

## RESPONSE TO REVIEWS OF *THE OUTRAGEOUS IDEA OF CHRISTIAN SCHOLARSHIP*

George M. Marsden

I am very grateful for these three thoughtful reviews of *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* and this opportunity to respond. Most of what the reviewers say correctly describes what I say, so there is no need to comment on that. At a few points, however, they perceive me to say what I did not intend, and these give me an opportunity to clarify my meanings.

The most serious critique comes from Professor Porath. He reads me as falling into a contradiction. On the one hand, I criticize the mainstream academy for setting up a positivist scientific standard for discourse even though there is no scientific evidence that the natural scientific method provides the highest source of truth. Then, says Professor Porath, I turn around and assert that in public discourse, such as in mainstream academia, it is necessary to argue in terms of publicly accessible evidence and argument. This he sees as reestablishing for the public domain the principle that all discourse must be empirically verified.

I can understand how Professor Porath reads me that way, but thankfully not everyone does. One has only to consult Professor McElroy's fine summary of my main arguments to see that I address the very issue in question. He points out that my first argument is that all points of view in the academy are shaped by "pretheoretical influences" that are not susceptible to empirical verification. For instance, the moral principle that all people ought to be treated equally before the law is a premise of much contemporary thought, but cannot be proven on scientific grounds. So the point of my argument regarding public higher education is that, even though all of us are dependent on first principles that cannot be definitively established on scientific grounds, we have to argue for our views on grounds that a diverse audience is likely to share. In a court of law, for instance, it will not help our case if we try to introduce as evidence our private revelation of who committed the crime. Nor would it help to appeal to the *Book of Mormon* or any other revelation not accepted by most of the audience. Rather, in such a situation, even though our divine revelation should be decisive for us in shaping our views, as a practical matter we have to argue on grounds that most of our audience will share. So if one is arguing in a state university class that abortion is wrong, it will be much more effective to appeal to the widely accepted ground that it is good to protect innocent life than to simply declare that this is what the Church teaches and that settles the matter. Church teaching may—in fact should—be decisive in shaping a Catholic's view of the matter, but that is a different question from how one should argue for it in public.

The other questions have to do with the positive dimensions of what a Christian perspective should amount to. Sr. Stano summarizes me as saying “there are no identifiable Christian schools of thought.” That puts my point more strongly than I would want to. What I mean is that today most of us cannot rely on set formulae of various Christian schools of thought the way that was possible at times in the past. Fifty years ago Catholics could pretty much equate Catholic thought with Neo-Thomism. Today Catholic perspectives are much more diverse. So is the thought of other groups of Christians. They may agree on first principles, but not on conclusions. For instance, two groups of Catholics may agree that Christians should be peacemakers, but they may disagree as to whether unilateral disarmament is the best step in that direction. There are, of course, still schools of thought on such issues, but they tend to be diverse and divided among themselves.

Despite this bewildering diversity in “Christian” thought, I still argue that the enterprise of developing Christian perspectives is an important one. Christians of all sorts ought to be asking “what is the relationship between these astonishing claims about reality that I subscribe to as a Christian and the rest of my thinking? How does the fact that I believe that God created everything, including a moral law for humans, change the way to think about sociology, anthropology, economics, history, literature, political science, and so forth?” Christians will not always agree on the answer to these questions, but if they raise these questions, it will substantially change the character of their academic inquiry.

Nor do we have to expect that Christian perspectives will change everything for the Christian academic. Economists may calculate the GNP the same way, no matter what their faith or lack of faith. But they should be constantly testing their views of economic justice in the light of their faith.

Related to these points is Professor McElroy’s observation that I slip back and forth too easily between “Christian scholarship” and “faith-informed scholarship.” By faith-informed scholarship I mean any scholarship that is shaped by religious faith (actually all scholarship is shaped by some faith, either secular or religious, but that is another point). Christian scholarship is a sub-type of faith-informed scholarship. The reason I use both terms is that often I want to argue that mainstream academia should recognize all sorts of faith-informed scholarship, Christian, Jewish, Mormon, Islamic, or whatever. I do not want to argue that Christians should be given a special standing in public institutions, such as state universities. Also, I have noted that even at Catholic institutions, people are much more comfortable talking about the broader category of faith-informed scholarship than with the narrower term Christian scholarship. Christian as an adjective is often used by the political right, so that when some people hear the term they automatically assume one is talking about something narrow, exclusive, and imperialistic.

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.*

For 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-

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