

Book Reviews

Spears, Paul D., and Steven R. Loomis. *Education for Human Flourishing: A Christian Perspective*, Christian Worldview Integration Series. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009. 251 pp., paperback, \$22.00.

Review by Matthew Emile Vaughan

As a theologically trained educator working in the public school system, I often struggle to integrate my theological convictions into my professional life. It was, therefore, refreshing to see that Paul Spears and Steven Loomis have given Christian educators a framework within which to address that integration in their new *Education for Human Flourishing: A Christian Perspective*. Their goal was to articulate a robust and apologetically Christian philosophy of education that seeks to lay a foundation for teaching within the K-16 context.¹ The book discusses both public and private academic institutions, but my review focuses mainly on its theses for public education.

Series editors Francis J. Beckwith and J.P. Moreland begin the volume with a preface to The Christian Worldview Integration Series (*Education for Human Flourishing* is the first volume in that series). In this provocative essay, they challenge some of the traditional methods by which faith interacts with varying academic contexts. The preface argues for a bold integration of religious ideals into academic enterprises, articulating seven “reasons why integration matters.” Beckwith and Moreland base several of their reasons, of course, on their reading of the Bible. Other reasons had to do with the nature of discipleship, the troubling secular/sacred divide, and today’s “crisis of knowledge.” The theme of reason permeates through the series preface just as much as integration. The editors examine related issues like argumentation, apologetics, and being objectively “right.” There is, as is so often the case with evangelical writers, a marked discontentedness with the postmodernity that they see plaguing the academic milieu of the 21st century.²

Structurally, the six chapters of *Education for Human Flourishing* are essentially divided into two major sections.³ In chapters 1-3, Spears and Loomis establish the ontological, historical, and epistemological framework upon which they build the theses of chapters 4-6. They devote these last chapters to the more tangible aspects of economics, ethics, and policy.⁴

In chapter one, Spears and Loomis begin by asserting, primarily from Plato and Aristotle, that reason is the defining attribute of humanity. In the bulk of the first chapter, however, they seek to defend an ontology based upon

¹Francis J. Beckwith and J.P. Moreland argue that “The central purpose of the book is to revive and ground a perennial philosophy of education that integrates essential tenets of Christianity” (25-26).

²Their arguments are particularly problematic because they never stop to define postmodernism carefully, frequently making the (all too familiar—and unhelpful) argument that it is simply the rejection of truth. Never do they consider some of the benefits of postmodernity for Christianity.

³Judging by the shift in writing style and references to their respective research projects, it seems apparent that Spears was primarily responsible for the first three chapters, and that Loomis was primarily responsible for the last three.

⁴These last chapters are “an exercise in the ontology of education as a social institution” (125).

substance dualism (that humans have both body and soul), insinuating that it is the “Christian” option (over and against physicalism, which sees no distinction between body and soul). Chapter Two is a cursory intellectual history of the West that begins by summarizing four principle categories of philosophy (metaphysics, logic, epistemology, and ethics). The authors then move into a summary of the thought of several prominent intellectual figures: Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas, Newton, Locke, Hume, and Kant. (There is not, however, much information on the history of education or educational practice.) In the first section of Chapter Three (on epistemology) they unpack the phrase “knowledge is true belief.” A homiletical treatment of the limits of modern science and secular epistemology follows. Divine revelation (presumably through the Bible), for Spears and Loomis, is “a fundamental source of truth,” and is the first step in bridging the epistemological gap that prohibits humanity from knowing its end.

Chapters 1-3 close by arguing that the work of past intellectuals falls short simply because those thinkers did not include a Christological element to their ideas. Although in some ways a helpful refresher on Western thought, the short treatments of the issues in this section offer nothing new. The generalized history and non-technical language in these chapters makes them seem like an undergraduate-level survey.

The fourth chapter is one of the unique contributions of the book, dealing with what the authors call “The Information Economy of Education.” It is, by far, the book’s most valuable chapter. Here Spears and Loomis enumerate the economic ramifications of education, beginning with a biting critique of the opacity prominent in the educational system. They interact with Martin Buber’s “philosophy of dialogue” on a number of fronts in this chapter, arguing that the highly standardized (“technical” or “New Essentialist”) educational model currently in vogue is fundamentally flawed because it engenders the “I-It” mentality.⁵ The theme of an information economy dominates the remainder of the chapter. The authors suggest that “the direction of any social institution lies in the orientation of information maintained by that institution.” Appropriately, they frame the discussion as it relates to justice; they compare education reform to the civil rights movement. While certainly not an exhaustive discussion of economies of information,⁶ this chapter was helpfully critical, yet ambitiously optimistic. It leaves one with the feeling that what is truly needed in the U.S. education system is for Christian educators to envision a new economy of information, one that takes the needs of the poor into consideration as well as the needs of the state.

