The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship

Reviewed by Gregory Schulz

In 1994 George Marsden authored The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief. More recently the Notre Dame history professor has given us The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship (1997 Oxford University Press). For the past two years I’ve been leading a discussion of Marsden’s Outrageous Idea each month in my college’s meetings of the humanities division. This division includes our professors in the arts, English, foreign languages, philosophy, music, theology and theater.

Marsden’s idea of Christian scholarship may well be outrageous in the context of the modern university. He alludes to the university’s “imperialism of secularism” and describes the outcome of the academy’s marginalization of religion as a “dreary uniformity.”

His idea does not appear at all outrageous from where I serve, at a Christian college. Remember that old saw “So, do you work in order to play more or do you play in order to work better?” Whereas a university professor may teach in order to do scholarship more, we college professors do scholarship in order to teach better. Different teleology. Marsden’s use of an Augustinian model for scholarship and his comments regarding the centrality of undergraduate teaching in his concluding chapter underscore his understanding of this.

Now, while Marsden’s book is clearly worthwhile – we would not spend two years of valuable discussion time on a book that wasn’t! – my view is that it offers significant resources for a serious discussion of scholarship at church-related colleges such as the one where I teach, but provides a thin account of Christian scholarship. Let me engage with Marsden on three points: (1) the distinctive contributions of the academic disciplines to Christian scholarship, (2) the impact of the Enlightenment on Christian scholarship, and (3) the notion of “Christian” in “Christian scholarship.” My intent is to offer something of an apologetic for his book while adumbrating the work to be done before we can be sure that it is a robust view of Christian scholarship that we are undertaking as professors who teach undergraduates.

First, the cultivation of Christian scholarship will involve the use of the distinctive skills brought by professors in the humanities. In a chapter where he discusses “Scholarly Agendas,” Marsden writes “that the relevance of the faith will vary greatly with the topic. The more amenable a problem is to tightly controlled empirical observation, the less the apparent relevance. Yet as any topic, including empirical investigation, touches on questions of wider significance or meaning, faith becomes more obviously relevant. So on topics that have the most to do with interpretation and with the larger significance and meaning of humans in relation to each other and the universe, faith-related perspectives will have the most bearing. Such implications are more often apparent in the humanities and social sciences than in the hard sciences” (page 63).

E.F. Schumacher, an economist and thinker, makes the point in his A Guide for the Perplexed that in the modern period, and particularly in the latter part of the twentieth century science has created a cognitive crisis. The problem, Schumacher maintains, is not that scientists have become specialists, but that specialized scientists have become generalists. The problem is that experts in applying the scientific method to restricted areas of study have presumed to make metaphysical pronouncements (“As an astrophysicist I can tell you that the notion of special creation is nonsense! Why? Because such an idea is beyond my scientific resources to demonstrate!”).

In terms of Schumacher’s analysis, we could say that the challenge for a scientist doing Christian scholarship is that she must make up her mind whether she is going to be a Christian doing good (that is, purely empirically investigative) science, leaving the relevance of her work vis a vis the faith untouched (in which case her professional work does not count as Christian scholarship), or whether she is going to enter into the interpretive realm, where her empirical findings are related to a Christian world view. This last choice (engaging in the interpretive
task) is not one for which the scientist is trained. Yet, how can the Christian professor trained in the hard sciences or the social scientist who is trained, after all, as a scientist as well, engage in Christian scholarship? She must construe her scholarship, not in terms of the lone researcher model, but in terms of her Christian academic community. Though this application is my own, Marsden speaks to my last sentence in his chapter “Building Academic Communities” (pages 101-111).

Consider the humanities faculty. They live and move and have their profession in the amphitheater of interpretation. They interpret musical composition, works of art and performances, they unfold the meaning texts. Faith-related perspectives are the sum and substance of their work. Would it be too bold to suggest that a college will be practicing Christian scholarship in direct proportion to the attention its entire faculty gives to the humanities? A recent issue of The Atlantic Monthly (October 2000) features an article on “The Opening of the Evangelical Mind” in which Alan Wolfe refers to Wheaton College as a Christian college that “takes its doctrinal statement seriously.” “Indeed, in order to obtain tenure at Wheaton, faculty members not only must teach and do research but also must write, and have approved, a thirty- to fifty-page paper demonstrating that they can approach their discipline from a Christian perspective” (page 56). These papers are clearly not mere assemblages of data or interpretation at the lower level of tie-ins with the literature, but involve high level interpretation in relation to the Christian faith. This high level interpretation is the bread and butter of the humanities professor. Unless we are willing to segregate our disciplines and despair of relating some topics to the faith, we need a genuine collaboration between professors in the sciences and professors in the humanities in order to practice scholarship that is Christian in substance, respecting the scientific expertise of the science professor and utilizing the interpretive expertise of the humanities faculty. My colleagues in the sciences may (understandably) find my recommendation of collaboration with us in the humanities for Christian scholarship a bit odd. It isn’t, in the broad historical view of the liberal arts. But I will opt for a snatch of deconstruction of current higher education as a briefer way to enhance our practice of Christian scholarship, a deconstruction of the Enlightenment assumption regarding reason as it has shaped our educational praxis.

