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INTERVIEW

# Let's Save the University from Secular Privilege

The academy has lost its pluralism. Here's how the church can help find it.

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This last school year saw a number of incendiary cases related to [freedom of speech](#) and [freedom of association](#) in the American university. Faculty have experienced what George Yancey calls [Christianophobia](#) and student groups, too, have had their fair share of fights on both private and public campuses. At Colorado State University, for example, a Christian organization called Students for Life (SFL) applied for a school grant to bring a pro-life speaker to campus and after their application was denied, filed a federal lawsuit (which they [recently](#)

[settled](#)). SFL joins the growing numbers of Catholic and Protestant student groups struggling to maintain or regain a voice on campuses around the country.

Mary Poplin, who teaches at the Claremont Graduate University in Claremont, California, has spent most of her professional career studying education, worldviews, and most recently, the subject of “secular exclusivity,” which in her opinion has played a significant part in the SFL case and others like it. The author of [Is Reality Secular?: Testing the Assumptions of Four Global Worldviews](#), Poplin, along with [Barry Kanpol](#), recently edited a collection of essays titled [Christianity and the Secular Border Patrol: The Loss of Judeo-Christian Knowledge](#).

She sat down with CT in Austin, Texas, to talk about the rising secularity in higher education—and what the church can do about it.

**How would you define “secular privilege,” a term introduced by David Hodge in one of the essays in your book?**

Here's a great example. When [US Senator] Dianne Feinstein interviews a candidate, Amy Barrett, for a judgeship, she presumes that she herself is neutral and that this candidate is *not* neutral just because she's an orthodox Catholic. Bernie Sanders did the same to another appointee. But, of course, Feinstein has a worldview, too. Barrett doesn't believe in

abortion, she's been active in Catholic organizations ... all that gets brought up. In the interview, Feinstein asked the question: How can [Barrett] make good judgments if she holds a religious worldview?

So the purpose of the book is to make explicit that secularism is a sort of umbrella of ideologies defined by its exclusion of religion, primarily of Christian voices, certainly in the US and Europe. Secularism defines itself by what it is *not*; it has no agreed-upon moral compass, so it's an umbrella for anything from the far right to the far left and everything in between—as long as it's not religious. As Stanley Fish says, secularism has survived by pretending to be neutral, but it's anything but neutral.

**What about the reverse scenario? Private Christian universities get accused of religious exclusivity, so how is that any different than secular exclusivity at non-religious schools?**

Any private campus can define itself any way. That makes sense to me—as long as you tell people who you are.

**So you're okay with secular exclusivity on a private campus.**

If the school actually says, "We're committed exclusively to a secular worldview," that'd be one thing. The problem is, secular universities don't actually say, "Hey, we're secular."

**It's an issue of transparency, then?**

Yes.

**What about a public university? How do you think about secular exclusivity in that context?**

That would be much harder—again, unless the university can say, "This is who we are" and get away with it. But the problem of secular exclusivity is that it's unconscious. These universities don't identify themselves and in some cases, don't know that they're being exclusive. That's the biggest issue. They think they're broad, inclusive, pluralistic, and open.

**In the book, you say, "radical secularization of the academy has produced five major problems that are bankrupting the academy and, in turn, the culture."**

First, the university used to think of itself as the free open marketplace of ideas, especially after it left its Christian origins. But it's the free marketplace of certain ideas and the closed marketplace of *other* ideas.

Second, the university says it is pluralistic, but it has lost that pluralism.

Third, it sends students out who are unprepared to face a world that is still primarily religious in one form or another, with Christianity being the largest religion. It treats everything so secularly that students are getting a distorted picture of the world—they don't see it the way it really is.

Fourth, it creates speech codes. You can say *this* but not *that*.

Fifth, what the university has done to placate religious groups is they've created these interfaith spaces, and in these spaces, they all just go out and do good social work together. It dilutes the idea that religious frameworks are actually distinct. Nobody really gets to work within their own frameworks.

### **Do these problems manifest at Christian schools, as well, or are you strictly talking about secular state schools?**

On some of these issues, they're pretty similar. Some of the colleges that call themselves Christian are not distinctly working on the difference between secular and Judeo-Christian thought.

The problem is, everybody who gets a PhD pretty much has to get it at a secular school. So a Christian scholar comes out of grad school and starts with the assumptions they've received in their secular PhD program, and then they try to add or integrate in a little bit of Christian faith. But the textbooks you're using, the research articles you're reading—they're still coming from a secular standpoint. That was the intent of the so-called integration movement: You have to integrate Christian thought into your work. But of course one has to deconstruct the secular narrative first; it has to be done really carefully.

### **What's the solution, then?**

The people who are doing the most effective work to solve this problem are doing worldview training. I hate the word "worldview" [laughs]. But they are training people to look at things through more critical lenses.

The Christian colleges that'll have the most trouble are those that have given in to the culture. For Gordon and other schools like it that are maintaining their Christian identity, they need to continue what they're doing—make sure they're teaching students and asking—what are the ideologies out there that we're not supporting and why? And how can we help students think through them? I think they're going to be the colleges that survive. Other smaller Catholic colleges like Thomas Aquinas or Ave Maria—I think there will be more demand for them.

