

Book Review  
*Stephen Van der Ploeg*

### **The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship.**

George Marsden. Oxford University Press, 142 pages, 1997. ISBN 0-19-510565-6

#### **Introduction**

Those of us who are members of the Christian Business Faculty Association are generally concerned with the idea of integrating our faith with the rest of our lives, especially in our teaching and our scholarship activities. Yet we practice these crafts in diverse settings, not all of which are explicitly Christian environments. Many of our scholarship efforts, for example, take place in primarily secular communities. In these activities, we would like to avoid compartmentalized Christian behavior, and instead desire to live integrated Christian lives, and by doing so, bear witness of

our Christian faith to the world around us.

George Marsden has published a book exploring the idea of Christian scholarship, a book that addresses concerns of both Christian and non-Christian scholars. The title of this book, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, immediately communicates the author's premise that the modern academic community reacts with offense to the idea or presence of a scholarship that is distinctly Christian in character. This book asks and explores some basic questions about the nature, limits, and identity of Christian scholarship and its potential role in the secular academic scholarship environment. Although not specifically addressed to the business disciplines, these questions are relevant to the business disciplines represented by the membership of the CBFA. The book also addresses the larger community of academic scholars, asking them to thoughtfully reconsider their attitudes to religious perspectives in scholarship and make room for positive contributions from these perspectives. This well-crafted book will assist Christian scholars in the difficult issues of faith and

learning with which we are engaged, and at the same time make a positive contribution to the pluralistic enterprise of academic scholarship.

Some of the questions that are raised in this book include:

1. What is the nature of Christian scholarship? Is there, for example, such a thing as Christian economics, or marketing, or even accounting?
2. Can Christian scholarship make a positive contribution in the context of the pluralistic academic community and will such scholarship be distinctive?
3. What are the "rules of the game" in the academic environment today with respect to religious, and specifically, Christian perspectives? How did these rules develop?
4. What are the historical origins of the current environment of hostility toward religious, and especially Christian, perspectives in the area of scholarship?
5. How can one introduce affirmations of a particular religious heritage into a pluralistic setting without offending the community of scholars?

These are questions that concern modern Christian scholars, including those in the

business disciplines. This book is a thoughtful and serious treatment of a difficult subject, moderate in tone, and sensitive to the perspectives of a wide audience of readers. It is informed by the high standard of scholarship readers have come to expect from George Marsden. Yet it is also written to engage the community of Christian scholars and encourage it to reexamine its assumptions about its role in the scholarly community at large.

#### **Theme**

The major theme of this book is that a scholarship that is informed by explicitly religious, including specifically Christian, perspectives will result in an improved scholarship which can address the larger questions of life, which is one of the legitimate functions of scholarly research. In this function, specifically Christian scholarship would be placed on a par with other categories of scholarship with recognizable and distinct influences, such as, for example, Marxist, feminist, or black scholarship.

Marsden begins his examination with a critique of contemporary university culture, namely that "contemporary university culture is hollow at its

core” (p. 3), meaning that it lacks the ability to discern appropriate choices among some first principles which ought to be at the center of the learning enterprise. Modern academic scholarship does not deal well with matters of first principles, and as a result academic efforts tend to be fragmented, without direction, and “detached from the larger issues of life” (p. 3). A solution, argues the book, should include the reintroduction of explicit discussions of issues of faith and learning into mainstream higher education, a discussion which has been systematically purged from the culture of higher education, including scholarship. Marsden advocates “the opening of the academic mainstream to scholarship that relates one’s belief in God to what else one thinks about” (p. 4). This is what he means by religiously informed scholarship.

The book develops in considerable detail leading *motifs*, or sub-themes, dealing with salient features of the culture of modern academic scholarship as they address religiously informed scholarship. These are examined in each of the following lettered headings.

### **A. Historical Developments Have Resulted In Prejudice Against Christian Perspectives**

First, Christian scholarship is an outrageous idea, in the sense that the modern community of scholars rejects it wholesale, unlike, for example, Marxist, feminist, or black scholarship—all forms of scholarship that are overtly and respectably practiced. This rejection of religiously informed scholarship occurs in every discipline, even in religious studies. Even some Christian professors accept as a premise “that it is inappropriate to relate their Christianity to their scholarship” (p. 7).

