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David W. Robinson
George Fox University

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Abstract

"For though we live in the world, we do not wage war as the world does. The weapons we fight with are not the weapons of the world. On the contrary, they have divine power to demolish strongholds. We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." II Corinthians 10:3-5 (NIV).

Those of us who have spent many years in Christian education, presumably engaged in thinking as Christians about the issues facing each of us in our academic disciplines, are familiar with a fundamental challenge: how do we take our faith in Christ and our scholarly work and fuse them into one? What is the way to true unity in Christ for our disciplines and our minds? When the apostle Paul says that "…we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ," what does that mean for the Christian teacher and scholar?

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Book Review: Paul D. Spears & Steven R. Loomis. Education for Human Flourishing: A Christian Perspective.

Reviewed by Dr. David W. Robinson, Adjunct Professor, D.B.A. program, George Fox University.

Paul D. Spears & Steven R. Loomis. Education for Human Flourishing: A Christian Perspective. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2009. 251 pp. $22.00 (paperback). ISBN-10: 0830828125; ISBN-13: 978-0830828128.

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Sad to say, the answer to that last question is all too often, "not much." As Harry Blamires observed rather bluntly in his book The Christian Mind decades ago, "There is no longer a Christian mind." Christian thinkers and scholars like Mark Noll, George Marsden, and Dallas Willard have pointed to the need for world-class Christian thought in various disciplines, a development which would allow the Lord's people to reclaim positions of leadership within academics and society in general. As it stands, many academic disciplines are yielded to non-Christian thought by default, since so many Christians within those fields practice a form of operational secularism by dividing their faith from the epistemics and practice of their academic specialty. They do this to appear more credible to their peers, confining their belief in Christ to a pietistic dungeon while they continue to teach and to act in the classroom as if Jesus had never been born. Such dichotomists hide their light under a basket, and extend the darkness by opting out of any effort to engage the possibilities of Christ within education. As a result, many are left with the impression that the proper answer to the question, "What does Jesus Christ have to say about this subject?" is simply, "Nothing."

In its new "Christian Worldview Integration Series," Series Editors Francis J. Beckwith and J.P. Moreland of InterVarsity Press announce their intent to fight the dichotomy of faith and reason in the academic world. Aiming their new publications squarely at college students who may not understand the need for the integration of faith and thought, Beckwith and Moreland address themselves to their audience directly in the Series Preface to this book: "We are passionate about helping you learn about and become good at integrating your Christian convictions with the issues and ideas in your college major or career." (p. 9). They give "seven reasons why integration matters," ranging from "The Bible's teachings are true" to "Integration is crucial to the current worldview struggle and the contemporary crisis of knowledge." They call the readers of their series to integrate faith and reason in three ways as they wrestle with the intellectual powers of this world: by direct defense, polemics, and theistic explanation. Non-biblical modalities and "isms" are explicitly rejected, including evolutionism, scientific naturalism, and postmodernism. Instead, they call upon Christian scholarship to cease the dichotomization of faith and reason, and to become

proclaimers ambassadors of the wisdom of God in Christ (Colossians 2:2-3) in their work. Such compartmentalization is common; the series editors respond with an emphatic, "This has got to stop."

Education for Human Flourishing is one of two new books in this series, responding to the editorial call. In it, Spears and Loomis seek to integrate faith and learning by "[r]eflecting on the efficacy of institutionalized educational standards in light of a foundational commitment to the Christian faith…." (p. 31). At heart is the challenge of the overwhelmingly non-Christian (indeed, often militantly pagan) worldview and stance of the modern educational establishment at all levels, which seeks to marginalize and then eliminate a Christian worldview from all significant educational discourse. The response of Spears and Loomis is a work in which they seek to "revive and ground a perennial philosophy of education that integrates essential tenets of the Christian faith." (p. 35). Of even greater interest to this reviewer, however, is their stated intent to achieve a very significant theoretical and practical prize.