Chapter Five deals with ethics. Here Spears and Loomis begin by contrasting the ends and goals of industrial (business-oriented) and post-

⁵See Buber, *I-Thou* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1970).

⁶For supplemental reading, see also Jacob P. Rodriguez, Steven R. Loomis and Joseph G. Weeres, *The Cost of Institutions: Information and Freedom in Expanding Economies* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007) and Jacob Rodriguez and Steven Loomis, “A New View of Institutions, Human Capital and Market Standardization,” *Education, Knowledge & Economy* 1.1 (2007): 93-105.

industrial (people-oriented) education. They contend that, on a policy level, modern education is ontologically incomplete because it does not take seriously the qualitative elements in human nature. They argue against seeing education as serving merely a utilitarian function, which they claim leads to “an ethics of accountancy.” They suggest that it is the Christian responsibility to model better ways of living, critique prevalent secular modes of thinking, and present “a time-tested architecture of moral thought.” In the latter half of this chapter, they critique several current ethical philosophies: scientific determinism, pluralism, consumerism, and positivism. They conclude by advocating moral education (based on natural law) in schools,⁷ and claim that it is the responsibility of the Christian educator.⁸

Chapter Six, although theoretical in nature, has to do with praxis and policy.⁹ Going along with their thesis of reforming the economy of information in the U.S., Spears and Loomis seek to increase the amount and flow of information in all academic contexts—advancing the educational system as a whole. Arguing against rote standardization and uniformity, they advocate a “decentralized” form of public education (facilitating the pursuit of individual interests). It is their thesis, refreshingly, that Christian educators should become what they term “public intellectuals,” people who (following Giroux¹⁰) “deconstruct centers of illegitimate power” and develop a liberating politic for education. They argue for rethinking the roles that Christian educators have played in public education, embracing J. E. Schwartz’s “Golden-Rule Truth Seeker” model,¹¹ which makes Christian educators non-sectarian, non-evangelistic solicitors of intellectual honesty—all the while seeking to know God through the educational enterprise.¹² They perceptively critique Christian colleges of education, and their failure to set an intellectual standard for ideology, policy, and practice.

To my mind, *Education for Human Flourishing* suffered from three significant weaknesses. First, the role of faith (evangelicalism) within the theses of the book was often tenuous. Other than the implicit and explicit argument that the Bible should take epistemic primacy, there is little that is uniquely Christian about the integration for which Beckwith and Moreland call in the series preface. Academics from other religious traditions might make similar arguments. Spears and Loomis also fall under the same critique in the body of

⁷The issues related to the teaching of morality are, admittedly, problematic for Christian educators—especially in the public school system. Many questions still remain: in what context should our society teach morality? What is the distinction between moral education and moral indoctrination? Is “flourishing” about creating “a universal public morality,” as Spears and Loomis suggest?

⁸This is similar to the educational philosophy of Pepperdine’s Carrie Birmingham. See her “Preparing the Soil: The Mission of Christian Teachers in Public Schools,” *Stone-Campbell Journal* 12 (Fall, 2009): 193-206.

⁹The title of the chapter is “*Issues and Questions for Educational Practice, Policy, and Leadership*,” not “*Practical Solutions for Educational Practice, Policy, and Leadership*.”

¹⁰Henry A. Giroux, *Teachers as Intellectuals* (New York: Bergin and Garvey, 1988).

¹¹J. E. Schwartz, “Christians Teaching in the Public Schools: What Are Some Options?” *Christian Scholar’s Review* 26.3 (1997): 293-305. See specifically pp. 301-304.

¹²They claim that “the point of academic work is to understand God and his purposes” (121).

the book. Although it was an addendum to several critiques of other scholars, Christian theology (much less Christology) was not central to a number of their arguments. The authors insinuate that they believe in the "truth" and "all-sufficiency" of the Bible, but their treatment of biblical texts was superficial, leaving the serious student of the Bible lacking exegetical guidance. The authors also gave insubstantial biblical and academic support for labeling their dualistic ontology as "Christian."