Why are Christian perspectives unwelcome in modern scholarship? Among other factors, Marsden traces the response to the historical dominance of cultural Protestantism in higher education and a historical reaction to that historical dominance which subsequently sought to dismantle it.

In a broad historical overview of the American scene, Marsden traces the establishment of higher education in the 18th century by sectarian Christian communities. University builders in the 19th century reacted against this sectarianism with a liberal

Protestant “non-sectarian” establishment in higher education that sought to establish a unified national culture and based learning in the new subjects (sciences, social sciences) in purely naturalistic terms. There was a strong identification of this unified national culture with “Christian” civilization, and overt conflict with Christian faith was not recognized, because all this took place in what appeared to be a Christian milieu.

Nevertheless, the establishment of new universities along naturalistic approaches toward the acquisition of knowledge, guided by the sciences as a model for all learning, resulted increasingly in the overt suppression, trivialization, and marginalization of religious impulses in academic life and, more specifically, of Christian academic scholarship. Religion was increasingly seen as legitimate only as an academic study of human behavior. Christian scholarship, especially, was in violation of canons of good taste in scholarship.

What exactly does Marsden mean by Christian scholarship in this context? “The idea of Christian scholarship does not have to do primarily with religious studies. Rather,

Christian perspectives can have influence on any academic discipline when it comes to questions of larger meaning” (p. 22). Marsden is proposing that the results of scholarship be evaluated in terms of norms that are provided by religious perspectives. Such examinations have been suppressed, trivialized, or marginalized, according to Marsden, in the interests of a spurious and unobtainable objectivity.

Marsden argues that the historical disestablishment of liberal Protestantism in academic life has now been replaced by a “virtual establishment of nonbelief” (p. 23). In this environment, the accepted view is not that religious belief is a bad thing *per se*, it is just not relevant to any field of academic inquiry and is therefore to be avoided in scholarship.

Marsden suggests that an overreaction to a perceived historical need to disestablish Protestant hegemony in a pluralistic society has occurred. An old problem has been corrected, but in the process replaced by a new one. “Something very much like ‘secular humanism’ is informally established as much as

Christianity was in the nineteenth century” (p. 24).

### **B. Christian Perspectives Should Not Be Heard In Modern Scholarship**

The academic community has several ostensible reasons for insisting on silence from Christian and other religious perspectives. Among these, it is asserted that religious perspectives are inherently non-scientific; they are in conflict with a high value placed on multiculturalism and diversity; and they would constitute a violation of the principle of the separation of church and state.

Marsden considers the merits of each of these in turn.

First, Christian perspectives are rejected in current scholarship because they are considered non-scientific and not relevant to good scholarship. At the same time, it is conceded by the community of scholars that “being African American or Native American would make a difference in how some things are perceived” (p. 27), i.e., some value is conceded to be added by these cultural perspectives. The same does not hold for religious perspectives.

Marsden counters with a critique of the dismissal of

religious perspectives as insufficiently empirical. He identifies this as a residual prejudice, with developments in philosophy and postmodernism casting doubt on the notion of strict scientific objectivity as an attainable standard. He also develops the historical roots of this prevailing orthodoxy, linking it to logical positivism in the sciences and creative anti-realism in other fields such as literature and the humanities. Both of these sources have in common naturalistic assumptions, which he argues to be a primary source of many naturalistic conclusions of such scholarship. He also presents this as a source of prejudice against religious perspectives in scholarship. Hence, the modern academy argues that such perspectives should remain hidden, hence silent.

Another objection to explicit Christian perspectives in scholarship rests on the value of multiculturalism and diversity. At first glance, this doesn’t make sense. Wouldn’t Christians be a part of the highly-valued multiculturalism and diversity?

Marsden claims that opposition to open expression of Christian perspectives is founded in a fear of Christian imperialism.