This book makes a case that the complex educational good is not sustainable in the present technical environment of schooling and higher education. This technical environment within the educational field limits information and knowledge that makes us most human. (p. 35).

The authors see a perennialist philosophy framed by the Christian tradition in the liberal arts as being the proper foundation for truly humane education, one that will stand for the mind of Christ in a culture that is structurally hostile to Christian truth. They address their work to those who are entering the profession of teaching, scholars who are addressing the issues that the authors outline, and undergraduate and graduate students who are commencing their studies in education.

The book itself cleaves easily into two main sections. Chapters 1-3 address the theological and philosophical framework of what it means to be human, and what one's worldview has to do with how one teaches. The section half, chapters 4-6, outlines the world-system attitudes and forces that seek to conform teachers and educational practice into technical modalities, instead of seeking the truly humane via the liberal arts, mediated by Christian teachers who truly understand and seek to model the mind of Christ in their disciplines. This schema is logical and easy for the reader to follow.

The first chapter starts out with a consideration of anthropology in its larger Biblical sense: a study of the nature and purpose of humankind as created by the Lord. Education is ineluctably connected to this realm, and so many questions pertaining to the practice of teaching flow from what one believes humanity to be in the first place. Non-Christian thought generally imbibes at the broken cistern of evolutionism for its explanations of the origin, nature and purpose of the human race, with enormous implications for all aspects of life. Christian thinkers and teachers drink at the well of living water that God has given His people through the scriptures and the Holy Spirit of the Lord; again, the implications are cosmic. Therefore, as Christian thinkers Spears and Loomis go immediately in their writing to a consideration of the fundamental truths addressed by theology and philosophy as the proper underpinning of our theory and practice as educators. Their approach is balanced, with both faith and reason seen as coordinate domains for a full and mature view of the Lord's creation. "It has been tempting, historically, to abandon either rationality for revelation or revelation for rationality, but either extreme ends in an inability to access reality." (p. 43)

This section is followed by a rather extended discussion of the nature of man (a body and biological life only, as evolutionists, for example, would say; or body and soul as Christians and other religious groups would maintain?); clearly this anthropological discussion (not often to be had in colleges of education in America today) is of great significance for educational practitioners. The authors then shift to a consideration of teleology in classical non-Christian and Biblical Christian thought, with the proper end of man being summarized from both vantage points. The limitations of the classical approach, as great as it is in the work of men like Socrates, Plato, or Aristotle, are clearly revealed by the contrast to the glory of the risen Christ's Kingdom of God and His church. And the only anthropology that truly reveals the nature of humankind is to be found in one founded upon a Biblical consideration of both theological

and philosophical truths applied to the act of teaching and learning. Otherwise, Christian educators will be no more than those who simply hew to the standards of the state as the summum bonum of educational possibility, and thus behave just like the ones who have no hope. And there is so much more that is possible within the realm of the mind of Christ.

In chapter two, Spears and Loomis reflect on the history of education with an eye to understanding how higher education arrived at its modern dead end.

Broadly speaking, modern education lacks a unified purpose or goal to direct its curricular and pedagogical commitments…. Education is no longer understood in terms of training that enables us to pursue a true conception of reality…. Today, education is not so much about truth or morality as it is about tolerance and contributing to the nation's economic growth. (pp. 69-70)

Modern American secularism has shoveled dirt onto what it presumes to be the coffin of "religion," assuming that it has nothing to offer our educational discourse. Considerations of elemental philosophical categories (e.g., epistemology, metaphysics, ontology, and ethics) are considered to be anachronisms by many, or, worse yet in many cases, are "deconstructed" by postmodernists who declare them to be little more than western conventions of no transcendent ("What's that?!") value. Education and thought drowns in the resultant immanence. Spears and Loomis reintroduce these categories to educational discourse. They then follow with a brief outline of some key movements and thinkers in philosophy, and how modern corrosive atheism stands in a cul de sac of its own making, mocking religion in general and Christ in particular (e.g., Richard Dawkins and his ilk) as useless encrustations on the body of humanity. Science has been replaced by scientism, and secularism in its many forms stands arrayed for battle with the Lord Jesus Christ and His people for the minds and hearts of humankind; the Christian teacher must prepare himself or herself for the conflict.

