

“The University Doesn’t Get It.”

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In Evangelical Studies Bulletin Summer 2000, Vol. 17, No. 2: 1-4. Used by permission.

D.G. Hart. *The University Gets Religion. Religious Studies in American Higher Education*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. 321 pps., \$38.00.

The thesis of *The University Gets Religion* is, in brief, that the university does not and can not “get” religion. It would be best then, D. G. Hart argues, to abolish the field of religious studies. Furthermore, he adds, believers in historic Christianity should abandon efforts to relate faith to university learning.

Hart skillfully employs conventional academic methodologies in setting up his historical case for these conclusions. He organizes his well-told narrative around the story of the rise of religious studies as a university discipline. His theme is the determinative influence of liberal Protestantism in shaping American universities and their approaches to the study of religion.

Hart divides his narrative into three sections. First, is the era of the formation of American research universities from about 1870 to 1925. During that time universities were trying to define themselves as scientific institutions and to distance themselves from their more sectarian Protestant pasts. The universities, their leaders affirmed, were not antagonistic to Christianity, so long as Christianity was understood as essentially non-sectarian. University scholarship of the era, Hart aptly points out, “suffered from the problem that plagued all versions of Enlightened Christianity, namely, how to reconcile the universalism of science with the particularism of a specific religious tradition” (61). Scholars of the era struggled to show how Christianity—i.e., liberal Protestantism—was friendly to the universal aims of the university. The scientific study of the Bible might undermine some traditional claims, but the universal character of Christian morality fit well with the universities’ role in building a unified national culture.

In the second era, which Hart describes as “The Age of the Protestant Establishment, 1925-1965,” this latter theme became dominant. Religious studies emerged as a separate academic discipline. Its proponents, who were concerned that the scientific university was neglecting religion (i.e., mainstream Protestantism) justified new religious studies as part of the humanities. Christianity, they pointed out, was close to the heart of western civilization and still could provide a basis for unifying higher education and the democratic culture that it served. During this era, especially in the 1950s, spokesmen for the study of religion in the universities were remarkably open in speaking explicitly of their Christian commitments and goals. The boldness of neo-orthodox and Niebuhrian rhetoric buoyed the enterprise. Hart sometimes exaggerates the prominence and the prospects of this movement. He says, for instance, that “for the decade or so after the mid-1950s the establishment of a Christian academy appeared a realistic possibility” (178). It is true that mainstream Protestants were well accepted in some parts of the universities and did succeed in getting a watered-down version of the Protestant seminary curriculum established as the core of religious studies programs. Yet, as Hart himself sometimes suggests, such programs were peripheral to the mainstream academy, even to most of the humanities.

As Hart proceeds through his narrative of these first two eras it becomes increasingly apparent that liberal Protestantism is the villain of the story. While Hart speaks in a voice as though he were a

detached objective observer, he is also free with strong insinuations as to the inadequacy of the entire liberal Protestant effort to establish a privileged place for itself in the university curricula. In such characterizations it becomes evident that it is the biographer and admirer of J. Gresham Machen who is narrating the history. Hart repeatedly makes telling versions of the twin points that when religious studies tried to meet university criteria for being scientific it was not sufficiently religious and that when it tried to be prophetically religious it did not meet university standards for scholarship. Despite neo-orthodox rhetoric, few of the Protestant mainline advocates of Christian scholarship were addressing the hard questions that were essential to their enterprise. Rather than producing substantial models of Christian scholarship across a large range of disciplines, they relied on rhetoric and on cultural momentum that allowed them to take a vaguely liberal Protestant ethos pretty much for granted.

