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The 'Outrageous

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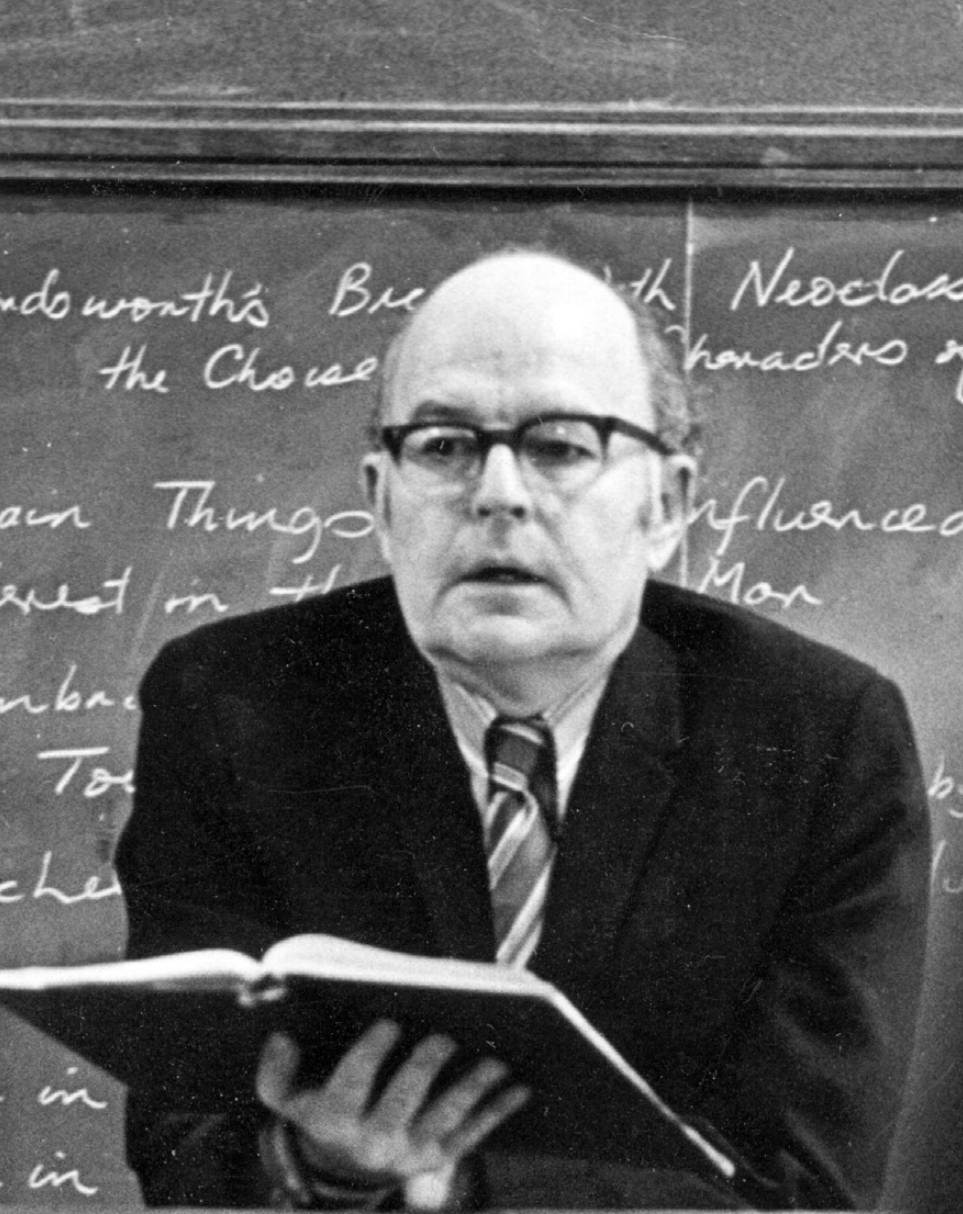


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The 'Outrageous' John Waller Integrating Faith and Learning

by Delmer Davis

In his "Introduction" to his book *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, George Marsden emphasizes how difficult it is for Christian faculty to relate their faith to their research efforts. The difficulty, notes Marsden, rests on the pervasive academic culture which rejects matters of faith as appropriate to intellectual efforts. The rejection rests, first, says Marsden, on the belief that "religion is simply non-empirical and therefore worthy of no serious consideration."