In chapter three, the focus is shifted to the role of epistemology in education. Epistemology may be succinctly defined with a simple question that I have used with my students many times over the years: How do we know, and how do we know that we know? Spears and Loomis hereby address the question of knowing, and what is worth knowing, and assessing how we know that what we seek to do in our education is worthwhile – and if it is, actually occurring when we teach. Drawing heavily on the writings of C.S. Lewis, they re-frame education in terms of the real existence of truth, the possibility of attaining a genuine knowledge of it, and the transcendent and non-relative results that knowing the truth can bring to our educational practice. They explore belief, truth, justification and logic, and their implications if pursued as truly existent ends, instead of merely transient conventions.

Christian teachers must understand that they must embody the faithful pursuit of the truth, among all the other things of excellence (cf., Philippians 4:8), and must not behave in their professional practice as if there were no God. This will help their students to grow in their faithful pursuit of their possibilities in Christ. "Through this commitment we can enable our students to fulfill their true purpose — to be ministers of God and his kingdom purposes." (p. 124)

So far, so good.

And then I came to chapter four.

True confession time: Up until this point in Education for Human Flourishing, I was enjoying the reading, but was also thinking that most all of it looked quite familiar. Worldview analysis, surveys of philosophy of one level of sophistication or another, and calls to thinking Biblically about such things have been a staple of my reading for decades now. I had tentatively categorized it as a well written and interesting blend of well-known concepts, suitable for entry-level use in Christian higher education. But this impression was blasted abruptly by the first page of this section of the book.

When I began to read chapter four – "The Information Economy of Education" – I found myself sitting up in my chair within seconds, and smiling with the recognition of a providential convergence of thought and research: Spears and Loomis, on the one hand, and myself, on the other.

The second sentence of this chapter states, "The next three chapters are an exercise in the ontology of education as a social institution." (p. 125) Indeed! "No philosophy of education is complete without an accounting of the reality of education as a social institution…. They are 'hidden persuaders' that affect and influence the choices and decision making of all the participants." (p. 125) And then:

While we do not provide the "deep structure" of education in this particular book, the next chapters specifically show (1) how any why many of the background presuppositions discussed in chapters one through three have great difficulty in reaching institutional agendas, (2) how and why many Christian educationists compartmentalize knowledge and faith commitments, (3) how and why education has tended in the direction of least cost, and (4) what might be done about it. (p. 125)

Well now! This immediately struck me as extraordinarily significant. In a moment, Spears and Loomis had shifted ground, and had moved to cosmic territory. Here they begin an exploration of modern civilization's high-velocity procrustean flow to the technical, the collective, and the universal. In the process our culture – education most definitely included – has shed the richness and complexity of human life and learning, and has replaced it with a streamlined mush, a kind of institutional "cheese food." The four dimensional has flattened to the two dimensional. In the place of real learning and attainment, we have mere certification, and credentialization has elbowed aside critical thought and higher reason. Degrees are sought as tickets to economic opportunity and advancement, and not to intellectual achievement or as a way of practicing the life of the mind. My flame of recognition occurred because Spears and Loomis' work parallels my own analysis of this fundamental problem which I have been developing since 2002. (For a brief example, see my article "Wheels within wheels: Some thoughts about the industrialization of American higher education in the ICCTE Journal, Vol. 2, No. 1, at https://icctejournal.org/issues/v2i1/v2i1-robinson/.) The critique that I have been developing from the vector of the historical and the linguistic, they have developed from the vantage point of the sociological and the economic – with all of us converging on the theological, philosophical, and educational implications of our work for the mind of Christ in the domain of higher education.

It is quite evident that Spears and Loomis grasp the heart of the institutional problem. In modern American higher education, the drive for increased scale is also driving what the authors term the "information economy" of that setting. "Information" in their terminology is the general body of knowledge that is sanctioned and pursued within institutional boundaries. In an extremely important passage, they define what they mean by "information economy" quite clearly.

