Loss and Change of Personal Religious and Moral Values in American Secular Universities

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Abstract

This paper serves as an investigation into the decline of spirituality and the consequent shift in morals and religious values in the American university. The modern university as many know it today traces its roots back to highly religious origins, specifically seminaries founded upon the virtues of Protestant Christianity. Over time, historical sanctity gave way to secularism as faculty strived to conduct new institutes or convert old institutes into empirically focused research universities so as to serve a more heterogeneous and science-minded influx of students. Several writers have researched this shift in religious values and the prioritization of research as it largely began in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Although various religions pervade American life and academia, it is undeniable that much of the historical religiosity within scholarly circles and institutions belongs to the Judeo-Christian tradition. Because of this, the sources cited in this paper largely, if not wholly, concentrate on universities such as Yale, North Carolina, Brown, etc. Doing so may limit the breadth of understanding, but it also allows for a more refined investigation into these constrained contexts.

Keywords: secularization, Christianity, American university
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Attendants of Indiana University purport a decline in religion at this institution as well as other public universities. In coming from a rural, conservative, and religious area to the relatively liberal and less religious campus of Indiana University, I witness for myself a comparative dearth of Christian values and practices. This piece strives to ascertain how the American university evolves from its highly religious origins to a highly, though in truth not completely, secular current manifestation, especially as seen within the faculty and students. Though the topic I undertake proves often to be highly subjective due to the ever-topical sacred–secular schism, I intend to assess academically the literature surrounding it presently and to allow this paper to work as a conduit for the natural coalescence of information drawn from the questions “How does the modern secular higher-education institute, e.g. Indiana University, decrease the active personal retention of the familial morals and religious traditions instilled within its students?” and “What demographic groups can be cited as primary factors in the loss of religious—specifically Christian—traditions and values while at an institution like IU?”

Literature Review

Research into the religious lives at university appeals to me because I am invested in both religion and higher education. Being tasked with authoring a research paper requires my delving into the past studies that attempt to elucidate the changing status that is religiosiety at the American university. My textual sources, published in 1968 and then from 1994–2010, assess both religious and irreligious perspectives; however, the religion discussed is most significantly Christianity. Within the larger occidental context, religion has been largely influential in virtually all aspects of life. Many families pass religious traditions on to their children, and the children then bring that religion with them wherever they go, including college. However, with the advent
of the research university, the primary focus has shifted from spiritual enlightenment and biblical scholarship to the natural sciences and the search for ‘objective’ truth. I concede that modern public universities still permit and, in many ways, support religious pursuits, but it is apparent that the familial traditions once so evident are declining in representation amongst both students and faculty. The literature surrounding this subject seeks to first discover trends reflecting temporally (as opposed to geographically) comparative religious transformations, and second to discern the causes for whatever progressions and/or regressions manifest. Secularization and National Universities (Mixon, Lyon, & Beaty, 2004) identifies its purpose as “empirically [assessing] the dilemma that national universities cannot attain a reputation for academic excellence if they maintain their religious identity.” The authors examine how universities like Yale, Duke, Vanderbilt and others were formed from religious backgrounds, but that only “vestiges of their religious identities” remain (Mixon et al., 2004). Bouman’s Intentional, Inadvertent, or Inevitable (2000) also reflects on the transformation from Christian college to secular university, but it focuses on the example evidenced in the life of President James Angell of the University of Michigan, serving from 1871 to 1909. Bouman begins his text with a few inquiries as to what effect Angell had on the University of Michigan, but doubtlessly he confirms “Angell’s agency in the secularization process” (2000). This piece serves to answer the question of what person, persons, or other causes are factors in education secularization, and Bouman refers to prior research by citing the theories of George Marsden (whose ideas are present in this piece as well) and Julie Reuben, both of whom attribute specific “historical actors” (Bouman, 2000) to the shift in tradition as opposed to the more abstract forces or causes cited by other theorists. In fact, George Marsden’s book The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief (1994) contributes extensively to the understanding of
secularization in higher education, and refers to Angell also, while expanding upon the individual stories by referencing D. L. Moody (Yale), William Harper (Chicago), etc. and providing an (admittedly hyperbolic) excerpt from campus-traveler and author Harold Boyce. In addition to these sources, I draw upon authors Russel Nieli, whose writing analyzes the schism between Protestant spirituality and modern intellectualism; Perry Glanzer, who narrows the collegiate focus to North American universities that subvert the secular norm and retain faith-based curricula and tradition; and C. John Sommerville, author of a contrastive book published in 2006 and revealingly entitled *The Decline of the Secular University*. All the aforementioned academics assess the broad relation between Christianity and American universities, and the transformation that both have undergone beginning in the late 19th century and potentially still occurring today. While each author may have their own theories, or at least have appropriated the theories from groundwork prior, and supporting evidence, this essay itself does not represent any novel field research conducted by the author and solely works to distill the multifarious and often competing interpretations of the transformation of, be it in favor or against, higher education institutions in America with respect to Christianity, into a cohesive, somewhat unbiased, and satisfactory investigation.