Second, the implementation of the idea of Christian scholarship will necessitate a deep criticism of the Enlightenment and its continuing impact on the human and on the academic culture. In mild disagreement with Marsden, I will maintain that the impact of the Enlightenment on Christian scholarship is not so much that it altered the academic agenda from a sacred to a secular one. Rather, the impact of the Enlightenment is in the way it altered the means by which we teach and learn. The Enlightenment has altered the way we conceive of our selves and our students academically.

Take ethics as a case in point. I invite my undergraduate philosophy students to view Immanuel Kant as the poster professor of the Enlightenment. In his famous categorical imperative Kant advises us to “act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” It takes no time at all for a class to recognize that Kant’s categorical imperative is the Golden Rule from the Sermon on the Mount with Jesus excised and reason deified in His place. In his Critique of Practical Reason Kant writes that “Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe, the oftener and more steadily we reflect on them: the starry heavens above and the moral law within.” This is a telling revision of Psalm 19, with God and the testimony of His revelation (natural and biblical) excised. As is exemplified in the writings of Kant, the Enlightenment discounted the Means of Grace (God’s Word, Absolution, Baptism, the Lord’s Supper) and simultaneously granted human reason magisterial status. In academia the Enlightenment programmatically and dogmatically preached the omniscience of reason. What fruits has the Enlightenment borne in society and in the academy?

In societal terms, the Enlightenment has left us reaping the whirlwind of an uncivilized western civilization. In my own paraphrase of John Warwick Montgomery: the eighteenth century told us that the Bible was dead, the nineteenth century told us that God is dead, and the twentieth century has shown us that we wish all human beings were dead.
In academic terms, the Enlightenment has disenfranchised human beings from their humanity. Think of how Kant, who grew up as a Lutheran with a recognition that the means of grace are god’s designated methods for converting us to love him with all our heart, soul, mind and strength – and as a consequence, to love our neighbors as our created and redeemed and sanctified selves. Contrast this with Kant’s deliberate move to excise the Redeemer from ethics and to persuade people on the basis of (pure and practical) reason alone.

As Marsden explains in a winsome passage in his book under Cultivating Spiritual Values, “People are seldom convinced simply by arguments, although arguments can be important. Most often in academia people are convinced by a combination of intellect and character” (page 108). This is significant. One of my graduate philosophy professors, Andrew Tallon, a student of Karl Rahner, who was in turn a student of Martin Heidegger, as labored to get across the point expressed in the title of one of his recent books. Knowing, as Tallon elaborates, is a matter of Head and Heart. Thanks to the work of Ken Meyers and the Mars Hill Audio Journal, the work of Michael Polanyi, the physical chemist and philosopher, is coming to the attention of more of us. Polanyi’s work (for example in his Personal Knowing: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy) enables us to debunk to governing principle of scientific attachment in favor of a personal knowing which takes into account the reality and validity both of the object of our study and ourselves as subjects – a personal knowing, rather than a mythical objective knowledge obtained by reason alone.

Still, as significant as this point about intellect and character is – for all of Marsden’s historical analysis that we live in the “postenlightenment,” where the impotence of the Enlightenment to save humankind via human reason has been made manifest – his view of Christian scholarship sounds here and there more like what William James might call a tender-minded Enlightenment view, rather than a distinctively Christian one. Why is this? The outrageous reality behind Christian scholarship is that Christian scholarship is not essentially an idea (however carefully nuanced or fortified); it is an activity. Further, Christian scholarship is not just any old activity, but activity guided and informed by God acting through the means of grace. Christian scholarship is scholarship that lives and moves and has its being in Christ, not in “Christianity.” Christian scholarship depends upon the articulation of the living relationship which the scholar has with Christ Himself in terms of her area of scholarship.

