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## **The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship, by George Marsden**

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## THE OUTRAGEOUS IDEA OF CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP

GEORGE M. MARSDEN. OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 1997.

*Reviewed by Jerome R. Porath*

In the world of postsecondary education, Marsden's proposal may be an "outrageous idea," but for educators working out of a given religious tradition his writing provides some meaningful insights into institutional identity.

Marsden's thesis is simply this: Religious beliefs, particularly Christian beliefs, so affect a person's thinking that when that person expresses thoughts to others (teaches), those beliefs are embedded in a significant way. As a parallel Marsden suggests that a scholar, working out of a particular ideology, feels compelled to identify the ideology because it is significant to the ideas expressed. Christians in like fashion ought to reveal their ideological sources.

However, the "outrageous idea" goes beyond revealing sources. Marsden carefully critiques the prevailing positivist/empiricist position of higher education, offers guidance in discourse via a distinction of public and private knowledge or argumentation, and demonstrates the practical benefit of having and disclosing Christian beliefs.

In the first instance he challenges the current intellectual core of American higher education. Despite its religious foundations and tradition, colleges and universities in the United States have become subject to both the epistemology of positivism and the sentiment of neutrality in the American *polis*. Marsden rightly points out that higher education has accepted the truth of the statement: The only truth worth discussing is that which is demonstra-

ble through the sciences. It has done this without having a shred of scientific evidence to support the truth of that statement. Rather, a *belief* in science or some *other non-observable construct* is what supports the truth of the statement.

After having acknowledged that paradox of higher education's championing the truth of science without scientific evidence, Marsden softens his "outrageous idea" by advising that in public discourse, one ought only rely on the publicly observable findings of science. In other words, it simply is not fair to claim the truth of something on personal evidence. My goodness, if no one else could verify it as true, then how could it be true! Marsden's apparent way out is the distinction between the public and private discourse: In at least the public forum we hold science and empirical evidence as ultimate arbiters of reality.

Here is found the weakness in Marsden's writing; he falls into old traps laid in the very lengthy history of epistemology. As far back as Plato, who had his students question the reality of the shadows that danced on cave walls (despite the fact that they saw those shadows with their own eyes), philosophers have debated the difference between public and private experience.

Nonetheless, the consistent position across various philosophies is that truth is found in what explains most of the observable phenomena, recognizing the explanation itself is not observable. If to some this sounds like the pragmatism of James or Dewey and to others the naturalism of Aristotle or Aquinas, so much more to the point. Is evolution of the universe from an eternal unknown more observable than divine creation out of nothing?

There is no argument with the statement that evolution is a theory which resulted from human pondering on the data of experience, nor with the statement that creation is the result of God's revelation. The problem comes from the argument that the first statement is truer than the second, because it is possible for everyone to arrive at the first, but not arrive at the second statement. There is probably greater empirical evidence that human beings would posit divine creation than propose the theory of evolution; there were, after all, centuries of religious experience before Charles Darwin.

While Marsden does not advance epistemological theories, he does give some much-needed assistance to education leaders examining the meaning of their religious identity. Catholic schools at all levels have been discussing this "identity" issue for some time. Parts of the discussions among Catholic educators are clear and decisive. For example, no one disputes the appropriateness of formal instruction in Catholic teachings. Further, it is almost always a given that there should be opportunities for the experience of Catholic prayer and worship, of the care and concern of a Catholic community, and of activity on behalf of a more just society and in service to others.

There is disagreement in part, but convergence in part, on the question of Catholic education's role in catechesis. Things really get confused, however,

when discussions turn to the academic programs. Here is where Marsden's practical insight into why religious (Christian) beliefs are meaningful and useful is important. Having a religious frame of reference does make a difference in how the data of human experience are seen and understood. In Marsden's terms, Christianity offers some questions to be answered, some theories to be examined, and some projects to be undertaken, all of which might be overlooked or not be of interest to other observers.

Although Marsden acknowledges that Christianity not only asks the questions, but gives the answers, he points out that it leads the Christian searcher for truth to discover whether there are other reasons (other than revelation) that would support the Christian position. He also demonstrates how religion makes certain projects and life choices more attractive and, hence, encourages action or behavior that otherwise might be dismissed as irrelevant.

In sum, what makes a difference is the Christian worldview. It has an effect on what is selected for teaching, what is used for examples, what attitudes towards life are conveyed, what life-projects are spotlighted, what meaning is given to human existence. What makes a Catholic school unique in its academic program is not that teachers somehow skillfully weave tenants of Church teaching through the academic curriculum. No, to do that potentially distorts both the secular and the sacred. The real difference is at a deeper level, as Marsden clearly illustrates: that all culture and knowledge is presented in a different light, it has a different meaning, because of the good news of salvation.

*Dr. Jerome R. Porath has been superintendent of schools for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles since 1991. Before coming to Los Angeles he was superintendent of schools for the Diocese of Albany, NY (1978-85) and the Archdiocese of Washington, DC (1985-91).*

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*Reviewed by Diana Stano, O.S.U.*

**I**n *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, George Marsden presents an informative and intriguing approach to the question of the relationship between religious faith and intellectual scholarship. He begins by setting the historical context, citing the current reaction to the long-established and privileged position the Christian perspective held in higher education. The presentation sets a rather compelling stage from which to consider the relevance of faith to scholarship in all academic areas. The author then interweaves various positions related to this idea and intersperses brief examples of how such integration might be developed. Unfortunately, it is easy to get lost in the rhetorical and theoretical positions articulated in order to establish the valid-

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