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The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship, by George Marsden

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gious and newly appointed president of a small, Catholic, liberal arts college for women, I come from a background in science where I have always found the discussion of faith and the intellectual life fascinating. For me, Marsden's book reads as a philosophical text which has the potential to stir heated discussion among interested and informed faculty.

REFERENCE

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Reviewed by Robert W. McElroy

Sometimes in the course of a specific intellectual project, one comes upon a topic which dwarfs in importance the original focus of inquiry. This was the experience of George Marsden, who examined in *The Soul of the American University* (1994) how American university culture, itself a product of Protestant influences in so many ways, came to reject the legitimacy of scholarship explicitly shaped by perspectives of religious faith. In "An Unscientific Postscript" to that work, Marsden outlined a notion of "Christian scholarship" which should be welcomed in the contemporary university setting as an appropriate and enriching element in scholarly life.

The cascade of criticism which followed the publication of *The Soul of the American University* centered largely on the charge that Marsden had overdrawn the hostility of the academy to religious belief and to the scholarship of religious believers. In his newest book, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, Marsden has wisely resisted the temptation to focus primarily upon this issue of how hostile university life is to faith-informed scholarship, and instead has chosen to examine the far more interesting question of what Christian scholarship is and how it might be beneficial in the academic life of the contemporary university. Marsden's goal is a modest but rich one: "...to take a step toward clarifying what the ancient enterprise of relating faith and learning might mean in the academy today" (1997, p. ii).

It is important to note that Marsden is not speaking of a Christian scholarship which is confined merely to theology or to the study of religious life and practice in human society. No, the "faith-informed" scholarship he proposes to house in the mainstream of university life is much broader than that, touching upon the fields of history, ethics, the arts, economics, law, and even

the natural sciences themselves. "Christian perspectives can have influence on any academic discipline when it comes to questions of larger meaning" (Marsden, 1997, p. 22).

Outrageous Idea makes three major arguments. The first is that contemporary university life stigmatizes faith-informed scholarship on grounds which the university never applies to other, "pretheoretical influences" which shape scholarly inquiry. Freudian or Marxist worldviews are let into the academy without meeting a narrowly drawn measure of empiricism, but religion is not.

The second argument which Marsden presents is the assertion that faith-informed scholarship has a legitimate role in the university if it follows rules appropriate to the field of study in question, so that "no matter what commitments one brings into one's academic work, one would have to argue for one's scholarly interpretation on the same sort of publicly accessible grounds that are widely accepted in the academy" (1997, p. 52). Christian scholarship thus entails the conscious and public articulation of the religious roots of a scholar's findings, but not the presentation of those findings as primarily the product of religious faith. Christian scholarship allows religious belief to shape research agendas, to provide foundational beliefs for questions of meaning, and to avoid the sin of reductionism in treating the religious beliefs and practices which have shaped much of human history.

The final and most intriguing contribution of *Outrageous Idea* is its exploration of the manner in which faith-informed scholarship can enrich the academic life of the university community. Marsden effectively contends that to expel religious belief from the scholarly enterprise demands that the believing scholar divide his or her very self in a way which is demeaning to integrity and is ultimately impossible. He then proposes examples of how the Christian doctrines of creation, the Incarnation, and the human condition can foster scholarly perspectives on human rights, economic justice, and the origins of our universe which are ultimately far more beneficial to society than narrowly liberal or enlightenment views have been.

One defect in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* is that Marsden argues simultaneously for the legitimacy of "faith-informed scholarship" and "Christian scholarship." Both concepts can be legitimated within university life, but the ease with which Marsden moves from one to the other ignores the very important differences in these two concepts which necessitate differing arguments of legitimation. Another shortcoming in *Outrageous Idea* is that it almost exclusively considers the legitimacy of faith-informed scholarship from the perspective of the scholar. Marsden's enterprise would have benefited from exploring the ways in which faith-informed scholarship also benefits students and readers by making scholarship available to believers without demanding, implicitly or explicitly, that they become "methodological atheists" in order to participate appropriately

in the life of the contemporary university.

The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship is a skillful and reflective preliminary effort to identify the legitimacy, topography, and benefits of faith-informed academic inquiry. One hopes that it will produce the same thoughtful scrutiny which followed the publication of *The Soul of the American University*. And one hopes even more that this scrutiny will in turn prompt George Marsden's return to this fascinating question.

REFERENCE

Marsden, G. (1994). *The soul of the American university*. Oxford University Press.

Robert W. McElroy is vicar general of the Archdiocese of San Francisco. He is the author of The Search for an American Public Theology (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989) and Morality and American Foreign Policy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

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