Put simply, an information economy is how participants within a social institution like education acquire and use information, how they make decisions, how they act on information, and how that information is affected by the formal and informal rules of the game. In this sense an information economy is a property of the institutional environment (this is its ontological status). Information has direction, breadth and depth; it has quantitative and qualitative, theoretical and applied attributes. There is a fundamental, law-like principle of information in the complex good of education: education goods tend to exchange in proper proportion to their information content. (p. 146; italics in the original)

In fact, the entire discussion on pages 129-169 is of great theoretical significance. The authors outline the nature of the sociological problem and make clear its relationship to the educational enterprise. And they do so with a groundbreaking terminology that links the economic and the sociological in an extraordinary way. At the heart of their analysis and evaluation is the realization that information, the coin-of-the-realm for all educational institutions, has been bifurcated into low-cost and high-cost categories by the lust for academic expansion. (In my own writings, I describe this process as academic industrialization.) Low-cost information is that which is universal, standardized, stripped of richness and complexity, personality and mystery. Increasingly technical means are used to deliver it to ever-larger audiences at ever-higher speeds, replacing the leisure of reflection with a frantic drive for credentials. High-cost information is

highly complex, personal, filled with passion and the unknown, and all the possibilities that the Lord gave to humankind. Spears and Loomis call low-cost information "universal information," while high-cost information is "particular information." The drive to academic expansion at all levels is first forcing the division of information into these two categories, and then compelling the trade-off of low-cost information as opposed to its high-cost alternative. ("The information that is associated with the local and individual is traded off for that which can be standardized and governed efficiently by the few from a distance." p. 168) The implications of this soulless transaction are mind boggling: all education is being reduced to a high-efficiency, lowest common denominator, centralized and collectivist model of mere credentials, delivered via technical cleverness that alienates students as it eliminates all possibility of excellence, quality, real community, and mindedness. Spears and Loomis argue that this massive loss to our civilization is actually a spillover cost of "low-cost" information, and that "low-cost" information is therefore hiding the true cost of its procrustean expansionism to our culture and our society. Vulnerable stakeholders within American democracy (e.g., Latinos, p. 150) pay the price of "low-cost" information that has stripped away most values and possibilities; but this is also true of just about everyone within our civilization. Who can escape the gravity well of academic industrialization?

All of the truly transcendent, creative, and rich dimensions that our Creator wove into the fabric of His creation – with humanity at its peak – are all low efficiency, high-cost in their exploration. We cannot be truly human, and genuinely humane, without them. And yet our current information economy has become monopolized by the institutional bias towards low-cost information – again, what I have termed "industrialization." Furthermore, this bias not only prefers low-cost information, it marginalizes and seeks to exile all other approaches. The power to standardize is the power to destroy; the current academic bureaucracy at all levels seeks to defend the status quo, enforces the movement to mass scale and centralized controls, and compels the marginalization of all dissenting worldviews. Secularization in our schools, colleges and universities is simply the expulsion of spirituality, of the transcendent Creator, in toto. This automatically impoverishes the entire information economy of our republic, defrauding all citizens of the right to refuse the secular, and imposes a hidden tyranny on the minds and souls of men. And it does so in the name of a "public education" that has actually become a civil religion, and under the aegis of the doctrine of the "separation of church and state" that is actually the church being trivialized and ejected by the state. Even Christian teachers often conform rather than transform their minds (cf., Romans 12:2) in response to this brute environmental fact. As a result, we end up with educational dichotomists, teachers who profess Christ on Sunday but who are operational unbelievers in their classrooms and curriculum. There is almost no prospect of any other choice in the current information economy. The authors point out that any attempt to reform American education that does not take into account the information economy has already failed to understand the dynamics that produced our inimical institutions in the first place.

