

# Religion and Public Life Program

*Training students to do research and use research to expand understanding and advance dialogue about the role of religion in public life*

Social Sciences Research Institute at Rice University  
Volume 4 – December 2011

## Letter from the Director

It has been a busy fall for the Religion and Public Life Program. We have hosted two guests for our monthly workshops, where religious leaders and academics come to share their own models of religious conflict mediation with our student fellows. In addition, we had a conference on Religion in the University, hosting University of Notre Dame historian George Marsden and Harvard University historian Julie Reuben in addition to sociologist John Schmalzbauer from Missouri State University and University of California, San Diego sociologist Amy Binder. Read the articles below written by our student fellows to find out more about the five events we sponsored as part of the Religion in the University conference.

In 2012 we are spearheading a variety of programs related to Religion and Politics. Our first Religion and Politics event is January 25th at the Baker Institute for Public Policy. Stay tuned for more details. For those interested in getting started thinking about the role of religion in the 2012 elections see a recently published op-ed in the LA Times by one of our previous program guests, John Evans, Professor of Sociology at University of California San Diego. And our director Elaine Howard Ecklund has received coverage of a recent piece on the reasons atheist scientists with children participate in religious communities, which she wrote with sociologist Kristen Schultz Lee of University at Buffalo, SUNY. Check out coverage of this piece on from CNN and ABC News at <http://checklund.rice.edu/>. We look forward to seeing many of you in the coming year!

Happy Holidays,  
The Religion and Public Life Program



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# A Conversation on Religion in the University

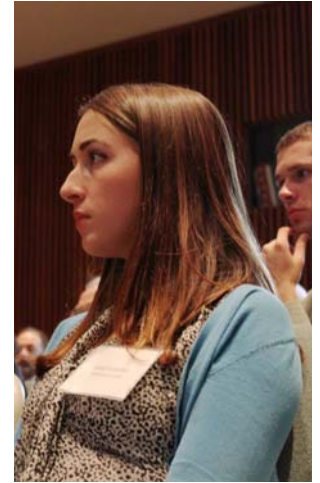
Article by Kristen Gagalis and Stacey Isidro, both Rice University '12 | Photos by Zachary Marx-Kuo, Rice University '13



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.

# Paper Workshop

By James W. Phillips, Rice University Sociology PhD Student

On Friday November 4, 2011, the Religion and Public Life Program co-sponsored a roundtable discussion with Amy Binder, an associate professor in the Sociology department of the University of California at San Diego. Her presentation addressed work from her forthcoming book *Creating Conservatism: How Campuses Shape Political Discourse and Style*, co-authored with UCSD graduate student Kate Wood. Binder described the role of culture in shaping the styles of conservative political discourse within two American universities. By using ethnographic research comparing a western public university and an eastern private university, she found that conservative college students' stances on various political issues are similar, yet their styles of expressing those stances is quite different. Conservative students at a western state university use a "provocative style" which is characterized by more sensational and public expressions. Students at an eastern private university express conservatism through "civility norms" which include more interpersonal discussion led by civil discourse.

As a student in the Rice Sociology PhD program, I was most impressed by Binder's rationale for these different styles of discourse. At the western public university, the environment is less cohesive. Students often commute to campus, do not interact together as much, and overall "have a weak set of community norms." For example, a more depersonalized faculty-student ratio and a lottery system of class registration also add to the notion of student distrust of faculty and higher education in general. These factors, together with a "fun school" culture, promote a system of provocative, populist attention-seeking behavior among conservative students.

At the eastern private university, students often had a future career in mind. For example, one student Binder interviewed said that promoting an anti-abortion bake sale "just doesn't look good on the CV." Rather, such students were more likely to do things like publish newsletter editorials on a conservative issue. Also characteristic of a private elite university, the students were more interested in knowing and interacting with one another, often to the end of advantageous social networking. This and having more access to available faculty who engage in professional discourse and experience more seminar-style classes further reinforced norms of civil dialogue.