This fear is part of the baggage of having been in earlier times a culture which was, either officially or *de facto*, Christian in character, i.e., Christian culture set the rules, including in academic matters. This, it is asserted by some interest groups, resulted in a hostile environment for gays, lesbians, Jews, and other minorities. These groups have won gains, and they fear losing them, should the rules of discourse be changed to permit greater openness of religious expression. According to this view, Christian views are a special case (especially conservative Christian views) of imperialism to be guarded against. This is not a matter of principle as much as it is a matter of political power in the academic setting. Marsden points out the irony of all this in a culture that places a high value on diversity. He argues that an exception to this value of diversity in general exists in the dimension of religion, i.e., religious diversity is, in general, not valued in the academic environment.

A third set of objections to open expression of Christian points of view appeals to the political doctrine of the separation of church and state. According to Marsden, the historical

development of the doctrine of a “wall of separation” (p. 40) of church and state has led to an environment in academic settings where any religious expressions may be viewed as a breach of this ethic. He develops the argument that this is a bogus claim and an archaic application of the doctrine. The rise of a politically aggressive Christian right, he claims, has reinforced and complicated this issue.

### **C. Christian Scholarship Should Be Accepted As Legitimate By The Rules Of The Academic Game**

Now Marsden begins to build his case for the acceptance of Christian scholarship by the academic community. First, he argues for a broader view of the scientific in scholarship. A quote catches the essence of Marsden on this:

*The problem as I see it is how to balance the advocacy implicit in all scholarship with academic standards that are scientific or “reasonable” in the sense of being accessible to people from many different ideological camps. Traditional religious viewpoints, I am saying, can be just as hospitable to scientifically sound investigation as many other*

viewpoints, all of which are ultimately grounded in some faith or other. Hence religious perspectives ought to be recognized as legitimate in the mainstream academy so long as their proponents are willing to support the rules necessary for constructive exchange of ideas in a pluralistic setting (p. 45).

Next, Marsden advocates a pragmatic approach to the operation of the liberal academy (i.e., the academic rules of the game), citing the father of Pragmatism, William James, and an analogy of a hotel with a common corridor with many rooms that open on to the corridor (p. 45). In the various rooms, very different (academic) activities are taking place, not all of which are consistent with each other, but to have access to the rooms, each scholar has to traverse the corridor, which they collectively own, or have in common. Such a pragmatic approach has room for an explicit Christian perspective or background in scholarship.

Next, he denies an inherent conflict between holding Christian perspectives and engaging in good research, as defined by the various disciplines. A critique of this view argues

that, if Christian perspectives are distinctive, Christians will violate the rules of academic discourse by appealing to knowledge not shared by non-Christians. Marsden's refutation:

*In a pluralistic public setting it makes sense to have a rule that representatives of various religious beliefs not argue on the basis of the authority of their special or private revelations. It simply does not advance the discussion to introduce an authority that other people do not accept* (p. 48).

Marsden argues that scholarship is shaped by the background religious commitments of the scholar. The liberal academy, however, does not treat all background religious views alike. There is not a principle excluding all religiously-based background viewpoints, so long as they remain in the background. "There is little evidence of prejudice against scholars who happen to have such religious views" (p. 51).

Given that religious perspectives are legitimate in scholarship in the background, they should be made explicit. This is the core of Marsden's

proposal. The secular scholarship community should make room for explicit religious perspectives presented in proper settings and appropriate ways. He considers analogies with Marxist, feminist, and gay-advocacy perspectives, which have a legitimate place in academic scholarship.

He explores the fears of the research/scholarship community, arguing that they are not well-founded. And he demolishes the pretense of the alternative to explicit treatment of religious perspectives "that all scholars and teachers pose as disinterested observers" (p. 54). He also advocates for civility, especially by Christian researchers, as an application of the Golden Rule. "How would we want scholars holding other strongly ideological convictions to act in the mainstream academy?" Christian attitudes should shape the tone of one's scholarship, and Christian commitments should lead toward scholarly rigor and integrity, an approach that representatives of other religious and ideological viewpoints would share in an ideal scholarship community.

Will acceptance of this model of Christian scholarship lead to bifurcation on the part of Christian scholars, a violation of the ethic of the faith that one

cannot serve both God and mammon? No, argues Marsden. Christians live in the City of God (*à la* St. Augustine) as well as the world (scholarship communities), and of necessity follow different rules in different settings with limited allegiance to those rules. Christians are "free to play by the academy's rules to the extent that these do not conflict directly with their Christian commitments" (p. 56). Marsden also comments on those of us who pursue scholarship in the setting of Christian institutions. "Such academic institutions are invaluable and can sustain a depth of sophistication regarding the implications of faith and scholarship that is unattainable in diverse settings" (p. 57).

