

# A Conversation on Religion in the University

Article by Kristen Gagalis and Stacey Isidro, both Rice University '12 | Photos by Zachary Marx-Kuo, Rice University '13



Ministry leader Tim Phillips (front) and special guest Dr. Karl Johnson (back) ask questions.



Drs. George Marsden, Elaine Howard Ecklund (RPLP Director), and Julie Reuben discuss religion and university life.



RPLP Undergraduate Fellow Cara Fullerton attends the Friday evening discussion.

In the culminating event of the Religion in the University weekend of events, nearly 100 community members and Rice University faculty and students had the opportunity to hear scholars Julie Reuben and George Marsden to discuss the often fraught place of religion in US university life. Rice alumnus James Bartlett, who attended the event, remarked on the way in which the speakers “recognized the historical traditions in the relationship between religion and the university, and used that perspective to inform their responses.” Indeed, both professors remarked that, even though higher education has become increasingly secular over time, faith still has a place in the university today. Marsden argued this place is vital because universities, as microcosms of religious diversity in our country, provide an opportunity to examine and understand how people of various faiths get along.

In the scholars’ consideration of the effects of religion being “in” or “out” of the university, Reuben expressed concern that academic freedom and open inquiry might be limited if religion is “in.” Marsden, on the other hand, commented that if religion is “out,” universities will be dominated by secular outlooks. Reuben also cautioned against hiring faculty to represent specific religious beliefs, arguing instead that professors should be hired based on the quality of their inquiry and scholarship.

Discussing the academic and curricular role of religion, Reuben stressed that an expansion of programs in religious studies would provide more forums for thoughtful scholarly dialogue on religion. She also commented on the importance of including students of all faith backgrounds and those who do not adhere to any faith in such conversations. Furthermore, Marsden argued, keeping religion out of the classroom altogether would eliminate what is perhaps one of the most important forums for inter-religious exchange. One audience member proposed the idea that professors should immediately and openly declare their religious commitments as a way to keep classroom interactions frank. Marsden noted that, while he does indeed disclose his religious background to his students, he is still unsure as to whether this course of action encourages or discourages student participation. Reuben suggested instead that the gradual emergence of professors’ beliefs over a semester might better encourage open discourse. (Continued next page.)

# Books In Public Scholarship Workshop

By Parker Eudy, Rice University '14 and Cara Fullerton, Rice University '12

On November 5, 2011, the Religion and Public Life Program held its third annual “Books in Public Scholarship” event in the Kyle Morrow room of Fondren Library. Inviting scholars and community members of the greater Houston area, the event allowed both the scholarly and general reading community to review John Schmalzbauer and Kathleen Mahoney’s tentatively titled manuscript, *Religion: A Comeback on Campus*.

Among RPLP Director Elaine Howard Ecklund’s primary reasons for hosting the event was the fact that there are “few chances in the academy to get together a group of people to have positive critique and conversation about a manuscript before it goes out the door.” Recalling a similar workshop that helped her through the revising process of her own book several years ago, Ecklund wanted to provide more opportunities for scholars to seek input from others about their own work prior to publication.

In an informal yet constructive conversation, the attendees discussed their own thoughts on the increased presence of religion on university campuses and how the authors could best present this phenomenon in his text.

While constructive suggestions were made for further revision, workshop attendees also offered praise for the manuscript. Julie Reuben of Harvard University applauded the book for providing a “thorough and balanced state of play of what’s going on campuses,” and noted that “it convincingly shows that, over the last three decades, there’s been a revitalization, a renewal, and a diversification of thought about religion, religious thinking, and religious practice.” Schmalzbauer thanked everyone “for the tone and the constructiveness.” Overall, there was great excitement about how Schmalzbauer and Mahoney’s text could change the way Americans come to view religion and its place on college campuses.

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## Conversation *(continued)*

Attendees were also interested in some of the material effects of religion in the university—for example, the issue of university-sponsored funding of religious student groups. If public universities participate in this sort of funding, then they might be accused of using taxes to support religion. If they don’t, however, they could potentially be discriminating against religious groups. Marsden proposed treating student group funding decisions based on the groups’ preparedness and legitimacy, regardless of religious affiliation.

One guest asked if church-sponsored financial and academic support for university students might play a significant role in affecting students’ career choices. In response, Reuben argued that all supporters of academic pursuit should acknowledge that the function of higher education is to challenge and add depth to beliefs. She stressed that students should be supported in serious academic questioning.

Event attendee and Rice sophomore Paul Abraham appreciated that the event included these topics, which he found “truly relevant in university life.” Following the program, guests were invited to a reception to mingle and chat about the issues that had been addressed. Terri Laws, a doctoral student in Rice’s Religious Studies Department, particularly enjoyed this dialogue and the scholars’ comments on the impact of “the information produced in the university [on] society at large.” What was thought of as perhaps the event’s greatest strength, however, was its informality and the chance for interaction between the visiting scholars and the program’s attendees. Dru Stevenson, a professor at South Texas College of Law, a co-sponsor of the weekend’s events, thought that the conversation was “a great opportunity to bring together scholars from different disciplines to speak in an open way about an important issue” and that the event’s interactive nature allowed for this candid discussion to take place.