Political realities also contribute to the relative silence of Christian scholars about their faith. In a time when various action groups based on ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender or political belief are demanding full acceptance into scholarly circles, Marsden says that it is difficult for the Christian majority, often guilty of using its power to discriminate against these same groups, to be heard without prejudice. Marsden quotes John C. Green's response to a Marsden presentation on "Religious Commitment in the Academy," at the American Academy of Religion: "If a professor talks about studying something from a Marxist point of view, others might disagree but not dismiss the notion. But if a professor proposed to study something from a Catholic or Protestant point of view, it would be treated like proposing something from a Martian point of view."

Seventh-day Adventist doctoral schools have historically emphasized the importance of integrating faith and scholarship. At Andrews both the Seminary and the School of Education encourage dissertation research that provides for such integration, and both produce scholarly journals which publish refereed articles that link such integrated research efforts: *Andrews University Seminary Studies* and *The Journal of Research in Christian Education*. Do we take seriously the following Marsden statement? "Even at church-related schools, however, the pervasive reach of the dominant academic culture is evident among the many professors who insist that it is inappropriate to relate their Christianity to their scholarship."

Before we too quickly dismiss Marsden, however, let's review why Andrews a few years ago went to such great efforts to back the School of Education as it created its scholarly journal. We knew that publishing such a journal would result in providing a venue for the publishing of materials from Andrews University faculty, thus increasing the research output of the School of Education faculty, something that was very important to do after the rather dismal NCA visit of 1989. But the fact

remains that the reason the journal has been a success is that it filled a void in the scholarly world. It provides a place for publishing research that links Christian faith with educational scholarship. The very fact that there was a void indicates that Marsden is not far off the mark when he laments that Christian scholarship is generally seen as “outrageous.”

The Marsden book is a worthwhile volume and will speak to many people who have been confused about how their faith relates or does not relate to their professional lives as teachers and scholars. James Sire addressed some of these issues at the 1999 Fall Fellowship, and in February George Marsden himself was on campus to further our understanding of how best to integrate our faith lives into our scholarly lives.

In *The Outrageous Idea of Christianity*, Marsden attempts to open our eyes to the conclusion that our Christian beliefs can and should permeate not just our teaching but also our scholarly research efforts. Perhaps the best thing I could do would be to provide a retrospective look at one of our own scholars from the Andrews faculty who for many years successfully carried his faith over into his teaching and research. I believe that his example can serve as a beacon for the rest of us to follow as we attempt to negotiate the tricky scholarly voyage central to Marsden’s book.

Dr. John O. Waller—Jack to most everybody—joined the faculty of the Andrews English Department in 1960, after teaching at Walla Walla College for eight years. The main reason that Jack was recruited to Andrews was that he had already established himself as a promising scholar, having completed his PhD at the University of Southern California in 1954 and having begun to mine his doctoral dissertation for scholarly articles. What was clear about Jack to his colleagues and students at Walla Walla and later here at Andrews was that he had the kind of mind that has to do research, regardless of class load, paper load, committee load, or administrative load. That quality of mind can best be labeled as curiosity, a desire to find things out, to discover, to uncover, to reveal. But Jack also was a fully-committed, thoughtful, believing Seventh-day Adventist Christian, whose faith influenced his teaching and his research. Waller’s distinguished record of scholarship was carried on while teaching a full quota of courses, advising all graduate students in English while chairing the English Department for 16 years, serving on numerous university committees, and eking out trips to research libraries during vacation times, here and abroad, with very little university funding.

