

## **Differences Christian Perspectives Make for the Humanities** **By George Marsden**

Many scholars, including many Christian scholars, are puzzled as to what difference Christian perspectives could make if Christian academics are addressing diverse audiences and are not quoting Bible verses to settle disputes or claiming to read God's providence, etc. First some preliminary points:

1. Christian perspectives on academic topics will not change everything, but will change some things.
2. For Christianity to make a difference it does not mean that the perspective must be uniquely Christian.
3. There are no set formulae for the Christian perspectives.

Some general effects: As with other commitments, however, the influence, although pervasive are often subtle. Often in practical terms it has to do with large background questions such as: What is worth studying? What questions shall I ask about the subject? I.e. What are my priorities and values? Or what theories that are current am I likely to accept?

Some Examples of Particular Influences:

The Doctrine of Creation: Christians should challenge the assumption that the naturalistic rules that are set up for the practical purposes of academy provide the best account of all reality.

Many people think of such exclusively naturalistic primarily with regard to the natural sciences, where they indeed may have bearing on larger speculations; but it is actually in the humanities and the social sciences where they have far more pervasive implications. Excluding of theism in these fields means that humans and their cultures have to be regarded as though they were nothing more than the products of natural evolutionary processes.

Some sort of moral relativism seems the only consistent option.

In contrast, even in cases in which Christians may flatly disagree on what is the proper moral principle, they at least agree that there are principles higher than the preferences of us or our group.

Most of those who deny the relevance of theism to academic inquiry have no adequate basis for the absolutist moral claims they are likely to make. This can be an opening for dialogue within academia.

Cultural relativism is essential to dismantling the many Western traditions that they do not like, but there is no consistent way to keep it from dissolving the moral traditions they themselves affirm.

The doctrine of creation also has important implications in the field of epistemology. Cf. Plantinga. Christians may disagree on details, but at the least we can say that with God in the picture the set of epistemological questions that we face changes dramatically.

Taking seriously the doctrine of creation gives Christians a critical place to stand in recent debates over postmodern epistemologies. Challenging "The Transcendent Self."

Christian scholars, at least those with more traditional theological perspectives, should be critical of this absolutization of humanity. With God, the creator out of the way as a serious component of Western thought, views of human capacities have become immensely inflated.

Christian views of humans as both of great importance but greatly flawed should make them critical of viewpoints, especially strong in the arts and literature, that emphasize human freedom and creativity as the supreme values.

The Augustinian theme of the human tendency to absolutize the relative can also be an important motif in Christian scholarship that critiques other idols of the age. For instance, a fruitful classroom theme for Christian scholars since at least mid-century has been to identify the various "isms" that contend for our allegiances.

Christians also need to be alerted to the tendencies of Christians themselves to absolutize the culturally relative, often in the name of Christ.

Because of the Christian teaching of the deceptiveness of the human heart, I want to emphasize in closing that one of the themes of Christian scholarship should be humility.

People are convinced as much by the character of the people who present arguments as by good arguments. So we should be models who display the virtues of attractive alternative communities.

*For further details, see chapter's 4 & 5 of George Marsden's book, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).*