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It's All About Jesus: Faith as an Oppositional Collegiate Subculture

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Magolda, P., & Gross, K. E. (2009). *It's all about Jesus: Faith as an oppositional collegiate subculture.*

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Reviewed by Carol A. Lundberg

Searching for a text on qualitative research, I stumbled upon a book entitled, "It's all about Jesus." I assumed it was misclassified until I recognized one of the authors, Peter Magolda, a well-respected ethnographer whose rigorous studies I knew well. Intrigued about Magolda's connection to Jesus and about Jesus' connection to qualitative research, I placed my order.

The book is an overview of a two-year study of Students Serving Christ (SSC), a pseudonym for an evangelical student organization at a Midwestern public university. Magolda and Ebben Gross participated with the organization as observers, though their consistent and lengthy involvement in the group demonstrates that qualitative researchers cannot be entirely separate from the groups they study. In the end, Ebben Gross reflects on the extent to which the organization treated her as one of its own, including her in photos of the group, even recognizing her graduation at the SSC end-of-year banquet. Both Magolda and Ebben Gross reflect on the group's likely interest in influencing their own spiritual development, suggesting that might have contributed to SSC's willingness to offer them entry to the organization for the purpose of the study. These reflections and myriad others make the text captivating.

The first three chapters introduce the student organization and provide an overview of ethnographic research, providing a helpful tutorial about values of qualitative research, especially ethnography. The language and writing style is easy to follow, unmasking the mystery surrounding rigorous research. Magolda and Ebben Gross tell their own stories of spiritual search and development in an attempt to interrogate themselves and identify ways that their own identities may have influenced the study. It is rare that professionals tell their stories of spiritual struggle, so this section captivated me more than I would like to admit. This is the first book I have found that includes both a short introduction to research and then follows with an actual study modeling that approach.

The next eight chapters introduce the key players in the study and then chronicle the development of the organization through the academic year, including the system of training by which committed members become more deeply involved in the organization. I was readily transported to the SSC meetings through detailed description of them, including surroundings, dialog, public presentations, and observations about the demeanor and behavior of participants. The authors describe SSC as a learning organization within the university, one that is rarely noted or attended to by university officials. As such, the authors suggest that colleges and universities may be missing out on understanding the ways learning occurs in such organizations and how such learning could be extended. The authors situate the study in terms of its meaning for higher education in general. For example, they connect the evangelical mission of SSC to the broader literature about the spiritual development of college students, including the

centrality of spiritual search in the college student experience (Dalton, 2001), a shift in student interest away from formal religions and toward spirituality (UCLA, 2003; Jablonski, 2001), and efforts on the part of evangelical students to integrate their faith into the daily aspects of their lives (Leland, 2004). This was the practice of both authors throughout the book: describe and explain what they observed, then connect it to the broader landscape of higher education.

Chapters 12 and 13 introduce overarching ideas about the organization and its students. The final chapter is written by seven members of SSC after they read the manuscript. This series of members' responses, written in their own words, functions as a sort of final member check. Throughout the book, I was impressed by the ethnographers' intent to understand the perspectives of the SSC members; giving them the last word showed a gutsy consistency with that approach.

As an evangelical Christian, I was struck by the depth of understanding both the content and meaning of elements of SSC. For example, in chapter 8, Magolda describes SSC's evangelistic training, during which students learn to explain Jesus as the bridge that established a relationship between people and God. It involves drawing an illustration of two sides of a gap (man on one side and God on the other), showing that sin creates a chasm between man and God. Jesus bridges that gap, establishing a relationship between man and God. This is an illustration that I taught recently to the 5th-grade Sunday school class at our church, so I was particularly intrigued by Magolda's presentation of it. His accurate and detailed description of the bridge analogy (complete with drawings) was fascinating, particularly because it comes from someone who does not believe it to be true. Moreover, he describes SSC's strategy for using it as a comfortable and accessible way of explaining the gospel of Christ. The unique side of this is that he presents it all as an outsider. This is the value of the book.

As the authors suggest, this book is useful for evangelicals to understand the way outsiders perceive us and it is also useful for nonevangelicals interested in understanding the perspectives, values, and practices of an evangelical subculture. As an evangelical Christian, I was captured by the ways some rituals that seem commonplace to me were noteworthy to the researchers. Some examples of that include the extent to which the Bible is central to the teaching and learning process, viewed as an authoritative source; the students' interest in weaving their faith into their daily lives in terms of its informing their behavior, values, and life decisions; and the organization's goal, both corporately and for individual members, to put Jesus first in all they do. Likewise, I was intrigued by the observations that were unsettling to the authors. For example, the organization's use of the male pronoun "man" to refer to all people in the bridge illustration was noted by Magolda. Though the bridge metaphor was designed to be a simple and winsome way of communicating the gospel message, the lack of gender neutrality in the presentation detracted from its appeal. In the closing chapter, one of the SSC members describes Magolda as being oversensitive to this, arguing that they meant "mankind." The issue of male privilege as it showed up in language was a distraction for Magolda, which can be helpful to note. However, the SSC member's comment shows she did not understand the critique, given her defense that they meant "mankind," which is also not gender neutral. Her response hints at the natural inclination for evangelicals to be defensive in reading this text and also suggests the ways such defensiveness can diminish our learning from it.

On a personal level, this book was remarkably encouraging to me. Having grown weary of negative stereotypes and broad assumptions about who I am as an evangelical, I find myself eager to hide that element of my identity. Too often, I worry that others assume my faith means I have a particular voting record, judgmental stance, and moral superiority. I found this text to be heartening in its identification of the values and motivations that are shared by members of SSC, values that I think are shared pretty broadly by evangelicals in general. In my opinion, the title, *It's all about Jesus*, is an apt description of evangelical values and motivations. The book delivers what the title describes, as the authors detail how, in day-to-day living, the students make their lives all about Jesus.

As outside observers, Magolda and Ebben Gross note some aspects of SSC that were confusing, given the mission of the organization. This is a gift because we rarely get an honest perception of ourselves from outsiders. Indeed, the perspectives and questions in this area are both refreshing and concerning. For example, they describe the organization as insular, despite its goal of reaching out to non-Christians. They note that the primary function of the organization is to support Christians and to draw in marginally-committed Christians, rather than to reach people who have never embraced the Christian faith. The authors suggest that for the organization to be true to its mission of reaching outsiders, students should engage more deeply and consistently with students who do not share the same faith and students should be more aggressive in sharing their faith. They comment that sometimes the students being “evangelized” don’t even realize that’s what is happening because the SSC students are so gentle in their approach. I was intrigued by the notion that self-proclaimed “outsiders” would argue that evangelicals should be more aggressive in their efforts to reach others or that evangelicals would be more effective if they spent more time scattered, rather than always gathered. Indeed, their role as outsiders is what makes this text fascinating, especially for insiders.

The authors stepped into a fairly typical evangelical organization for two years and then tell us what they observed. Those of us who occupy such organizations, whether they are campus organizations, churches, or colleges and universities, will benefit from listening to the perspectives of these outsiders. Rarely will a neighbor, friend, or student feel safe enough to tell us what they really think. Magolda and Ebben Gross offer such a perspective.

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