Waller’s curious mind, and his commitment to thinking related to faith, to getting his students to think are easily seen in one of his earliest efforts here at Andrews, an essay entitled “Encouragement of Critical Thinking in S.D.A. College Classes,” dated 1961, a part of a panel discussion here on campus about “Evaluation of Student Performance.” Waller notes that in working “with SDA college students, there has been nothing they’ve appeared to need more than practice in forming opinions of their own and defending those opinions in clear, logical discourse.” He compares his teaching of Adventist students in

In his teaching and scholarship, Waller’s concern with thinking emphasized the historical, the philosophical, and the theological aspects of the English discipline.

Seventh-day Adventist colleges to his teaching of non-Adventist students in two non-Adventist colleges and suggests “that SDA college students are observably less interested in thinking for themselves than non-Adventist students are.” He blames the lack of thinking among some Adventist students on their comparatively sheltered lives in academy dormitories that prevent students from even seeing “a daily newspaper” and, thus, having sufficient world awareness about which to write.

He also notes the Adventist tendency towards an “authoritarian approach to knowledge of all kinds,” depending overly on “a relatively few books . . . to find the answer to nearly all questions that arise,” resulting in a lack of openness to more than one answer or to students’ discovering their “own answers.” Waller bemoans the “largely negative approach” which Adventist education has taken, in that it has prided itself on all the things it does not teach, such as “evolution,” “fiction,” and “fables,” rather than developing into an education that at its best could be “a dynamic Christian philosophy capable of transforming all branches of learning into a thrilling testimony to the power of God.”

Waller ends his paper on critical thinking with a plea for Adventist teachers to emphasize “thought-content” in writing, to assign reading that will “challenge students to discussion,” and “to make more use of discussion methods.”

The challenge is to take “the risk...of trying to develop in our students the ability to question and talk back to man-written books without at the same time becoming doubters of God’s book.”

In his teaching and scholarship, Waller’s concern with thinking emphasized the historical, the philosophical, and the theological aspects of the English discipline. At a gathering of Adventist English teachers in 1965, Waller delivered a paper entitled “Some Eclectically Garnered Reflections Concerning the Moral Criticism of Prose Fiction,” in which he discloses some of his own teaching approaches to presenting literature in such a way that connections are made between an historical approach to literature and the Christian faith. He suggests that in the college Adventist English classroom, a sample work of fiction might be approached by sketching out to the class the “gradually altering moral assumptions of prose fiction over the last three centuries.” He would encourage students to respond to the “moral order” presented in the fictional work as compared to the various historical developmental phases for the fictional handling of moral order.

He argues that approaching a work of fiction in this way “would keep the exercise free from becoming at once a narrow quarrel with SDA dogma; but if we are truly SDA’s, as I assume we are, our SDA sensibilities will be present actively influencing our perceptions and our judgments.” He is concerned to emphasize, however, that the purely theological should not dominate literary study, for “criticism which is very self-consciously theological, very disposed to engage in rigid, systematic comparing of truth claims of literature with various neatly-formulated points of dogma, is likely to defeat its own purpose.”

Waller’s commitment to things historical in his professional career particularly shows itself when one reviews his published scholarly research works. Almost all of his publications are approached from the historical perspective to literary study. His dissertation, “The American Civil War and Some English Men of Letters, 1860-1865: Carlyle, Mill, Ruskin, Arnold, Kingsley, Hughes, Trollope, Thackeray, and Dickens,” began a direction that would continue throughout his career with such titles as “Charles Kingsley and the American Civil War,” and “Ruskin on Slavery,” culminating in his biographical/historical book-length study of Tennyson’s close relationships to the Lushingtons, entitled *A Circle of Friends: The Tennysons and Lushingtons of Park House*, published by the Ohio State University Press, in 1986.

It is interesting to note how productive Waller was during the 27 years from the time he joined the Andrews faculty to the time he taught his last class as a semi-retired faculty member at Andrews University in 1987. During that time period he published 16 separate articles in

recognized refereed scholarly journals, including such important venues as *Studies in Philology*, *Studies in English Literature (1500-1900)*, *Victorian Newsletter*, *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, and *Browning Institute Studies*.

