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Sugimoto - Nation as University - JCRT 2.1

## Nation as University; or the School We Never Leave

a review of *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, by Mark Noll (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996); \$15.00.

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A recent cover article in the *Atlantic Monthly*<sup>1</sup> and numerous other articles published over the past several years dealing with the status of religious (specifically, evangelical) scholarship attest to the ongoing sensitivity of the nerve struck, perhaps most pointedly, by the 1994 publication of American historian Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*.<sup>2</sup> However, the questions that remain largely unasked concern the historical development and socio-political function of the modern university as an institution within the nation-state; that is, what needs further analysis is the connection between the formation of knowledge ' its institutional form, its theoretical content ' and the role that larger social agendas of the nation-state play in determining the legitimization of knowledge in the modern world.

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3. In this article, I would like to couch the issues of Noll's book ' the self-marginalization of evangelical scholars in the modern academy ' in a larger cultural and political context related to modern nationalism, recognizing the social agenda of the nation-state behind the particulars related to the modern research university. Noll's book tends to be subjectivist in its critique of the evangelical world as it looks exclusively at issues of piety or theological orientation ' all centered upon individual agency. In this sense, Noll's treatment generally follows slightly earlier secular critiques, such as Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind*<sup>3</sup> and, on the left, politically, Russell Jacoby's *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe*<sup>4</sup>, which have tended to center upon world views and the question of bias.
4. The book offers an historical overview of roughly two-hundred years of intellectual and cultural decline in the tradition (mostly American) that is known as evangelicalism. The church's transition from a force which once shaped culture to one that, for the most part, only mirrors contemporary trends follows what was initially a promising start in the New World; that is, the Reformation-based heritage of the early Puritans best exemplified by evangelist and intellectual, Jonathan Edwards. According to Noll, evangelicals who came after Edwards largely accommodated the fashionable tenets of the rising New Science (pitting experimentation over and against the presiding scholasticism), thus appropriating the rationalistic Enlightenment belief that truth was transparent. In other words, the view that autonomous man could "experience" truth in a direct, non-interpretive manner, without aid of external sources of knowledge, revelation.

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<sup>1</sup>Alan Wolfe, "The Opening of the American Mind," *Atlantic Monthly* Volume 286 No. 4 (October 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans, 1994)

<sup>3</sup>Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York : Simon and Schuster, 1987).

<sup>4</sup>Russell Jacoby *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of Academe* (New York: Basic Books, 1987).

5. By adopting this kind of scientific objectivism or positivism, evangelicals sought to innovate biblical revelation, adapting it to the methodologies of the new, scientific model. In this manner, a long, hermeneutic tradition of reading sacred texts gradually became reduced to a recognizably American-style, pragmatic approach, stripping away centuries of interpretive sophistication to a level of “common sense” knowledge; ready-at-hand and ready-for-use. In a sense then, Noll presents a gospel which had become increasingly democratized in theory, as well as, in practice, typically represented in the conventions of American revivalism which, for all its successes, also tended to reduce the rich, theological content of redemption to a matter of individual will.<sup>5</sup>
6. In a somewhat controversial turn, Noll implicates both the concept of inerrancy and creation science as symptomatic of this prior accommodation to New Science. By this account, the startling decline of the early, evangelical presence in higher education represents, in essence, an intellectual failure: borrowing the tenets of Enlightenment scientism (generally dubbed “Baconianism”) just when they were in the process of being superseded and modified by other developing theories. In other words, the colleges were lost because evangelicals chose to adopt trendy cultural patterns which bought esteem in the short run, rather than develop a critique which emanated from a lasting, biblical frame of reference; then the world moved on while the church increasingly found itself trapped within an intellectual ghetto. This is a painfully familiar scenario to many of us, but in addition to his analysis, Noll also promotes a broader vision by arguing for a return to the life of the mind, a model of cultural engagement applicable to but not strictly limited to the academy.
7. Recently other authors, such as David Wells and Os Guinness, have also addressed the problem of the church’s decline. In fact, all these writers can be profitably read together (they reference each another), forming an unintended, united front against the cultural apostasy of modern evangelicalism. However, in contrast to the latter writers’ sociological analyses, which are reminiscent of Peter Berger and the late Christopher Lasch, Noll’s book primarily studies the historical process of ideas. All of these books bear some resemblance to the already mentioned cultural criticism of Bloom or Jacoby, but could, I believe, also benefit from other analyses which relate cultural decline to larger philosophic and institutional inquiries, forging connections between ideas and broader, socio-political formations.<sup>6</sup>
8. It seems impossible to me to discuss questions of intellectual decline within modern evangelicalism without first accounting for the status of the modern nation-state, which looms behind the university in setting academic and social agendas. In order to assess why evangelicals are