In his third period, 1965 to the present, Hart depicts a descent from liberal Protestant mediocrity into an even lower valley of dry bones, contemporary religious studies. Following the transformation in 1964 of the National Association of Bible Instructors (NABI, suggesting the Hebrew word for "prophet") into the American Academy of Religion (AAR), religious studies gradually gained recognition as a professional discipline. Hart shows, however, that all was not well. He recounts internal AAR debates during recent decades and makes clear his own belief that religious studies has no adequate justification to be a separate academic discipline. Religious studies, Hart observes, "has functioned as a clearinghouse for a multitude of scholarly approaches to religion whose only source of unity is the vague concept of 'religion'" (233). As some of its own practitioners have said, the significant contributions that religious studies makes could better be made from within the more established academic disciplines from which "religion" borrows. Religious studies lacks coherence and insiders in the discipline, Hart suggests, often have well-justified inferiority complexes. It is, as he puts it in his final chapter title, "the would-be discipline."

The principal value of Hart's well-documented study is as a history of the rather curious discipline of religious studies. Persons defining their careers in terms of that discipline should read and contemplate Hart's account. His basic argument is a scathing and sometimes telling indictment of the entire field.

The strength of Hart's argument—as with so many things—also becomes its weakness. Defenders of religious studies can readily point out that Hart's account is unrelievedly and selectively negative to the point of failing to give credit when it might be due. Almost nothing seems to please Hart. He begins by summarizing a 1992 *First Things* article that ridiculed the jargon-ridden program of the 1991 annual AAR meeting. Hart accepts such totally negative characterizations at face value, never seriously considering that the same program doubtless included some presentations that would be worthwhile even by most conservative Reformed standards.

Hart ignores any positive contributions in the history of religious studies because his basic premise, stated in his "Conclusion," is that religion cannot be profitably studied in universities. "In the end," he says, "the university's disregard of religion may not only be a good thing for higher education but also for religion itself" (250).

In Hart's view something essential about the exclusiveness of an historic faith must be surrendered if it is subjected to study according to modern university standards. Those standards, he seems to assume, furthermore, are unalterably fixed. Therefore, for Christian believers to study Christianity in the mainstream academy necessarily involves improper compromise.

In order to defend this thought-provoking, if overstated, view Hart has to fight a battle on a

second front. While most of his narrative seems driven by his concern to account for the intellectual vapidness of religious studies, in his Conclusion he uses his historical account to challenge those of us who are urging academic perspectives from more traditional Christian viewpoints.¹ Hart argues that his history of the fate of religious studies is decisive evidence demonstrating the futility of advocating that Christian (and other traditionally religious) scholars should work harder at relating their faith to their scholarship in university settings.

“If the current state of religious studies,” he writes, “is what happens when the university, in response to religious advocates, attempts to take religion seriously, then, contrary to recent arguments about religion and higher education, the university’s trivialization of religion may be entirely reasonable and even praiseworthy” (245). This argument is simply based on a false premise (i.e., that the current state of religious studies shows what *necessarily* happens in response to religious advocates etc.). Further, it is a premise that Hart himself has shown to be false. If his history has demonstrated anything, it is that contemporary religious studies is *contingently* the child of liberal Protestantism. Liberal Protestantism, as he well shows, maintained its privileges in the universities largely on the basis of cultural momentum, rather than doing its intellectual homework. Furthermore, it lacked rigorously critical attitudes toward the underlying premises of the mainstream academy, which it had helped to form. In addition, because of its support of the role of the universities as cultural unifiers, it lacked—or had to tone down—an adequate sense of the exclusiveness of Christianity.

