



Sunset Christianity: My Experience Teaching Religion in Southern California

Madeleine Forell Marshall

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Framed as a memoir, *Sunset Christianity* offers a series of reflections on Christian post-secondary pedagogy in the 21st century. What do students bring to the university religion classroom? What experience, what knowledge, what attitudes toward religion and religious people? How can their resistance to the danger of any but the most namby-pamby sharing be overcome? How can their horror at the evils of religion in human culture, past and present, often the product of “secularization theory,” be assuaged? Using the insights of anthropologists and the sociologists who study “lived religion,” Forell Marshall draws on her extensive experience as a literary historian, hymn writer and poet. The combination of social science and poetry lets her focus on the signs and symbols all around us. She calls for us all (but especially teachers, pastors and parents) to learn to read these signs as packed with signification, as sacramental. Just so, ordinary experience at home, at work, in nature and at the shopping mall, all are to be understood as indicative of religious understanding—perhaps not the dogmatic understanding of conventional beliefs and creeds, but religious, even Christian, nonetheless. Such a reorientation insists on a new, localized theology that takes the world the students inhabit and the attitudes they bring to the religion classroom very seriously. What perhaps worked “back east” a couple of decades ago no longer works. Listening carefully, she finds students are traumatized and alienated by the angry disagreements (creation, gay marriage, political factionalism) that pass for religious concern. Students have likewise been deeply shaken by the almost universal association of religion with “purity”. When, for instance, abstinence only sex education is promoted in the name of Christianity, students have retained the association and blamed religion for the dishonesty and sexism of the sex education. If to be “religious” is to be judgmental and bound by cruel laws, who would claim that? Forell Marshall suggests that the predominant cultural preoccupation with purity of one kind or another (diet, hygiene, domestic order, sexuality) has diluted and diffused sacramental understanding and appreciation of God’s good creation. It has become the new and demanding “Law,” the mark of the truly religious. Meanwhile, a shabby and superficial idea of diversity has become the new “Gospel,” the new sign of righteousness and grace. Real difference and real distinction are discredited in the rush to join together and get along. Real distinction is a hallmark of critical thinking, and has become the baby that gets tossed out with the bathwater. Throughout her book, Forell Marshall argues for the unreasonableness of “secularization” as it is often understood and endorsed by academics, clerics, and journalists. The Christianity that came clear to her in the classrooms of Southern California may have been skittish and inarticulate but it was authentic and even original, an introduction, certainly, to a new, very localized kind of theology. In his Preface to what he calls “a body of interwoven essays, performing mystagogical work,” Christopher Evans relates the book to classic texts of Christian spirituality and doxology, including the “homely divinity” of the Blessed Julian of Norwich.

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