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<sup>5</sup>Consider the common, “democratic” interpretation of Christ’s use of parables as a marvel of teaching technique to the masses, rather than, as I believe the gospels present them, as an indication of their resistance to truth, thus the need to speak to them in parables. Although the simplicity of the parables is often admired over the stuffy, doctrinaire approach of the religious leaders, they actually signal a split in Christ’s audiences: the “in” group of followers who were spoken to with clarity versus the “out” group of the larger crowd who got the parables. In this respect, instead of illustrating the success of teaching style to the masses, the parables actually indicate a failure of learning.

<sup>6</sup>To be sure, David Wells does tackle the problem of modernity, taking up the issue of the university, in pages 117-127 and 238-245 of *NO PLACE FOR TRUTH; Or Whatever Happened to Evangelical Theology?* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1993); and a general theoretical analysis of modernity/postmodernity in *GOD IN THE WASTELAND; The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994). For an analysis of higher education which also considers the question of nationalism, see Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature; An Institutional History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987). Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities*, extended edition (New York: Verso, 1991), remains a classic, linking the development of national languages and standardization of the vernacular to the rise of nation-states; the revised edition includes two additional chapters that correct some of the theoretical flaws in this early study of nationalism.

ineffectual in the academy, we need to first understand how the terms for academic success are related to the university's standing as an agent of modern nationalism. In other words, the question is whether or not the institutional form and philosophic content present in the modern research university marginalizes competing claims to truth. From the mid-nineteenth century until the present, higher learning has been the ultimate end for programs of mandatory education, requiring the standardization of national languages, canonization of national histories, and so forth; in short, establishing the democratic base for the sieving of national talent. From this perspective, the function of the university has been to serve as a mediator between compulsory education and the greater economic purpose of modern nations: to create a pool of techno-scientific experts who will engineer and manage the expanding realm of state and private capital.

9. This model of the university was intrinsic to the Social-Darwinist logic of nineteenth century imperialism, by which the building of nations meant the acquisition of colonies. As the expansion of industry rapidly transformed nature into material goods, imperialism converted the foreign or "wild" element into a product of civilization, an achievement of science and technology most conspicuously displayed in the great world expositions.<sup>7</sup> For this reason, Germany (the model for the professionalization of the academy into graduate and research institutions) and other nations overwhelmingly funneled talent into the natural sciences, furthering the ideological apparatus of the State ' as one critic put it, "the school we never leave."
10. Further, as a secular institution of research, the modern university was organized around modern conceptions of knowledge; cognitive reason, ethics, and aesthetics now separated into specialized spheres, each with their own methodological protocols, respective departmental offices, and disciplinary regimes within the university. These categories are discrete, producing instrumental knowledge, that is, values limited to a function and utility within a prescribed framework. Lacking substantive philosophic legitimacy or grounding then, "rationality" in this sense essentially functions as a creative activity of the imagination; Kant's epistemological subject ' the center for the production of modern knowledge ' is basically empty. Consequently, by the terms of the Enlightenment, what is meant by "human being" is really a product of education, a training in what we typically call "the humanities," and is predicated upon this notion of self-creation, the filling of a void. In its autonomy and isolation, the condition of Kant's knowing subject bears a striking parallel to the general plight of the individual in modern society, abstracted from his work even while occupying the ideological center of liberal, capitalist states; that is, the knowing subject of the Kantian critiques turns out to be the philosophic notation of the prototypical bourgeois.
11. At its core, the dilemmas facing Christian academics is only part of a dynamic fundamental to modern philosophy, continually perplexed with resolving problems of knowing, of epistemology. Briefly put, I believe that the modern world remains defined and caught within the tensions produced by the epistemological splits of Kant ' the antinomies between the

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<sup>7</sup>From the 1860s on, world expositions were held almost annually as a showcase for the modern state's technological achievements, each nation displaying its wares in a separate pavillion, exhibiting a curious synthesis of industry and culture. These grand expositions eventually faded and were replaced with a new spectacle—the modern Olympic movement—and the display of a new synthesis, this time between technology and bodies (of athletes and of the masses); the older sense of athletic struggle largely transformed into a struggle against clocks and measures, displaying that consummate form of modern competition: test taking. Susan Buck-Morss, *The Dialectics of Seeing; Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1989).

knowing subject and the object of knowledge; between mind/body; between reason, ethics, and aesthetics; between experience and cognition; even within the knowing subject itself regarding questions of identity ' and the subsequent attempts to overcome them. In response, post-Kantian knowledge, namely Hegelian dialectics and the institutional forms (the secular university) they characterize, attempted to overcome these gaps through a series of social mediations (national communitarianism, civic society) ultimately embodied in the State and symbolized through the modern Individual.