#### **D. What Difference Could It Possibly Make?**

A common view is that it should not make a difference, because there is really not such a thing as Christian economics or marketing or accounting, etc. These are objective disciplines, with their own scientific, objective, or practical methodologies which are then applied to factual information. What difference could a Christian perspective possibly make to such disciplines? Marsden suggests

several possible contributions, beginning with a real contribution from perspective.

The model of value-free scholarship generating spurious views of objectivity is faulty, except perhaps in the narrowest of scholarly applications, argues Marsden. He employs the analogy of a well-known *gestalt* picture (which may be perceived either as a duck or a rabbit) to represent the way that the interpretation of “facts” (the figure) is conditioned by the perspectives brought to the situation. Instead, he argues that a Christian or religious perspective will influence the pursuit of scholarship in a number of ways, including motivation of the scholarship, selection of the questions asked, and the interpretations offered to varying degrees in the varying disciplines. In addition, perspectives from faith may lead to the development of certain scholarly agendas in the various fields, or challenges to the non-articulated assumptions of the existing research agenda.

Christian perspectives may also challenge naturalistic reductionism or other unwritten assumptions driving the modern research programs of the various disciplines. Marsden claims that “modern academia leans heavily toward what might be called

naturalistic reductionism,” resulting in a big picture interpretation “that includes everything but God” (p. 77).

Christian perspectives will also challenge the “Transcendent Self” (p. 77), or the tendency in modern culture (which also infests academic scholarship) to place humanity at the center of all inquiry and to interpret all human behaviors in naturalistic terms, as human creations. Marsden argues that Christians can be united in rejecting this philosophical underpinning of many theories articulated in academia today.

Finally, it should make a moral difference. The Christian reference point in academic research will contribute to the set of moral judgments that is part of the environment of modern scholarship. This moral environment will be ambiguous with regard to its Christian roots, i.e., a product of many cultural influences, but a Christian perspective will continue to contribute to it.

With the presence of these differences, is Christian scholarship nevertheless distinctive, and what would distinctive look like? Marsden argues that distinctive Christian scholarship “does not typically lead to scholarship that will set

Christians apart from everyone else” and that there is not one Christian view on any subject, but instead there will generally be a diffuseness or variety of Christian influences.

### **E. Christian Theological Context Will Make Positive Contributions**

Here, theological context is “any serious thought about God and God’s revelation according to a particular religious tradition” (p. 83). Distinctive Christian doctrines, according to Marsden, such as the creation, the incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and Christian beliefs about the human condition, can all be expected to make at least indirect contributions to Christian scholarship. For example, the specific Christian doctrine of the incarnation can be expected to result in a spiritual openness to the universe of reality, not a universe closed as a presupposition to supernatural reality. This doctrine would be expected to affect sensibilities to fellow human beings and result in strong moral sensitivity to disadvantaged and suffering fellow humans. As another example, the Christian doctrine of the fallen nature of humanity will result in an attitude affirming

limitations in all human endeavors, and will place limits on the valuation of these endeavors, including academic scholarship, since they will all be in some way flawed. Such a doctrine will contribute a welcome humility to the evaluation of scholarship results.

### **Summing Up**

George Marsden has written a very thoughtful, stimulating, and serious book about the relationship between Christian thought and scholarship and the scholarship of the larger academic community. Multiple facets of this relationship are explored. Some of these have been briefly reviewed here. Many more are to be found, in carefully considered detail, in the book. This book will encourage you to think about the relationship of Christian beliefs to your own field of study and your own activities in it. What are the presuppositions of your field? Do these have a bearing on the link between Christian faith and the practices and thought structures of your discipline? Can we identify a distinctly Christian emphasis in law, management, accounting, marketing, finance, and economics? If you are not yet convinced and continue to

struggle with this, this book will help you sort out these issues. It will help you explore how the Christian faith can make a positive contribution to your discipline and your scholarship.

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