Second, there were several crucial issues that Spears and Loomis neglected to discuss. One was the lack of clear definitions to several terms upon which they based their theses: they never systematically defined the terms "flourishing"¹³ or "Christocentric,"¹⁴ which they use frequently. They glaringly omitted developmental psychology from their prescriptions, without which it is impossible to articulate an ideology that takes adolescents (and undergraduates, for that matter) seriously on their own terms. Also, they never clarified how a teacher, school, or district might assess its progress toward the goal of flourishing. Also, the rarity with which they referenced or responded to other Christian philosophies of education was disappointing. Lastly, given that public education is a service of the state, a comprehensive philosophy of education must take into consideration the preservation of state goals: responsible citizenry, democracy, etc.; their book does not.

My third critique hinges around a much larger issue: Spears and Loomis did not take seriously the practicalities of reform.¹⁵ Their opinions (although lucid and brilliant) were often unrealistic about classroom life in a public educational setting. They did not address some of the more substantial problems facing schools: overcrowding, violence, insufficient funding, low graduation rates, tense district/union relationships, etc. Equally important, they were unrealistic about the issue of teacher accountability: they argued against institutions like NCATE and WASC without offering clear alternatives.

In spite of these weaknesses, the book does have an immense value in that it framed the educational experience for a confessional audience. Dale Goldsmith offered three reasons why this book is beneficial to the Christian educator;¹⁶ I will structure my praises around his and briefly supplement his observations with my own. First, the book successfully integrates Christian ideals into the majority of its proposals. As the series preface indicated, Quentin Smith noted that Christian intellectuals have tended to separate their faith from

¹³They seem to use the terms "success" and "happiness" as synonyms, but they never define the word beyond that.

¹⁴They claim that they want to bring Christocentric knowledge to popular educational theory, but do not articulate exactly what that knowledge is, or what makes it uniquely Christological. In a recent review Dale Goldsmith also noted the lack of a clear definition for this loaded term. See his review of *Education for Human Flourishing*, by Paul D. Spears and Steven R. Loomis, *Christian Scholar's Review* 39.3 (Spring 2010): 350-353.

¹⁵Goldsmith also noted several of these impracticalities in his review. To his mind, they did not "dampen [his] enthusiasm" (353), but to my mind they must.

¹⁶Goldsmith, 352.

their research and writing.¹⁷ Spears and Loomis show that academic integrity and religious confession are certainly not mutually exclusive entities. Second, the book is thoroughly informative as to the myriad issues at play in the U.S. educational system. Spears and Loomis enumerate the macro issues of education, and argue effectively on behalf of reform against standardization, credentialing, and the demise of the university. Although their suggestions for reform are incomplete, they speak explicitly (and rightly) about the inefficiencies of the "technical" model of education. Third, the book "philosophizes" the matter at hand. At its core this is a book of philosophy, not merely a book about education: the authors are trained philosophers who seek to use the established category of philosophy of education to begin conversations for reform. For Christian philosophers, especially those considering employment in the field of education, this book is a valuable resource.

Greatest of all (and not part of Goldsmith's review), they argue that Christian educators should initiate confessional educational theory and practice in the U.S.¹⁸ This is something Christian educators have neglected to do in both colleges of education and the public school system. This book is a call for Christian educators to consider their faith as a framework upon which they build their curricula. The book is also, perhaps more than anything, a call to rethink the nature of Christian influence within the K-16 educational system.

As required reading, therefore, in a class dealing with the foundations of curriculum (or, even better, philosophy of education) at a Christian university, this book would be a fruitful conversation partner. This is especially true for graduate students, for whom this book would be intellectually demanding (the philosophic terminology in the latter half of the book might disorient an undergraduate audience).

As I conclude this lengthy review, I offer a few questions for further inquiry and reflection. What, specifically, does Christology have to say to public education? Would theology (over and against philosophy) provide an alternate framework for effective integration, practical application (ministry), and attention to justice? How do the ecumenical and political commitments necessary to ministry through the state affect the confessional integrity of Christian educators? What is the role of the church in the education process? Until a philosophy of education can effectively link theory to realistic practice, Christian educators will represent peripheral views. Perhaps when we address these issues coherently and practically, Christian educators will finally take part in the race to influence public thought. Spears and Loomis are waiting at lap one.

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¹⁷Quentin Smith, "The Metaphysics of Naturalism," *Philo* 4.2 (2001), 1. See pp. 26-27 in *Education for Human Flourishing*.

¹⁸They argue that, "...Christian educators simply have the ontological and epistemological right to inform their theory and practice in ways that are Christian, just as critical pedagogues have the right to inform their theory and practice in ways that are Marxian" (222-223).