
*The Soul of the American University* outlines the institutional history of collegiate education in America from the founding of Harvard until the late-twentieth century. The author charts the lessening commitment of educators to Protestantism and the concomitant growth of secular, naturalistic commitments. The result, today, is that Americans receive a college education that does what it can to weaken whatever faith students have when they enter the groves of academe.

This argument is not new and is certainly true. But no one has told the story with such interpretative flair as Marsden has. He concentrates, as have most people who have worked in this area, on the post-Civil War university. Marsden points out that the liberal Protestants who constructed the modern university system on the backs of the denominational colleges were more concerned with Protestantism than religious truth and that their leadership ultimately undercut any positive creed. Marsden’s fundamental notion is not any less interesting for being well known, and he embroiders it with his own fine threadwork. As I understand Marsden, the first generation of University-builders were not the secularists they are often made out to be. Rather, they wanted mainstream believers on their faculties and in general were committed to safe, conservative men. Nonetheless, the captains of erudition also did not want religion to intrude into the actual workings of their institutions; it was a “personal” matter not to be connected to the vocation of a scholar. This revolutionary separation of one’s profession from one’s profession of belief led, later, to the secularism that, Marsden concludes, dominates the university today.

In addition to his story, Marsden adds a sixteen page afterward. In this “Concluding Unscientific Postscript” Marsden leaves the realm of social and institutional analysis. He denounces the results of these developments and
argues for the reintroduction of normative religious concerns onto the American campus. The author's position here has been widely disseminated and has attracted much attention. Although there is a certain incongruity in the sixteen page tail wagging an over-400-page dog, it is clear to me that Marsden wants it that way.

The book is not based on archival material. Marsden spent some time at Berkeley where he consulted with Henry May about his work and used the California archives (and, incidentally, the dissertation from which came Laurence Veysey's *The Emergence of the American University* [1965]). But except for this foray, Marsden has written from secondary literature and published contemporary writings – e.g., the Yale Report of 1828 – on higher education. But even many such famous writings are cited from anthologies or reliable secondary sources.

This strategy has meant that in some cases Marsden may get the nuances wrong. For example, at the turn of century, ancient near eastern studies became a refuge for many religiously inclined academics, although within that field there were a variety of spiritual views. Overall, however, Harvard and Yale were less devoted to Christian verities than were institutions that were more secular in other ways – Columbia, Pennsylvania, and Hopkins. This is the sort of complexity the author misses. Moreover, although I cannot prove this, in concentrating on flagship schools like Yale, Marsden might have underestimated the secularism of universities. My own sense is that Protestant cultural sensibilities persisted far longer at places like Yale than they did at places like SUNY-Buffalo, Michigan State, or the University of Washington. That is, further primary research may show that Marsden's case is stronger than he makes it out to be. Yale, for example, may have followed the secularizing trend, not promoted it.

The tradeoff of secondary reading for archival grubbing is that Marsden has actually finished a large synthetic work on the cultural politics of academia. Although his focus is the decline of religiosity, he has first of all examined the geographic sweep of higher education in the United States.

Although he emphasizes "pacesetting" schools, there are many of these, and different ones in different periods; and Marsden looks as well at other institutions – Catholic colleges, for example. In addition, he has explored many other topics – for example, the exclusion of Jews, women's education, student life, curricular innovations, alumni relations, and the impact of federal funding. The great strength of *The Soul of the American University* is that it is the best single survey we now have of the social history of American higher education. As a text for graduate students interested in the topic, it is unmatched. Marsden has not really added much to what we know, and his mode of explanation falls under the rubric of the well known "new social history" (rather than traditional intellectual history). But his concentration on