**Methodology**

Undertaking this research involved two distinct approaches to knowledge apprehension: Textual and visual. As stated, I did not conduct original research in religious studies, rather I sought academic sources who have devoted much of their lives to understanding the roles religion plays in America at large, but specifically in the institutes of higher education. My main method consequently is distillation, the synthesizing of multiple texts into this essay. My searching process involved correspondence with a librarian at Indiana University who was
able to direct me toward feasible information outlets. In reading the documents gathered, I began a mental process of connect-the-dots in which I recognized the relations between the authors and their findings. Here I distill these findings. My second method was in meeting the SHOWED photography assignment’s requirements. While the paper strives for concrete, academic understanding, when religion plays a role, a space exists for transcendence of the empirical. Simply I photographed a light at night. The interpretation of this photo is where my work transcends page for praxis, a sort of subtle evangelism. As my conclusion shall convey, the photograph allows for a call for revival and ecclesiastical enlightenment.

**In the Beginning**

Historically evidenced is the spirituality of the first American colleges. The incipience of the American university reveals the first step in the historic nature of higher education in America. This is supported by Nieli, who acknowledges that “virtually all the institutions of higher learning established in America in colonial times and most of those started in the nineteenth century” received support primarily from adherents to the Protestant tradition (2007). The Protestant founders instilled their affinities for “moral, intellectual, and religious heritage of Christianity and Greco-Roman high culture” (Nieli, 2007) within their students as a means of preservation of self, where self means the values maintained over centuries as they manifest within the individuals who planted the colleges, seminaries, and institutes. For years the seminaries did enable students to aspire to their cultural forebears, but as a people witnessed a religious decline, many sought to explain it.

Different researchers offer different reasons for the secularization of American universities, but Glanzer, Carpenter, and Lantina suggest that the once-common “secularization theory” in fact failed to provide evidence as to the secularization of educational institutions
The intent behind the theory was to view the current decline in religious values as well as predict an even greater decline in the near future (Glanzer et al., 2010). Critics argued that not only was the world at large still highly religious, but some secularization theory-adherents even admitted their fault, like scholar Peter Berger who admitted “a whole body of literature by historians and sociologists loosely labeled ‘secularization theory’ is essentially mistaken” (as cited by Glanzer et al., 2010). The reason for the mistake is essentially that Americans only predicted the future of education from a static and almost para-destined view instead of understanding that as the nation at large changes, so do the means of education and the doctrines shared within the higher institutions.

Who is the Wise Man That May Understand This?

So what is the real driving force behind the loss of religious morals and faith in higher education? Marsden posits that the answer can be revealed by examining the purpose of a college, both historic and contemporary. Originally, colleges served as clerical training centers, institutes that would prepare young, often white, men for theological jobs in small regions, but “by the mid-nineteenth century…the majority of collegians were preparing for [non-clerical] professions, and ministerial education itself had been shifted to divinity schools or separate theological seminaries” (Marsden, 1994). The growing desire, and arguable necessity, for non-Christianity-affiliated work motivated many colleges to offer secular trades and practical education. This is not only a harbinger of 20th Century intellectual globalization but is also indicative of the accompanying secularization that so impacted burgeoning research universities.

While the research universities slowly abandoned God in favor of science, suggesting the two are mutually exclusive, scholars sought culprits for the decline. Bouman takes on the case of James Burrill Angell, former president of Michigan University. Claiming, “The University of
Michigan appears to have been a leader in the secularization process” (Bouman, 2000), he points out the role of a liberal Protestant president’s role in the forming of a prominent, secular American university. Throughout his article “Intentional, Inadvertent, or Inevitable? James Burrill Angell and Secularization at the University of Michigan,” Bouman reveals his own intertextual investigation by referencing heavily the studies of revisionist George Marsden. When Marsden insisted that “methodological secularization” (as cited by Bouman, 2000) was the force that drove even pious scientists to leave their cross outside the lab, Bouman applies this explanation to Michigan University’s shift in religious priorities by asserting that perhaps Angell was helpless to reconcile religion and science and so left the secular an open path to the heart of the university. He concludes so:

Angell’s liberal Protestant belief system made every effort to marry religion with modern scholarship and science, but his belief system was party-line liberal-Protestant when choosing a dominant alliance: he (implicitly) chose empirical science every time. (Bouman, 2000)

This conclusion suggests an incompatibility between intellectual success and the approval of God. From this conclusion, it is possible to suggest that perhaps when faced with this incompatibility, university faculty and student from religious backgrounds choose the intellectual success and peer-approval over their faith, which yields less obvious rewards.