12. In Hegel's society, the individual becomes a type of modern hero who, embodying the Absolute, overcomes the social constraints of sub-institutions like the family (which Hegel criticized), as well as the philosophic limits of Kant in a vision of social plenitude; the classic split between theory and praxis resolved in an apotheosis of the Now, the present. Thus, the loss of transcendence in modernity not only entails a loss of confidence in matters of faith or theologically informed learning, but a complete transformation in orientation of the social and institutional practices of our life-world.
13. Merely stating the need for Christians to, once again, promote the intellect runs the risk of dealing with these issues largely on the level of individual talent, rather than illuminating the relationship between the social and philosophic levels which structure thought; avoiding these theoretical tasks only reinforces the very isolationism which we bemoan. Therefore, the evangelical scandal must also be understood, not only in subjectivist terms of honoring one's world view, but in the relationship between modernization theory and the transformed institutional roles of the church and state. Otherwise, the concern for more holistic spirituality or academic devotion never really addresses the central issues which have redefined and marginalized intellectual endeavor in the modern world.
14. For example, although Noll notes the recent rise in prominence of Christian philosophers in the United States, I feel that the book and the work of many christian philosophers in the 1990s, who subsequently tried to tackle the discourse on postmodernism, largely ignored the important socio-political context of what became known as postmodernism, writing exclusively on the subject as an epistemological issue (thus recapitulating the problem prevalent in English departments that reduced theory to another form of writing only). I would rather critique the situation by suggesting that the disciplinary regimes represented by the modern university are the overarching reason for the production of knowledge, and behind that is the nation.
15. The demise of evangelical thought and practice is but one facet of a larger social and intellectual fragmentation in modernity, the explanation of which is not, I believe, to be found within a critique internal to the church. For this reason, it is especially important to study social theories on modernization in the West and other parts of the world where nationalism took root (the real disease the world contracted from the West), as well as, to reopen philosophic study of the German idealist tradition, from which the contesting field of civilization versus culture and the battle between contesting classicisms originated.<sup>8</sup> It is not possible to elaborate here, but allow me to add that Marx, Hegel, and nineteenth century historiographers in general,

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<sup>8</sup>In a sense, the battle for social plenitude in the present was waged over ancient genealogies, thus the rise in prominence for classical studies (in Hegel's case, classical philology) in the quest for cultural purity or authenticity for the nation. Hegelian Marxists in the early 1900s, rearticulated this argument in a global scale, anti-capitalist critique, later "downsizing" their movement into the national arena until collapsing altogether in the decades to come. This foreshadowed the theorizing of an existential Marxism compromised of its grander, metaphysical pretensions (in the work of Sartre), focusing instead on notions of subjectivity, while others (such as Heidegger) attempted a reworking of the entire Western metaphysical concept of Being, articulating a return to the original philosophic language of poetry.

constructed a nostalgic narrative of progress which traced “the Spirit” (of emancipation, of historical destiny) from a mythic past through the winding contours of World History, until manifested in the modern age in the form of civilization. Thus, for nations to industrialize and to colonize was seen as the legitimate means by which to enter History, which, remarkably or not, seemed for enlightened Europeans naturally to consummate in the pastoral climate of modern Germany; while in contrast to this, the East and Africa had no history.<sup>9</sup>