Third, the practice of Christian scholarship must be Christocentric. Jesus, not Christianity, is the alpha and the omega of Christian scholarship. Though this reality can be marginalized in the theory of an academic book, it cannot be marginalized in the concreteness of a professor’s life at a Christian college. Different teleology, remember? Further, this relationship with Christ is mediated by God according to the means He has instituted, not through the models and methods we humans have contrived. We need to remember that, in diametric opposition to Enlightenment thinking, truth is discovered, not socially constructed – not constructed, even by top-notch scholars who are in the Christian faith.

A few years ago, at a Society of Christian Philosophers conference, a keynote reactor to our topic, “God and Evil,” was introduced as “the finest Christian gentleman it has ever been my privilege to know.” When the speaker came to the podium he explained good naturally, “Actually, I prefer to describe myself as a genial atheist.” It does not seem good to me to develop a theory of Christian scholarship by means of a via negativa, by means of an its-not-secular-scholarship explanation. Nor does Marsden overtly take this tact. He has a chapter entitled “Positive Contributions of Theological Context.” He certainly does not reduce “Christian” to a near-synonym for “nice” as did that speaker at the SCP conference.

But neither am I satisfied that “Christian” in his treatment of Christian scholarship is robust enough to qualify as Christian, rather than, say, religious scholarship. This is the problem with bifurcating “Christian” into “Catholic” and “Protestant.” Marsden does not take account of all Christians who are engaged in scholarship. To go by the book, we are to believe that all Christian scholarship that is being produced is from Catholic or Protestant (read as “Evangelical”) professors. Just as there is no use of the wisdom from Christian poets for The Outrageous Idea – a disappointing omission since Marsden is so facile in his use of other literary sources (surely T.S. Eliot and Richard
Wilbur, for example, have something to offer regarding the synthetic, integrative aspect of Christian scholarship) – there is no recognition of Lutheran scholarship.

Perhaps this is because Lutheran scholarship tends to be too paradoxical in its insistence on the continuous application of law and gospel and too critical of generic theology. I’m thinking of Robert Benne’s *The Paradoxical Vision: A Public Theology for the Twenty-first Century* (1995, Augsburg Fortress). In discussing the Lutheran view of history, for example, Benne refers to “the error of Reformed views” that open history “to the possibility of salvation through political or social transformation” and concludes, in part, that sometimes “confusion of law and gospel does not lead to the exclusion of persons from the gospel, but rather exclusion of the gospel of Christ as God’s uniquely chosen way of salvation” (pages 91-93). I think that we may have in Marsden’s book an academic counterpart to this Reformed view of history.

It is Benne who has me thinking that the real impact of the Enlightenment on us does not lie in its agenda, but in the way it regularizes and mandates the means by which we must operate to qualify as scholars. Benne writes, “In fact, the values of the Enlightenment were rational distillations and translations of Christian values. The Enlightenment approached the Heavenly Throne not through revelation, as the Christian church had claimed, but through reason. The early intellectuals of the Enlightenment thought they were doing ‘natural theology’ – discerning God’s eternal laws by rational means. Reason and science, rather than revelation and theology, were to become the guiding instruments of a new chapter in human history, a chapter that would lead to progress toward a heavenly city built here on earth. The ethos of American life at its earliest inception was a combination of Protestant – mostly Calvinistic Puritanism – and Enlightenment themes. ... This ‘righteous empire’ was nurtured by the great mainstream Protestant traditions – the Puritans, who became Congregationalists; the Presbyterians; the Episcopalians; and later Methodists and Baptists. ... Enlightened persons, many Christians among them, dealt with the explosiveness of religious differences by keeping those differences distant from public life. There is still a modicum of sense in such a position – but only a modicum. ... [Leaders within the religious traditions] often capitulated before the forces of secularization by supplanting their own vision’s insights with those more acceptable to the secular despisers of religion. Psychology, sociology, philosophy, and particularly politics provide more ‘relevant’ substitutes for the tired offerings of theology” (pages 16-17). This brings us back to the humanities, and in particular to theology. But Marsden does not apply theology to his interpretation of Christian scholarship.

With the idea of Christian scholarship sketched out by Marsden there comes an invitation for us Lutheran scholars to enter the conversation. What is needed to make this a discussion of Christian rather than religious scholarship is the addition of voices schooled in the (outrageous) difference between the ministerial and the magisterial uses of reason, voices that are not slurried by the hangover of the Enlightenment. What is needed is scholarship on the topic of scholarship from thinkers with roots somewhere other than in Rome and Geneva – say, with roots in Wittenberg.