

AlbertMohler.com

Is the University Hostile to Christian Professors?

Thursday, October 4, 2007



The university was the child of the church. The classic ideal of the university emerged from the context of medieval Christianity and the confidence that all truth and every discipline of learning is, in the end, united in Christ — the wisdom of God.

Fast forward a few centuries and the picture is very different. The modern university has taken on a cultural importance that dwarfs that of the medievals. And these hugely influential institutions are now, in the main, thoroughly secularized.

This does not mean that no Christians are to be found there. It does mean that the culture and worldview of the institutions are thoroughly secular.

Historian George Marsden explains that with the rise of the modern university ideal came a tide that ran against the Christian foundations of the established academic culture. A generation of reformers pushed for the secularization of the colleges and universities as a means of freeing the schools from ecclesiastical control.

“To reformers it seemed that colleges had to be freed from clerical control, and hence usually from traditional Christianity, in order to achieve something that we now take for granted — the emergence of higher education as a separate profession, distinct from the clergy,” he explains.

By the end of the twentieth century, the process of secularization was virtually complete. As Marsden notes, “today Christianity has only a vestigial voice at the periphery of these vast culture-shaping institutions.”

A recent news article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* raises many of these same issues. Reporter Thomas Bartlett set the story this way:

He thought he had a good chance. Last year Mike S. Adams, an associate professor of criminology at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, applied for a promotion to full professor. He had been at the university for 13 years. In that time, he had published 10 peer-reviewed papers and won three teaching awards. Not that there weren't bumps along the way, but his record, he believed, was better than most.

So when he was turned down, Mr. Adams started asking questions. The official word was that he hadn't measured up in any of the three crucial categories – teaching, publishing, or service. He didn't believe that for a minute. The real reason he wasn't promoted, according to Mr. Adams, is that he's a Christian.

The remainder of the article is a consideration of this question — are Christians the targets of discrimination in the university culture. The article presented arguments on both sides, and then turned to the question of whether the real discrimination might not be religious, but political.

Of course, a clear separation of these issues is not possible.

It can be difficult to untangle political and religious views. “A person’s stand on a controversial topic – abortion, say, or gay marriage – may very well have roots in his or her faith. Where does politics begin and religion end?” Bartlett asks.

He then turns to the example of Professor Randall Balmer of Barnard College and Columbia University:

Of course not all Christian professors are politically conservative. Randall Balmer, a professor of American religious history at Barnard College, is an ordained Episcopal minister and a self-described evangelical. He is also a liberal. He published an article in The Chronicle Review last year titled “Jesus Is Not a Republican.”

He has certainly heard people say that Christian professors are discriminated against. But he has never, in his 22 years of teaching at several universities, seen evidence of that. “The picture that has been painted on the right is that the academy is hostile to faith and is a bastion of secularism,” Mr. Balmer says. “I simply haven’t encountered that hostility.”

He does believe there is a liberal bias in academe. “And thank God for that,” he says. “I’m glad there is a bunker against the tide of conservatism that has overtaken every other corner of our country.”

Professor Balmer is a “self-described evangelical,” but that explains almost nothing of his essential worldview. In what sense is he committed to evangelical doctrinal commitments and related concerns? What does *evangelical* mean in this context?

One professor at an elite university recently told me of a conversation with a Jewish colleague. A recent news item had raised the issue of the exclusivity of the Gospel. The colleague asked: “Do you really believe that persons who do not believe in Jesus are going to hell?” When the Christian professor said “yes” his colleague was outraged. “I would never have voted tenure for you had I known that,” he retorted.

The other fascinating issue is Balmer’s unvarnished pride in the politically liberal stance and worldview of the university. So much for any claim of objectivity and openness to ideas. He sees the university as a “bunker” against conservative ideas. We should be thankful for such candor. Keep his statement handy so that you have it the next time you hear an major university leader bragging about the openness and political neutrality of his institution.

A very different analysis comes from British historian Paul Johnson in the October 8, 2007 edition of *Forbes* magazine. Johnson responds to militant atheists like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and then notes:

My old university, Oxford, which was founded by monks, friars and theologians nine centuries ago, was until recently regarded as a bastion of old-fashioned Christianity and, as such, was called “the house of lost causes.” Today a publicly expressed belief in Christianity is likely to lower your chance of landing a job at Oxford.

Religion has become a handicap in university life, especially in certain subjects. In philosophy, for example, academics who hope for senior chairs keep mum about any faith they hold. God and promotion do not mix. And in all the sciences, young men and women with religious backgrounds are advised to jettison their Christian, Jewish or other religious baggage if they want to pursue careers in physics, chemistry or biology. The universal assumption seems to be that a belief in God fatally debars a scholar from acquiring scientific knowledge. In Britain the number of students concentrating in the sciences is on the decline, and the systematic discouragement of Christians and Jews in the science faculties will clearly increase that trend.

Recent developments in Britain appear to prove Johnson’s point. It appears that the more openly a professor’s worldview is tied to Christian commitments, the larger the problem becomes. When the professor’s worldview and political commitments are those shared by his or her secular colleagues the social and professional cost of Christian identification is likely to be low. When those commitments and worldviews diverge the cost is likely to be far higher.

The passages cited from George Marsden can be found in *The Secularization of the Academy*, edited by George M. Marsden and Bradley J. Longfield (Oxford University Press, 1992). See Marsden’s opening chapter, “The Soul of the American University,” pages 9-45. Readers are strongly advised to read his classic work on this subject, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

The building in the photograph is the Low Memorial Library at Columbia University.

Content Copyright © 2002-2010, R. Albert Mohler, Jr.