective, on the one hand, and perennial naturalism and creative anti-realism (along with the relativism and anti-commitment it spawns) on the other.” As a Christian academic I see the need to interrogate aspects of contemporary scholarship that are at odds with a Christian world view. As a participant in the university and in academic communities, I do not approach this task dogmatically, but as one who has a right and obligation to express ideas which reflect who I am and what I believe. My faith is not neutral; it does shape how I see the world. My hope is that CASE will continue to help me and its associates to be more effective in this endeavour.

¹ George Marsden is a Professor of History at the University of Notre Dame. In his book, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant establishment to established nonbelief*, he wrote a “Concluding Unscientific Postscript” in which he declared his own faith and presented the case for reconnecting faith and scholarship.

² Marsden, G. (1994). *The soul of the American university: From Protestant establishment to established nonbelief*. Oxford University Press: New York, p. 430.

³ Marsden, G. (1997). *The outrageous idea of Christian scholarship*. Oxford University Press: New York, p. 3.

⁴ Plantinga, A. (2003). “On Christian scholarship”. <http://www.id.ucsb.edu/fscf/library/plantinga/OCS.html>

⁵ op cit, Marsden, G. (1994), p. 430.

⁶ Ganssle, G. (2003). "A Doxastic Community Approach to Christian Scholarship".
<http://www.leaderu.com/aip/docs/ganssle.html>

⁷ As part of a visiting professorship at the University of British Columbia in July this year I presented a public lecture titled "Digital literacy: The myths, realities, threats and possibilities" which was also web cast and can be viewed at <http://www.newcollege.unsw.edu.au/case.php>. **Link to**
<http://www.lerc.educ.ubc.ca/lerc/resources/tcairney.wmv>