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## Liberation Theology and Critical Pedagogy in Today's Schools: Social Justice in Action, by Thomas Oldenski

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Finally, Professor McElroy helpfully makes the point that I speak too much from the perspective of a “scholar” and neglect the benefits of what I am saying for students. Here I should have been more explicit. A “scholar” I assume is ordinarily someone who teaches. Everything I say about what difference Christian perspectives should make can and should be applied to teaching. At a number of places I point that out specifically and I always take it for granted. Likewise, as my last chapter emphasizes, the importance of cultivating Christian perspectives in the classroom applies even more strongly at church-related institutions than at strictly public ones. Virtually every church-related college and university today serves the wider public as well as its own church community. For many that has meant that they have adopted essentially the secular “public” standards for what is the best education and have relegated church influences to extracurricular life. My argument is that it is possible to meet the highest intellectual standards for higher education and to be respectful of differing points of view while integrating religiously based truth into our teaching.

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## **LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND CRITICAL PEDAGOGY IN TODAY'S SCHOOLS: SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ACTION**

THOMAS OLDENSKI. NEW YORK: GARLAND PUBLISHING, INC., 1997.

*Reviewed by Edward van Merrienboer, O.P.*

**F**or at least the last 25 years, Catholic educators have been exploring methods to realize the social mission of their teaching ministry. Special days have been established in many schools to create a greater awareness of world hunger, racism, violence, and sexism. Other schools have integrated topics into the curriculum to encourage their students to have a greater concern for social problems. Furthermore, service programs are frequently required for graduation from Catholic high schools. These important and valuable programs point to the active response of Catholic educators to make social justice one of the hallmarks of their schools.

Thomas Oldenski, a Marianist brother and Catholic educator, has attempted to move this exploration of the school's social mission to a discussion of what social justice can mean for pedagogy. The purpose of the book is to share with Catholic educators what Catholic education can be in relationship to the critical discourses of liberation theology and critical ped-

agogy. The author achieves his purpose through a systematic review of the many challenges that have been given by religious and secular educational leaders to schools to form youth into agents of socially responsible change. He demonstrates that “liberation theology and critical pedagogy integrate ... concepts of equity, justice, freedom, and a democratic community by according voice to the many others who were and are oppressed by Eurocentric metanarratives” (p. 9). Oldenski illustrates his theory through the findings he reports from research conducted at the Vincent Gray Alternative High School in the African American community of East Saint Louis, Illinois.

East Saint Louis is not your typical American city, nor is the Vincent Gray High School typical of most Catholic secondary schools. East Saint Louis represents one of the poorest communities in our country. The author’s description of the city is one of grim hopelessness. Poverty, violence, and lack of opportunities make East Saint Louis a good location to test the mission of a Catholic school trying to bring about critical awareness and hope for change. Vincent Gray High School has about 100 African American students, most of whom have not found success in their previous educational experiences. The faculty is small and highly motivated. Their dedication to this project must be recognized as a key to understanding the success of this school’s mission as demonstrated by this research. Few Catholic schools will enjoy the good fortune of having a faculty with such a high commitment. Also, it should be noted that the percentage of religious to lay faculty is not representative of most Catholic schools; few schools have religious faculty in the majority. Considering these characteristics, the model proposed by the author is helpful in that it provides direction on how to engage faculty and students in evaluating the school’s effectiveness.

I am convinced that this atypical Catholic high school has achieved to a high level its mission of forming young people into agents of change. In the voices of faculty and students we find examples of abundant hope amid the harsh realities of East Saint Louis. These voices expand and give meaning to the author’s theoretical perspective. Several sections of the text are particularly noteworthy. The second chapter offers a rich discussion of the identity crisis that has been experienced by Catholic schools since the Second Vatican Council. This short chapter could be useful for any members of a school community wanting a concise resource on “the struggle Catholic educators experience as they confront the question of what makes a school Catholic or what makes a Catholic school” (p. 21). The author locates this discussion within the reality of Catholic education’s role in United States society. The fact that Catholic schools have educated a small but very significant percentage of the American population is placed in the context of the actual decline in the number of schools and students within the system. His excellent review of the work of those who have spoken to this identity crisis is a great resource. This chapter is closely linked with the next chapter that reviews

what research reveals about Catholic schools. I recommend that these two chapters be read as a unified whole to give the reader a clear picture of the choices that Catholic schools are facing as they attempt to define their mission for the future.

What follows in chapter four is a serious survey of the major themes in liberation theology and critical pedagogy. Both disciplines understand their task as presenting a new understanding of what it means to be human and Christian in a transformative way. For those not familiar with either liberation theology or critical pedagogy, this chapter provides an excellent summary of the major contributions of writers in these movements and concludes with a clear "integrative model" of liberation theology and critical pedagogy.

I highly recommend this work to Catholic educators looking for resources on Catholic identity and the integration of social justice into the school's educational mission. This book should be part of every faculty library as a resource tool to be consulted in developing the school's vision.

*Edward van Merriënboer, O.P., has taught, researched, and written about curriculum for peace and justice. He is currently chair of the Theology and Philosophy Department at Barry University, Miami Shores, FL.*

## **PARISH SCHOOL: AMERICAN CATHOLIC PAROCHIAL EDUCATION FROM COLONIAL TIMES TO THE PRESENT**

TIMOTHY WALCH. NEW YORK:  
CROSSROAD PUBLISHING COMPANY, 1996.

*Reviewed by Robert A. Teegarden*

**T**imothy Walch's *Parish School* weaves a rich tapestry as it tells the story of Catholic education in America from the Colonial times to the present. The warp of his fabric highlights six themes central to Catholic education: survival, immigration, a variety of responses, adaptability, community, and identity. The woof of his loom portrays a kaleidoscope of people, places, politics, and power. The woven images tell the story of risks taken, of adventures to foreign lands, of conflicts both in and out of the Church, of powerful leadership, and of more sanguine times in American Catholic education. In one sense, though, *Parish School* depicts a seamless garment, one whose recurring themes include the preservation of faith of its children and their preparation for productive roles in society.

*Parish School* sheds light as both treatise and thesis. It unravels the long and rich influence that the American Catholic educational organizations have

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