In 2004, academics Mixon, Lyon, and Beaty sought to assess the issue that Angell allegedly grappled with during his presidency. By “empirically [assessing] the dilemma that national universities cannot attain a reputation for academic excellence if they maintain their religious identity” (Mixon et al., 2004), these academics hoped to first understand and second reconcile the religious roots of the American university with the secular contemporary form. One
interesting conclusion based on study data was that “religious schools may have to pay their faculty more than predicted because some faculty might find themselves becoming uncomfortable at schools based on religious values that are at best irrelevant and at worst antithetical to their own” (Mixon et al., 2004) which might not seem immediately related, but in fact implies that secularization of public institutions like universities occurs because of the simple reason that some/many potential teachers prefer teaching at a place that does not contradict their own philosophies. Therefore, universities are more apt to secularize so as to allow for a larger pool of applicants, thereby making available workers who otherwise would have gone to a different college. After the data conclusions, however, the authors concede (perhaps antithetically to the likes of Glanzer and Bouman) that the supposed mass secularization of American universities is “indeed more apparent than real, and that secularization, while historically common, is not currently necessary in the pursuit of a strong academic reputation” (Mixon et al., 2004), suggesting that a universities do not need to abandon faith in order to appease the masses of academia.

**A Case Against His Neighbor**

Not all academics agree that there is such a significant decline in religious values in university students and faculty. Sommerville’s *The Decline of the Secular University* (2006) contests that “universities have not been as thoroughly secularized as one may think, however. The history of the secularization of American universities has been well described in the literature and historians do not reveal a deep-laid secularist campaign,” and this proposition clearly does not align with much of the literature surrounding the issue. He does not deny that secularization occurs; in fact, his thesis argues that secularism actually leads to the “increasingly marginal [role of secular universities in] American society” (Sommerville, 2006). His book cites
proponents of cultural preservation as primary factors in the decline of secularism; he reasons that when largely diverse universities incorporate and celebrate religio-cultural traditions and lifestyles, they counteract the neutrality and empiricallity upon which many so-called secular universities base themselves (Sommerville, 2006). In essence, Sommerville says that religion remains prominent in both faculty and students because the university permits and often exhorts such expression.

**A Lamp Unto My Feet, And a Light Unto My Path**

While none of the academics pursuing this subject have reached full accord, it is evident that America’s universities, public and private, have evolved from clerical beginnings to far more diverse offerings. No reason is fully concrete, but the research consistently points to the schism between faith and science and the desire to expand into the future as primary factors in the secularization of these institutions. Students are coerced into leaving their cross at the door; presidents are afraid that they will not attract as many top-notch faculty; and frequently, religious customs manifest superficially instead of within the soul. While I am a Christian, I do not solely lament the shifting and declining virtues of my faith; nay, I seek a love supreme to guide. As per my photograph in the appendix, I implore all, in higher education and in the world, to seek a path lit not by the fluorescent bulb of a cordial machination; rather, seek the light that emanates from the soul of the righteous.
References


Appendix I: *the guide*
## Appendix II: SHOWED Document

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image</th>
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| **S** What do you see here? | • The scene is a sidewalk at night.  
• Everything is wet; it is a little bit foggy outside.  
• There are several lamps.  
• One prominent lamp is behind tree branches. |
| **H** What is really happening here? | Ostensibly very little is happening. Within the frame are several static objects: cars, lamps, branches. But as a metaphor, another image is portrayed. Perhaps it means that in the dark, cold night, there are lights on the path, lights to guide the steps someone takes. I know that from this photograph shot almost carelessly, meaning is derived. Perhaps that too is a metaphor. |
| **O** How does this relate to our lives | Our lives tread slick paths sometimes. College kids frequently walk in a figurative darkness, be it emotional, mental, spiritual, or, as photographed, literal. Our selves possess unique goals, but each goal is found at the end of a path, and the way to attain that goal is to adhere to the lighted path. |
| **W** Why does this problem or strength exist on our campus? | This problem exists because humans sometimes seek themselves before God. In higher education, people often find alternative ways of living that might provide life-long happiness. But after that life lies the problem. |
| **E** How can we become empowered about this issue? | We can be raised from the mire à la Psalm 40:2; we can learn, be receptive. We can acknowledge the *tenebrosity*, but also acknowledge the lamps that guide. |
| **D** What can we do about it? | To do often means to effect change not just in environment, but also in one’s self. That for many can signify becoming the lamp. Becoming the lamp means going to the dark places, illuminating the way back the road. Becoming the lamp means loving and rebuking. Becoming the lamp means evangelizing, proselytizing, apologizing. |