None of these characteristics apply to most proponents of historic Christianity who advocate relating faith to university scholarship today, so it is incorrect to argue that what happened to religious studies necessarily will happen to their efforts. Many Christians concerned with university education today readily emphasize the exclusiveness of Christianity. Unlike mainstream Protestants of the era of the emergence of American universities, many Reformed, evangelical, and traditionalist Christians have a strong sense that their religious views are culturally “outsider” views. They have no illusions that they might “Christianize” the universities. Nor do they believe, as Hart implies they do, that “including religion in higher education will remedy the defects of the modern university” (245). Unlike Hart, however, they believe that Christians can and should work in largely alien settings—as, for instance, Paul worked within the structures of the Roman Empire. Christians thinking critically about the dominant systems of the world might be able to find creative ways to work with integrity within those systems, even while recognizing that those structures as a whole will remain essentially alien to the faith. The reason why Hart can proclaim the apparent *non sequitur* that what happened to liberal Protestantism will happen to any religious group in a modern university is that he believes his conclusion is based on logic rather than on mere historical circumstance. Traditional religious perspectives, he believes, will never pass muster in universities because they will be discredited for their religious motivations and claims to exclusive special revelations. Yet what he actually shows is not that traditional religious perspectives cannot be expressed in the mainstream academy—they often have been—but that, as Hart puts it, “religion is at best an awkward fit in the university” (243). That is correct. Historic Christianity is an awkward fit. Yet that is not a reason for committed Christians in the mainstream academy to abandon their efforts to relate their faith to their scholarship.

¹Editor’s Note: See for example George Marsden’s the reviewer’s—own, *The Soul of the American University. From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

It is a reason to be very careful not to be coopted by the prevailing standards of the academy. Reformed, evangelical, and other conservative Christians, in their eagerness to be accepted in the mainstream, might repeat some of the mistakes of liberal Protestants. Or they might not be sufficiently critical of the prevailing academic standards. One might think that the admonition one should take from Hart's analysis is to be vigilant in such regards—that one should follow some variation on the more general theme of being “in the world but not of the world.”

Hart, however, will have none of such flabbiness. In his view even such attempts at critical engagement with the contemporary academy will end in compromise. In his final paragraph he asserts that if Christian university professors are serious about their faith they will have to live schizophrenic lives, bowing to the standards of the academy in their work and to the Triune God otherwise. Quoting Mark 8:36 (“What does it profit a man.. .?”) his final thought is that: “If the old religions are right, in the new heavens and new earth there should be plenty of enduring rewards that will make promotion, tenure, and endowed chairs look like so much hay and stubble” (251).

Hart's own scholarship in this book belies this conclusion—unless like many preachers he is preaching first of all to himself. *The University Gets Religion* is a distinctly Christian (conservative Reformed) piece of scholarship. At the same time, Hart is working within university culture by publishing with a university press. Through most of the book he seems to be intimidated by what he takes as fixed academic procedures that do not allow one explicitly to reveal one's religious motivations. Except in the last paragraph of his Conclusion, Hart speaks as though he shares a detached perspective with a general audience of right-thinking university readers. Yet this artificial stance of detachment is constantly at odds with his many explicit and implicit evaluative judgements concerning the failures of religious studies. The result is a confusing double-mindedness, but not the soul-threatening schizophrenia Hart warns against. All in all, he succeeds in evaluating religious studies from a conservative Reformed Christian point of view and in bringing that evaluation to a university audience.

In my view *The University Gets Religion* would have been a little stronger had Hart been more willing to identify his point of view. From a Machensque Reformed perspective his deeply jaundiced view of religious studies makes a lot of sense. He might have explained, a la Machen (who was not shy about his views in academic settings) that what counts as true Christianity for him is quite different from what counted for many of the founders of religious studies. He might have explained why his view deserves consideration as an alternative to broader religious viewpoints from which religious studies appears healthy and thriving. Perhaps he would have lost some of his audience had he acknowledged such a viewpoint in a preface or introduction. As it is, however, I fear that many proponents of religious studies will simply dismiss his unrelievedly dim view of their discipline as puzzling and perverse.

The fact is, nonetheless, that *The University Gets Religion*--even if it is dismissed by some--demonstrates that conservative Christian scholars *can* work within the norms of mainstream universities and their principle arbiters of tenure, the university presses. Hart's work offers an accessible and thought-provoking interpretation of the rise of religious studies. One might hope, therefore, that Hart will not follow his own advice and abandon the enterprise of bringing a traditional Reformed perspective to university audiences. If he did practice what he preaches, both communities would be the worse for it.