16. This gradual unfolding of Hegel’s “Reason in the world” ‘ the realizing of reason ’ sought to heal the wounds originally wrought by Kant. In this secular eschatology, premodern knowledge (theology, in its broadest sense) authorized and mediated by the Church’s non-subjectivist sources of truth, such as revelation or creation, was transformed into the Reason of the State; “God on the earth,” Hegel’s secularization of deity, dutifully administered by the university.<sup>10</sup> Stating differently, by wresting religion from ecclesiastical authority, modernity marginalized Christian articulations of truth and the Church/State conflict into a question of form rather than content.<sup>11</sup>
17. These questions are extremely complex, but as intellectuals such as Edmund Husserl and Walter Benjamin revealed in the early 1900s, the dichotomies of modern epistemology and the attempt to reconcile them through the mythic narratives of classicist history revealed the complicity of the Enlightenment with a collapsed metaphysics, ultimately charting the failed politico-philosophic course which pointed directly to Auschwitz. On one level, I believe that the university sanctioned this sense of historical inevitability with the mythic past by writing this kind of national history, legitimating the splits in modern knowledge, and disabling other forms of truth (ethical, aesthetic, theological) that might have offered a critique.<sup>12</sup> In other words, because Enlightenment reason has proven to be complicitous with the collapse of politics, rather than celebrate a return to the university as an intellectual model, it is paramount instead to offer a critique; thereby illuminating the crisis which the institution signifies for the West in its disastrous twentieth century.
18. In a sense, I am arguing for a more complete respect for the process of secularization, one which does not mean that science and religion, as we currently distinguish them, were simply separated from each other ‘ that would already presuppose a prior split ’ but that they were transformed into a condition of deformity; thus what we consider to be intellectually normative categories are actually disfigured. For this reason, it is no longer possible to simply reintegrate the church with the academic world, because that pre-lapsarian context longer exists. In other

<sup>9</sup>The ideological battle between national spirits and their classical antecedents not only waged in Europe between France and Germany, but in Japan, as well, curiously caught between the East and the West in a field that polarized the “soul” of culture against the products of civilization, another form of the art/science split. In the early 1800s, the overwhelming superiority of Western military science caused Japanese ideologues to capitalize on a “superiority” of culture, of art, as the focus of national identity. Thus, even today, Japan’s ambivalence in its identity as an Asian or Western culture plays a mischievous role in questions regarding war guilt and responsibility for atrocities waged in Asia, which, earlier on, Japan claims to have been defending against Western imperialism.

<sup>10</sup>Even while acknowledging an overt Hegelianism, Georg Lukacs has, to my knowledge, provided the most powerful critique of Kantian antinomies, revealing the philosophic dead end of bourgeois thought as being a corollary of the reified social condition in modern capitalism. See Lukacs’ influential essay on reification in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1971).

<sup>11</sup>I owe this concise articulation to Mark Anderson, fellow graduate student at Cornell University.

<sup>12</sup>It can be argued that the collapse of the political realm represented by the rise of the Third Reich was an instance of the return of the repressed, as the religious element, suppressed in the Enlightenment project of rationalizing all of life, came back with unmediated, irrational violence. Thus, rather than demonstrating the inherent danger of the religious, it was techno-science allowed to manifest in unchecked barbarism from either religious or ethical spheres.

words, what we now take to be “science” and “religion” already contain the terms of the modern dichotomy within their very natures, although we tend to think of them as stable, whole entities needing to return to a prior unity.

19. Thus, I suspect that even the distinction made by Francis Bacon (apparently, a major proponent of the experimentation of the New Science, rather than the former, conceptual scholasticism) between the “book of God’s world” and the “book of God’s word,” rather than indicating a balanced unity, already displays the ill effects of this split. Although the word “book” is used and Psalm 19 is referred to by Bacon as “speech and language which has gone out to the ends of the earth,”<sup>13</sup> the methodology seems decidedly positivist. The knowledge that creation and the Bible offer, in Bacon’s view, does not seem very textual, not “speech,” as the premodern psalmist describes the utterance of the heavens, but more like transparent data which can be retrieved in a straightforward, unmediated manner, as in the colloquial sense of being “read like an open book.”<sup>14</sup>
20. Basically, *Scandal* presents early American history as a narrative of corruption, the Puritans being contaminated with the Enlightenment. While the Enlightenment’s influence is indisputable, I do question the ease with which some writers (although Noll is certainly no debunker) dismiss the notion of Christian legacy in revolutionary America, fundamentally misreading, I believe, the nature of secularization. I am not a scholar of early American history, but rather than view the Enlightenment as antithetical to Judeo-Christianity, I think it is important to recognize how deeply imbued it was (is) with the theological, thus betraying the ontological or metaphysical nature of secularism; for example, “We the people...” is a pronouncement of metaphysical chuptza that would be unintelligible outside of a theological framework. And because the ideological nature of the modern is, precisely, that it declares “the new” while suppressing any trace of its debt to a premodern (religious) past, it is doubly important to disallow any such philosophic cloaking. As Marx has pointed out, the modern carries within itself a nostalgic impulse: the new inventions of early industry ‘ the train, the electric light bulb ‘ appeared in the old guise of the stagecoach and candle flame, even while the revolutionaries of 1787 France donned the costumes of ancient Rome.
21. Thus, rather than dismiss early America, current political theorists who are profoundly anti-Enlightenment continue to show great interest in the American experiment, rereading their Tocqueville and studying the United States for possible models of radical democracy. Also, one recurring problem, it seems to me, in dismissing the Christian presence in early America involves merely locating non-Christian deists, such as Jefferson and Franklin, in prominent positions, rather than assessing a larger ethos or life-world. Just as finding highly placed Christians in late twentieth century America has, unfortunately, little correlation to the present state of our national character, finding deists among the Fathers, while telling, does not adequately inform us as to the overall cultural milieu of that time. I would hazard to guess that if someone like Benjamin Franklin was attending Jonathan Edwards’ revival meetings, and finding them “inspiring,” then Christianity as a social practice, if not as a strict belief