Waller also served as one of the important contributing editors and, later, one of the editors of *Abstracts of English Studies*, from 1958-1980, an affiliation that kept him abreast of research in 19th-century literary studies as he abstracted literally hundreds of articles over the years for this journal. He unquestionably established himself as a respected Victorian specialist and researcher, even though he taught at a fairly obscure church-related institution, to the extent that MA students who had taken his *Bibliography and Research* course here at Andrews were regularly excused from taking Robert Altick's similar course at Ohio State when they transferred there for further graduate study (Altick being the author of the leading textbook on literary research at the time).

It is interesting to notice how often Waller's historical research was linked to his Christian faith. The titles of some of these refereed articles are revealing: "Christ's Second Coming: Christina Rossetti and the Premillennialist William Dodsworth," "A Composite Anglo-Catholic Concept of the Novel, 1841-1868," "The Methodist Quarterly Review and Fiction, 1818-1900," "Doctor Arnold's Sermons and Matthew Arnold's 'Rugby Chapel,'" and "Matthew and Thomas Arnold: Soteriology." Waller would not have been comfortable with those researchers described by George Marsden, who, "even at church-related schools . . . insist that it is inappropriate to relate their Christianity to their scholarship."

As important as Waller's contributions to refereed scholarship are, however, it is also crucial to remember that as he carried on this productive research career for the English profession, linking his faith commitment rather continuously to such activity, he also was committed to important scholarly activities that showed a very direct relationship to his chosen faith and church.

Along with the titles noted above are these others, published in such Adventist venues as *Adventist Heritage*, *Spectrum*, *The Adventist Review*, and the *Seventh-day Adventist Encyclopedia*. The titles are revealing: "Uriah Smith's Small Epic: 'The Warning Voice of Time and Prophecy,'" "George Washington Rine: The Early Education and Literary Ideals of a Master English Teacher," and "Some Roots," his study of several early Adventist English teachers.

Indeed, perhaps Waller's most influential research came not through his extensive publication in research journals or even through the Adventist titles just noted. Rather his curious mind turned itself to an important issue in Seventh-day Adventist English teaching: the question of fiction reading and its place in the Christian life. When Waller joined the English

faculty at Andrews in 1960, there had been nearly 100 years of controversy regarding whether or not Adventists should read fiction. That controversy centered on how to interpret certain statements of Ellen White which seem to indicate a "blanket" condemnation of fiction reading.

Before Waller, Adventist literature teachers in North America had attempted to answer White's condemnation of fiction in various ways, ranging from L.W. Cobb's support of this ban by his suggestion that English students should not read primary works of fiction but could read about such works in secondary sources to Harry Tippet's and Paul Gibbs' attempts to argue on practical grounds that the form of fiction is not evil in itself and that works of literature in any literary genre must be judged by their content and not by their form. Gibbs had even gone so far as to assert that White may have included fictional materials in her collection entitled *Sabbath Readings for the Home Circle*.¹

Perhaps Waller was spurred to his exhaustive research on this collection by Gibbs' encouragement, since Gibbs was chair of the English Department at Andrews when Waller joined the faculty in 1960. Regardless, what Waller set out to do was to search out the sources for the various stories and readings included in the White volume. The results of his research were described in his highly-influential paper, "A Contextual Study of Ellen G. White's Counsel on Fiction," read first to North American Seventh-day Adventist English teachers in session at La Sierra College in 1965.²

In this paper, Waller establishes the religious context for White's comments, with special emphasis on the Methodist perspective, noting that statements condemning fiction, many of them in terms similar to those used by Ellen White, were perennial in American religious culture up through the middle of the 19th century. Waller then describes how the language of "addiction" was often used in such condemnations, just as White herself had used such terms, before enlarging on the problem of what White may have meant by fiction when she used the term, emphasizing that the very imprecision of the term *fiction* has contributed to difficulty in understanding her condemnations.

Waller concludes his paper by describing the results of his research into the sources for the collection of materials issued in White's *Sabbath Readings for the Home Circle*. He "painstakingly examined one hundred and ninety-four stories" attempting to identify their authorship or the original source of publication. He notes that a few were from "well-known fiction writers of their day, including Harriet Beecher Stowe and Hans Christian Anderson..." He was not successful in identifying the authors of the other stories, since most of them were originally published anonymously, although he was able to tie down the original publications in which they appeared.