From Binder's presentation and from subsequent interactions with her during the other events of this special week, I learned more of the power of social structures in shaping human behavior, and in this case, political expression. Indeed, "Campuses create pathways to expressions of conservatism."



## Upcoming Events

Our programming theme for the Spring 2012 semester will be "Religion and Politics." We will have various events on the Rice University campus and in the greater Houston community that will discuss topics related to this theme. Our first event, a panel on "Religion in the 2012 Elections" will be held at the Baker Institute for Public Policy on January 25, 2012.

# 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.

# A Forum with Religious Leaders

By Hannah Thalenberg, Rice University '12

On November 4, 2011, the Religion and Public Life Program brought together professors George Marsden of the University of Notre Dame and John Schmalzbauer of Missouri State University for a round-table conversation with religious leaders from various Houston ministries to address the issue of how religious leaders might help students in their congregations better transition to college. The event was hosted by Pleasant Hill Baptist Church and its pastor, Harvey Clemons, Jr.

When asked about the place of faith on university campuses, Schmalzbauer pointed out that it depends on one's temperament, saying, "The glass is either half empty or half full." Schmalzbauer sees it as half full, citing more open dialogue about issues of faith even in secular universities, increased religious diversity, and a realization on the part of many academic disciplines and the professors in them that religion is not, in fact, a thing of the past.

Marsden discussed the historical events leading up to our current approach to religion on American campuses, explaining that throughout the second half of the twentieth century the Protestant Christianity that dominated most of American higher education gradually faded from the university setting. He attributed this trend to the secularization of the classroom, resentment toward Protestant privilege in the 1960s and the promotion of pluralism and diversity in all aspects of society but religion.

The ministry leaders who attended expressed concern that college students tend to experience crises of faith. Schmalzbauer mentioned research that shows that young people have faith issues regardless of whether they pursue higher education. The consensus was that if religious leaders want students to maintain their faith that the most crucial thing is to enable students to find a community of peers who believe in the same way they do.

While faith-based institutions, where students' basic beliefs are a given, naturally create such communities, the same is harder to achieve in secular schools with religiously heterogeneous student bodies.

Since campus ministries are essential in preventing the "erosion of faith" that occurs among some youth, Marsden and Schmalzbauer both pointed to the importance of communicating and working with universities in order to secure the resources necessary to make religion accessible to students. On the university's part, a strong connection to campus ministries is simply good community relations: concerned parents, alumni, and donors are likely to support institutions that facilitate the exercise of religious belief. Also, campuses need to be a home to everyone, as well as to have referees to avoid civility problems and invasion of space. Therefore, the attendees agreed that ministries should not simply be dismissed as mere extracurricular activities but instead incorporated into the fabric of campus life (although the legal difficulties of implementing this vision were recognized). (Continued on back cover.)

The mission of the Religion and Public Life Program is to encourage productive conversations about religion and public life, not only within the academy, but also between the academy and the general public, including scholars who study religion and religious leaders from different traditions.

To learn more about RPLP, visit our website at <http://rplp.rice.edu>

## A Forum with Religious Leaders *(continued)*

As for what ministries should do within their own ranks, both Schmalzbauer and Marsden believe that young people need to be encouraged not to view their academic life, careers and religion as mutually exclusive, but rather to understand them as intertwined religious callings. Additionally, some religious leaders felt the need to connect ministries to local congregations to challenge the age homogeneity of campus groups and stimulate meaningful community involvement.

As a university student myself, even though the scholars and religious leaders who participated in this conversation were discussing mainly Christian faith traditions, I most of what they discussed regarding how to help students maintain their faith in a university environment is applicable to other religions as well. Reflecting on the diverse forms of religious practice and expression I see on an everyday basis at Rice and the civility with which they are manifested, I felt proud to be part of a program that works to enable this sort of relationship between religion and universities elsewhere—outreach to religious leaders being only one of many means to this end.



### Religion and Public Life Program

Rice University  
Sociology Department, MS-28  
P.O. Box 1892  
Houston, TX 77251-1892

[Recipient]

Address Line 1  
Address Line 2  
Address Line 3  
Address Line 4