<sup>13</sup>Originally taken from Benjamin Farrington, *Francis Bacon: Philosopher of Industrial Science* (New York: Collier, 1961), pages 118-19; also quoted in *Scandal*, p. 204.

<sup>14</sup>Bacon’s status in the book is curious, as he is commended as an example of Christian openness to scientific developments in the interpreting of scripture, yet, earlier, his methodology (or those who followed him) was regarded as reductionistic, a simpleminded notion of science which Christians should have critiqued. My point is that the latter use is equally misguided, conflating the “doing” of science with the “openness” of a book, and in both cases, suppressing the element of interpretation.

system, was still carrying considerable weight. Also, the surrounding cultural context in which deists may find themselves—for example, in early eighteenth century America versus 1990s California—will determine much of the actual “content” of the belief system, beyond simple prooftexting of the written records. Thus, even the example of Karl Marx, hostile to theism yet his thinking permeated by theological structures (besides the fact that he loved to read Shakespeare), demonstrates the impossibility of absolute rebellion.

22. The question of intellectual renewal within evangelicalism remains complex, but I contend that it can only adequately be grasped within the context of the history of the nation-state, which is the legitimizing authority for the production of knowledge in the modern world. In short, the history of marginalization is inextricably linked to the larger development of mainstream research in the sciences, that is, the funding of industrial and technology research for corporate and government projects. A grasp of the wider problematic of modernity reveals that it is not an evangelical problem, per se, but one which addresses modernity, the ideological stakes of its national institutions, and the metaphysical presuppositions from which it draws its authority.
23. Mark Noll’s book goes a long way in delineating the history and the causes for evangelicalism’s intellectual demise: the dichotomous view of spirituality which devalues the spatio-temporal “this” world; the predilection towards experience over thought; the antitraditionalism and inwardness of American revivalism, reducing complexity to the level of the individual. My point is simply that the critique needs to be broadened to avoid valorizing higher education for its own sake, rather than as an institution with a history and considerable ideological baggage.
24. In the end, the modern university is the main forum where ideas are circulated and discussed. Thus, no group can avoid it without cutting off a major source of cultural vitality and sustenance. Still, it is no coincidence that individuals who have attempted to engage modernity, thereby retaining a timely, critical function to their intellectual concerns, have often challenged and even worked outside the university, the earlier mentioned Walter Benjamin as one outstanding example.<sup>15</sup> One major, remaining problem is not the presence of humanists of any stripe within the university structure ‘ its own in-house credentialing and evaluative processes ‘ but the pressing need to develop a critique of the institutional form by which knowledge is produced and marginalized.

## Notes

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<sup>15</sup>Walter Benjamin is an excellent example because he so clearly saw the philosophic implications in the German idealist tradition, notably German Romanticism, and revealed the false classicism within modernity which completely suppressed the theological. Benjamin attempted to, in a sense, resituate the entire discussion on modernity, bringing to light Christian history (the Baroque period), which had, up until then, been suppressed in an historiography which claimed a direct lineage from classical Greece and the Renaissance. Benjamin’s 1936 essay, “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” retains its critical edge, making the connections between modern epistemology, technology and the rise of fascism. For a visual primer, Wim Wenders’ fine 1987 film, *Wings of Desire*, is a tribute to Benjamin’s main ideas, engaging in its own critique of modernity. Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn. (New York: Schocken Books, 1969).

literature, aesthetics, and literary theory at Cornell University, focussing upon the relationship between Japanese nationalism and modernist poetics. He teach courses on modern literature, nationalism, film, and Asian classics. His article, "Oliver Stone's *JFK* and the Loss of Social Memory," is forthcoming in *2000 Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and TV Studies CD-ROM Annual* (March 2001).

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