In total, he was able to conclude that 99

stories came from upwards of 71 different magazines, "several of which were known primarily as fiction magazines." Since White herself included fictional materials in this edited collection, Waller argues, then her seemingly blanket condemnation of the genre cannot be read as such at all. Instead, he suggests, readers and teachers might well use her model for selection of reading material—a process which involved her in reading literally hundreds of possible selections for her book, including in the final collection only those that passed her test of inclusion on moral and spiritual grounds rather than on whether they were fact or fiction.

Waller, however, always careful in drawing conclusions, cautions his colleagues to be very conservative in how they react to his insights about White and fiction, insisting that teachers act responsibly in relationship to the age and maturity of their students. (Indeed, Waller did not allow his potentially explosive findings to be printed for nearly ten years.)³

Waller's study continued the liberation of North American Seventh-day Adventist literature teachers from a constant defensive position in relationship to literature courses. It made possible a conservative inclusion in English courses of modern fiction and drama, approached on their own merits with critical judgment. Indeed, Waller himself helped lead the General Conference Department of Education to publish an important pamphlet on the teaching of literature, entitled "Guide to the Teaching of Literature in Seventh-day Adventist Schools," the result of a special North American Division committee of which he was a member. The pamphlet details how a judicious approach to modern fiction can be a part of Seventh-day Adventist education.

Waller's study also led him to a more global consideration of the place of literature in the life of the Seventh-day Adventist Christian. His paper, "Some Eclectically Garnered Reflections Concerning the Moral Criticism of Prose Fiction," also first presented in 1965 to the gathering of English teachers at La Sierra College, provides crucial evidence in understanding how completely Waller's Christian worldview had become linked to his role as English professor.

After arguing that the life experiences presented in fiction inevitably make "the novel...inextricably involved in moral issues" and emphasizing that the novel writer "wishes most intensely for you and me to agree with his worldview, to adopt his values for our own," Waller briefly summarizes how a work of fiction might be best approached in an Adventist college classroom. He suggests that students should examine the worldview of the

work, should evaluate the “truth claims” of the fictional work, and should ask if the novel presents “some kind of responsible moral order? If not, is its amorality or immorality, obtrusive or kept in the background?”

Waller ends this paper by emphasizing both the difficulty and challenge of encouraging Christian students to practice moral criticism in relationship to their reading. More importantly, however, he reveals his passion for linking research and the Christian worldview at the end of this paper when he calls for “the possibility of a scholarly SDA literary criticism,” something that cannot “be the work of one man” but, instead, must be a collective undertaking, one that can make “Adventist literary study...a distinguished profession.” Waller’s plea here is a clear indication of his concern that worldview must be linked with one’s professional research.

It is interesting that the plea has fallen mostly on deaf ears within the profession of Seventh-day Adventist English teachers, for Waller’s successful defense of the inclusion of selected fiction in literature courses at Seventh-day Adventist schools has tended to make the majority of Seventh-day Adventist English teachers feel that there is no longer any need to wrestle publically with fundamental questions of how their Christian worldview affects their scholarly and professional lives, resulting in their research and professional activities centering on questions that have little explicit connection to their Christian beliefs.⁴

Waller established an enviable record of integrating faith and scholarship years before our own university and the Seventh-day Adventist Church began to emphasize such phrases as “the integration of faith and learning.” Indeed, when that phrase first began to be popular here on campus, Waller showed a typical English teacher’s resistance to what he regarded as a too formulaic approach to such matters. In the late 1970s, the administration at Andrews requested that all faculty members write out how they went about integrating faith and learning in their professional lives. As I remember, this request came without adequate warning, with almost no discussion about what faith and learning might be, and was accompanied with a deadline that had little to do with the realities of faculty teaching schedules and work loads.

Waller’s two-page response indicates his distaste for this required task, particularly in light of his long career in which his faith had so much influenced his teaching, research and theoretical writing, a linkage about which the

administration should already have had plenty of information in their files.