In chapter five, Spears and Loomis go on to cover social ethics in the educational institution. In this important section, they go on to make explicit the link between academics and industrialization that I mentioned above. The rise of "management science," Taylorism, Raymond Callahan's classic examination of "the cult of efficiency" in K-12 education, the corrosive effect that the "social sciences" and their alleged "neutrality" and "objectivity" have had, and the utilitarianism and pragmatism of Dewey and his followers, are all paraded before the reader. In their wake academic industrialization accelerated, with Christian revelation and thought and the liberal arts becoming deprecated, then marginalized. Nowadays, they are scarcely allowed to enter public discourse at all.

As a result, liberal education is now a minor subset within technical and professional programs; secularization is the assumed mindset; all moral/character education has declined to panegyrics for mere "diversity" (itself an attribute, and not a value at all); scientism sets the standard for all things; and relativism is the only absolute. The prospect for a rich and complex educational environment in such a toxic setting is nil.

Education for Human Flourishing concludes with chapter six's consideration of "Issues and Questions for Educational Practice, Policy, and Leadership." Having laid out its analysis and its theoretical structure, Spears and Loomis outline some possible lines for future inquiry, research, theory, and practice. First, they call their readers as Christian thinkers to consider the call to develop "a body of ethical and religious knowledge that operates within the institutions of knowledge." (p. 220) Second, and echoing Dallas Willard, they exhort their readers to "redeem reason" within the educational domain. (p. 220) Third, they point to the thought and writings of C.S. Lewis as a fruitful wellspring and model for those seeking to integrate Christian faith and learning. (pp. 221-222) Fourth, they renew the call for Christian educators to be "salt and light" and constantly seek to integrate their worldview with all aspects of their life, including their teaching.

They go on to encourage Christian educators to embrace their prophetic roles as (that often abused term) "change agents," seeking to redeem institutional agendas, challenge deadening practices and the mindless pursuit of the merely technical, resist the tide of low-cost information and academic industrialization, support the re-establishment of the liberal arts, and generally embrace what I have called "the blessings of inefficiency." Christians should shed their go-with-the-flow dichotomous thinking and operational paganism, and seek to fully integrate their faith in our Lord Jesus Christ with their calling and their academic discipline. Only in this way can Christians reclaim leadership within the very educational precincts that are trying to euthanize them, and become the influential public scholars and intellectuals that they ought to possess by rite of passage – and by right of the new birth. Instead of an intellectual and theoretical void in our schools and colleges of education, there ought to be a vigorous and critical (cf., Proverbs 27:17) Christian community of agapé and brotherly engagement, setting a godly example of what the mind of Christ can do to transform the world until He returns.

After all, as James (cf., James 3:1) reminds us, we who teach and lead will incur a stricter judgment before the Lord who loves us, redeemed us, and has called us to teach. Can there be any higher or more urgent motivation?

In conclusion, I am compelled to pay Education for Human Flourishing a real compliment: this is one of those all-too-rare books of real theoretical significance. Spears and Loomis have broken very significant new ground in constructing a framework for understanding the modern tendency towards technical culture, academic industrialization and the loss of the humane in education, and they have done so in a book that is both well written and highly engaging. They have developed a new fusion of economic concept, philosophical and theological insight, and sociological analysis that is a very powerful tool for understanding the loss of personal richness and complexity in our educational institutions at all levels. It dovetails nicely with the research that I've done on the historical elements of academic industrialization, with each line of research and writing supporting the other. (It also links potently to work by such diverse thinkers as Jacques Ellul, Ivan Illich, Raymond Callahan, and William Jeynes.) In doing so, they have generated a new terminology that illuminates important concepts, and helps other Christian thinkers to understand our current cultural and institutional dilemma. Furthermore, it is evident to me that their interpretive framework will can cross domain boundaries; I am sure that the application of the general information economy model will explain institutional behavior in other realms.

If you only read one book this year on Christian education, I would say that Education for Human Flourishing has to be it. I give it my highest recommendation, both for my colleagues, as well as for use as a vitally significant textbook in teacher education programs at all levels.