

RPLP Visits RELI 101

By Henry Hancock, Rice University '12

As part of the Religion and Public Life Program's series of events on Religion in the University, George Marsden and John Schmalzbauer were both asked to speak to an "Introduction to the Study of Religion" class (RELI 101) of over 150 Rice University undergraduates on a Friday afternoon. Elaine Howard Ecklund and Parker Eudy, an RPLP undergraduate fellow who is also a teaching assistant in the class, facilitated the discussion.

Eudy began the question and answer session by asking the two scholars about their personal working definitions of religion. In Marsden's view, religion is the human regard for something higher than the material reality, but that, more practically, it is helpful to look at particular religions and their specific histories. Schmalzbauer quipped that this was a "Pandora's Box" type of question but spoke to the need for a substantial, explicit definition of religion. In his own research, he keeps a "big tent" definition of religion encompassing both conventional religion and more fluid types of spirituality.

Since the class had read excerpts from Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, Ecklund asked what, if anything, religion could add to scholarship in the university. According to Marsden, no one approaches religion from a neutral standpoint—everyone has biases. It makes a big difference, he said, if a scholar believes in a certain type of god. When asked about the dangers of having a religious perspective, Schmalzbauer spoke to a worry common to all biases: a perspectival "lens" is also a filter in that what you look for determines what you don't see.

Afterward, the students were given a chance to ask the two visiting professors their own questions. One student wondered if modern universities have contributed to the "melting pot" that is beginning to exist in American religion.



Drs. George Marsden, John Schmalzbauer and Elaine Howard Ecklund and RPLP Fellow Parker Eudy engage RELI 101 students.

Schmalzbauer responded by saying that this is occurring both inside universities, as religious studies departments separate themselves from traditional Protestant theology, and outside the university, as changes in immigration law lead to vastly more religious diversity in the US population.

Another student wanted to know what Marsden meant by his conception of "hollowness" in modern university culture. Marsden explained that most university students receive a technical education narrowly focused on learning the skills related to a particular set of careers, which means that they often fail to ask the broader questions that would be elicited by a liberal arts focus. This is not simply a matter of religious issues, but about secular answers to the "big questions" of life as well.

A student asked Marsden if there can be a middle ground between extreme atheists and those who think that religious knowledge is more trustworthy than scientific knowledge. Marsden said that this is why we need serious religious perspectives that can provide rational alternatives to more radical views. Too often science and religion are oversimplified, so it is important to have scholars who can articulate nuanced views about the relationship between the two.