### **What does worldview discussion look like in your own classroom?**

I feel morally obligated to present students with a wide range of options. When I'm teaching pedagogies, I teach critical theory—Marxism, feminism, etcetera—and I also teach a Christian perspective. I present the alternatives because I'm at a secular university. But even if we were at a Christian university, I would want the students to know the range of explanations in epistemology or pedagogy or whatever. What are the options here? The problem is that most students have not been educated about a distinctly Christian worldview, and that's a huge problem.

### **As someone who works on a secular campus, how do you suggest that other believers at other universities—both faculty and students—push back against secular exclusivity in a winsome way that invites conversation and not confrontation?**

The university used to be better at debate; it was *the* place for open debate. When we have colleagues who are intellectually alive and like to *do* that, we can go for it. But first, we have to know what our field would be like "if Jesus were in it," as Dallas Willard would say. We have to take the debate out of the political atmosphere, keep it in an

intellectual atmosphere, and not make it so personal or political. We also have to look at the data. That's the beauty of having data—it's hard to object to.

**In your view, secular exclusivity “contradicts the university’s own self-professed commitment to pluralism,” which brings us to the topic of free speech. This last school year, we saw multiple cases on campuses around the country. What are you anticipating this school year?**

More of the same. The most disturbing thing to me, as I read the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on a regular basis, is that it doesn't appear that the university has yet come to grips with the fact that it's lost public confidence.

I was with a man recently—a young entrepreneur in his 40s, a middle-of-the-road Christian with big degrees from big places—and about halfway through the conversation he leans across the desk, points his finger at me, and says, “Why in the hell would I pay 60 grand a year to have my child's life ruined?” I hear versions of that question everywhere. When we come to grips with the fact that the public no longer trusts us, then we might begin to do more self-reflection.

**Emily Faulkner, one of students involved with the CSU Students for Life case, told you in an interview that “I prayed and prayed that God would give me courage, and he did.” In the context of discipleship, how can we equip Christian students like Emily to speak and hold their views in secular settings?**

The church does need to do some work on worldviews—preparing students in terms of the intellectual content they'll face and also in terms of the moral fortitude they'll need. For students to stand up, they have to be well educated. My worry is, sometimes there are students who are brave, but they can't carry the conversation of “why Christianity?” very far. They've been taught a lot about faith and how they should be good people, but they haven't been trained on how to argue and discuss ideas. Read Pope Benedict's talks, watch Ravi Zacharias or Robert Barron. Churches can do that sort of thing.

**You're essentially pointing toward apologetics.**

Yes, apologetics *and* worldview training. If you don't understand other worldviews, then your apologetics is going to be weak.

**Besides apologetics, what else can churches do to equip and support students, especially given that parachurch organizations like InterVarsity are increasingly getting pushed off campus?**

Here's what I'd say to the Christian community: It's our responsibility to build things up on the edge of college campuses—Christian Study Centers like the one at the University of Virginia. We need to understand that this is the way we're probably going to have to live for a while. There are a lot of universities that have them or are considering them, and we need to bolster them. I don't think we can be naïve and expect to be invited in to secular universities; more and more groups are going to lose their university affiliations. But we have Catholic groups, like Focus, which are strong; we've got Protestant groups like InterVarsity, Cru, Navigators, and Veritas—which just piloted a new initiative, The Veritas Academy—and they can all use the same buildings. We need a place where students are getting fed. We need to really build up and support these structures.

**You've addressed students, student groups, and schools as a whole. What about scholars and professors? How should they respond to what Mark Bauerlein calls "the secular premise"?**

The first thing is awareness—we have to be aware of how secularism excludes. The second thing is that, as Christian educators and scholars, we have to wake up and get busy redefining our fields. Where do secular theories and Judeo-Christian thought overlap, and where do they part ways? And what does the Judeo-Christian tradition add to the conversation?

If you look back, George Marsden and Charles Malik and Pope Benedict ... they've all been saying the same thing. Dallas Willard went around and said to us as scholars, "You need to figure out what Jesus thinks about your discipline." For Marsden, he called it the "outrageous idea of Christian scholarship." For Benedict, it was integrated from the top, from philosophy, really. In the book, Charles Glenn does a great chapter on this history.

**This relates to a project you're working on called the Upper Room. Tell us about it.**

So the idea with the Upper Room project is, we get Christian scholars together—the sociologists and the psychologists and the political scientists, etcetera—for an extended period of time, a week every summer, and we say—what are the issues? Where do we need to work? What research do we need to do? There has to be a place where we gather into an "upper room" of sorts and begin to collectively rethink through our disciplines. The good news is, there are excellent forerunners from whom we can learn.

And we can't get there alone. We have to be together—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox. We have to be international, too, because this is not a national problem, anymore—yes, it was created by the West, but it's spread everywhere now. We also need to have not *just* scholars—we need to have high-level players in each of these professions, and we've got to have younger people—graduate students and apprentices. We need journalists, too.

It's going to be expensive, and we will need a lot of intercession. But I don't see any other way to save the university.