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Education, Religion and the Common Good: Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation About Religion's Role in Our Shared Life

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Martin E. Marty and Jonathan Moore;
Education, Religion and the Common Good: Advancing a
Distinctly American Conversation about religion's role in
our shared life [*San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000*].

Reviewed by David M. Johnstone

The title of this book has captured the essence of many conversations on college campuses. It hints at pertinent discussions that have circulated among Christians in higher education for some time. Because it is written by Martin Marty and published by Jossey-Bass, the reader can assume they will read an insightful and perceptive volume. Marty is a sound and wise observer of American Christianity. He has reflected deeply on issues that affect America and its people. Not hesitant to articulate his thoughts on a myriad of issues, Marty is a thinker who assists in shaping questions and challenges individuals to delve deeper into the issues they are facing. The publisher, Jossey-Bass, is a leader in tackling topics of education and leadership and typically provides extremely helpful resources for educators. Joining Jonathan Moore, they produced two volumes that stand alone, but compliment each another. The first, *Politics, Religion and the Common Good*, explores the importance of those with faith taking an active role in making and assessing the impact of political decisions. It explores the implications of mixing religion with politics for the community or "common" good. The other volume, *Education, Religion and the Common Good*, asks where education, religion and community should intersect. Conventional wisdom suggests that Marty and Moore may be venturing into an extremely volatile area. Their perspective is that those of faith and religion need to and should reflect, discuss and enlighten institutional, political and civic discussions on education. This small volume is meant as a primer for Americans of faith to reflect and act upon the implications of educational concerns facing their campuses, communities and nation. Religion and education do not naturally come together in American thinking. However, as Marty writes: "... where does religion not come into this? You will not get very far into any educational issues without somehow bumping into religious themes" (p. 23). For those followers of Jesus who have rooted themselves in higher education and care about education in general, the implications of this "big picture" conversation are important.

The volume begins with setting parameters for the discussion. The terms "education," "religion," and "common good" are loaded with presuppositions, images, meanings and emotions. Marty and Moore narrow the field by defining the terms for this particular discourse. While education can encompass things as diverse as grade schools,

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apprenticeships, colleges, trade schools and mentoring, here the principal focus turns to “education that is transacted in institutions” (p. 8). Religion, with its multiple definitions, is distilled into that which gives us “ultimate concern” (p. 9). As Marty asks, “What guiding principle organizes and infuses your life with meaning?” (p. 10). While the discussion of education has been restricted to the institutional context, religion touches the individual as well as the community. These become the focus of the discussion.

The topics of education and religion can be highly volatile. As the authors write: “When nothing less than the common good is at stake, we want discussions to generate more light than heat” (p. 11). When education and religion are brought together, everyone has an opinion, everyone has an interest and the potential for combustible passion is high. The purpose of this volume is not to prepare an individual to win an argument or force a solution to a problem, but is to encourage the freedom found in conversation. An argument is essentially a defense of a position; someone must win or lose. A conversation is less combative, less heated and assists in the progression towards the common good. Ideally, conversation will begin to enlighten arguments, by bringing information, understanding and perspectives from unexpected sources. In short, Marty and Moore assert that: “this book is dedicated to fueling a conversation about education, religion and the common good.” (p. 16)

The strength of this volume lies in its brief historical discussion and cultural analysis of how religion, education and politics have affected each other in America. It is also very helpful in its exploration of worldview and factors that enlighten and impassion the discussion. From these foundations, they move into a discussion of grade schools, home schooling and moving to private and public institutions of higher education. In their examination of higher education, Marty and Moore limit the discussion for private colleges [or more specifically what they have identified as “church related higher education”] to the move away from institutional religious roots to the secularization of higher education. The primary concern discussed under public universities is the establishment of a religious studies department within secular institutions. The limitations of their discussion left this reader far from satisfied.

Marty and Moore are correct in that the discussion about religion, education and community must take place. It is essential to understanding American culture to discern how religion has shaped and influenced the worldview of Americans. All one has to do is scan the daily newspaper to see that at a certain level religion is a factor in countless newsworthy events. Fortunately, many of the conversations Marty and Moore encourage are increasingly taking place. As I opened this volume, my hope was that this book would clarify some of the questions and provide some reflections on the conversations that are taking place on public and private campuses. For those on Christian campuses there is disappointment that the myriad of issues that revolve around religion and education were ignored or rarely mentioned in this book. While discussing secularization is important, so are conversations regarding the roles of education, leadership, service, faith and learning, gender, multiculturalism, etc. These matters are shaped by worldview and faith, and are concerns for many on Christian campuses as well as those in public institutions.

In a final analysis, the book is a helpful primer for those who have not yet started to reflect on the relationship between education and faith or religion. At the same

time, the pertinent discussions are basic and cursory, especially for those who have already been wrestling with these matters. We need to acknowledge that religion does have a role in most issues we face and in many of the matters facing our educational institutions. We also need some strong tools to begin exploring these concerns. Marty and Moore provide a foundation and a plan for reflecting on these issues. However, that is as far as they go.

The significance of this book for those Christians in student development is in two areas. The first is that if we see ourselves as educators within the North American context we need to be able to grasp the issues with which our colleagues, students and faculty are wrestling. We need to be able to discern the implications our faith has on the concerns that our institutions encounter, whether public or private. With this competency comes the need to model to our students how to reflect deeply and demonstrate the significance of action and inaction in these areas. If our desire is to encourage the development of wise and discerning citizens of this nation and of the “Kingdom to come,” we need to demonstrate how to learn, discuss and act on issues that have benefits for the community and “common good”. Absorb this volume, but use it only as the beginning of a longer and essential journey.