He argues that if faith and learning are truly integrated, they will scarcely be detachable at all. Furthermore, since these delicate balances come daily and hourly as answers to prayer, they are often fleeting and evanescent things that can lose much of their essence if one attempts to describe them out of their context. To turn away one’s eyes from the ineffable living experience, reducing it to “technique” set down on a report and taken credit for, seems to risk depreciating, even trivializing, it. These divinely given enablings can be as slight, and precious, as a tone of voice, a subtle pacing, in the oral reading of a poem—a welling up of feeling, a conveying of reverence. They are emphatically not something that “I do,” but something that God does through me, and they are seldom the same thing any two times.

Waller also notes that his written report may well be untrue—something made up for the occasion “in response to some sort of administrative fiat....” He adds, in a somewhat exasperated tone, that the truth of his report really depends on “matters of faith in one another. If you have faith in my integrity, you will believe I’m telling the truth as I see it, and have experienced it. But if you really have that kind of faith in me, why are you requiring me to make this kind of report at all?” He returns, however, to his theme about a seamless integration that will result in spontaneous, God-given moments for the teacher, by writing, “I have never marked a single lesson plan, ‘Say so and so here, to integrate faith and learning in such and such a way.’ If other teachers can do so, and make it sound unforced and sincere, I’m glad for them. No doubt, God works in different ways through different persons. Whatever I’m able to do, I must do under momentary inspiration.”

Even though Waller’s words may be most interesting because of the slightly antagonistic tone of his response to what he called an administrative fiat, he does underscore an important issue for each of us to mull over. Tying one’s Christian worldview to one’s teaching or one’s scholarship cannot really, for most of us, be forced. Instead, the worldview itself must be our first commitment, followed by the willingness to allow that worldview to shape our teaching and our research.

What Jack Waller’s example shows is that such willingness can result in establishing a credible reputation for scholarship both within and outside church circles.

Notes

¹ Cobb’s “Help on Literary Problems,” Tippet’s “A Review of Some Principles in Dealing with Fiction and Imaginative Forms in Our Schools,” and Gibbs’ “Literature in Adventist Schools” can be found in an anthology developed by Robert Dunn, entitled *Seventh-day Adventists on Literature*. Unfortunately, this volume, primarily printed for a specific course at Loma Linda University in the mid-70s, has not received very wide circulation and has long been out of print.

² This gathering, sponsored by the North American Division of Seventh-day Adventists, was the progenitor of the present meetings of the Adventist English Association.

³ A version of Waller’s paper finally appeared in Robert Dunn’s anthology *Seventh-day Adventists on Literature*. The paper’s influence came from Waller’s presentation of the research on several SDA college and university campuses. Perhaps its most important outcome, however, was in Waller’s use of the research to influence the North American Division Committee on the Teaching of Literature to create the carefully-phrased “Guide to the Teaching of Literature in Seventh-day Adventist Schools,” published as a brief pamphlet by the Department of Education, General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists in 1971. The “Guide” allows for a careful, conservative selection of fictional materials for the Adventist classroom.

⁴ There are some important exceptions. Robert Dunn at La Sierra University has given continuous attention to the interface of religion and literature, has published on such topics, and has long been one of the compilers of the annual bibliography included in *Christianity and Literature*. Scott Moncrieff of Andrews University has published regarding Adventists and fiction. Other English teachers have participated in and produced papers related to the Seminars on the Integration of Faith and Learning, regularly sponsored by the Education Department of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. Perhaps the most important concerted effort by North American Seventh-day Adventist English teachers to provide an “Adventist” scholarly approach to the English discipline is contained in *Language Matters: Notes Toward an English Program*, edited by Verne Wehtje in 1978, but this volume was a global explanation of the English discipline (or language arts), with only one chapter, by Robert Dunn, specifically on literature.

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Dr. Waller has lived in Berrien Springs since his retirement with his wife Elaine, who served for many years as music librarian for the James White Library. Dr. Waller currently resides in an extended care facility in Berrien Center, Mich.