

THINKING CHRISTIANLY ABOUT THE LIBERAL ARTS

by Robert M. Woods, *The Covenant School*

The incarnation calls us to the things of this world. So when we consider the following quotes about the liberal arts we must begin and end there:

- “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?”—Tertullian
- “What has Ingeld to do with Christ?”—Alcuin (when catching some monks reading Beowulf)
- “What has Horace to do with the Psalter? Or Virgil with the Gospel? Or Cicero with the Apostle?”—Jerome

Just as the Logos, God Himself, became flesh, and just as God’s words and wisdom were penned by human hands in particular times and places, Christians, as embodied beings, are called to be in the world. We are called to a healthy, robust terrestriality, without compromising our calling. Engagement with the world—in all of its God-imbued glory intertwined with human wretchedness—requires wisdom from God, a wisdom that assists us to be faithful. Just as the incarnation was ultimately about redemption, it is the task of the Christian to redeem all that can be redeemed. Paul tells the very worldly Corinthians to “take captive every thought for Jesus Christ.” We can do this by imitating the enfleshed Word of God and by dwelling in God’s Words while we live in God’s world.

It is grand news indeed that we are not alone. There have been many who have been faithful in this endeavor



Tertullian

for thousands of years. Remember the examples of John of Salisbury and what he did with his *Metalogicon*, or Hugh of Saint Victor’s *Didascalicon*, or Dorothy Sayers’s “The Lost Tools of Learning.” The shape, tone, contours, and content of the liberal arts in the West has been thoroughly developed by the Christian worldview. It is the Bible, more than any other writing, that informs the great intellectual liberal arts tradition to such a degree that ignorance of the Bible makes apprehension of our

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humane past nearly impossible. Indeed the Bible was institutionalized in the Western intellectual tradition until the modern world, and the modern world's reaction to the Bible can be seen as persistent mass rebellion against that tradition.

The liberal arts have been in decline for a number of decades and the attacks on this tradition come from various fronts. There are those who have called for all education to be "immediately practical" and "eminently usable," who have called for the end of these "irrelevant studies" that "waste our time on fruitless" intellectual endeavors. These utilitarians are the modern-day equivalent of the ancient slave owners. All considerations about the issue of what it means to be human are framed in terms of "man as worker" who is best educated when pragmatism governs the work week and consumption is the chief end.

Not all the enemies of liberal learning are managers of middle-class America. There are those in the academy, who have been "educated" in modern day "wisdom" to have a posture of disdain toward the Great Tradition. In fact, much of the attack begins there. We should recognize these enemies of the permanent things as anti-traditionalists. I once had an exchange with an individual who claimed there was no great tradition or Western intellectual heritage. I assured him that the Great Tradition is as real as Narnia and my birth city of Rochester, NY. All real in different ways, but real, nonetheless. These are all places we can inhabit and that, in turn, inhabit us. Unfortunately, there are those who would state that since they have never been to Rochester or Narnia they do not exist. This is modern narcissistic folly.

Much like Christianity in twenty-first century America, liberal learning has fallen to the wayside due more to sheer apathy than overt attacks. The masses care little about anything that happened fifteen minutes ago, let alone fifteen-hundred years ago. This apathetic posture has done tremendous damage. And the people

in the academy have come to passionately embrace it. Instead of the good, the true, and the beautiful, one can now major in the relative, the mundane, and the insipid.

Possibly the worst enemy, omnipresent in the academy and pervasive throughout society, is an extraordinary level of ignorance about the liberal arts. Shortly after I received my PhD in humanities, a well-intentioned but astonishingly ignorant fellow asked me in the most sincere tone, "Why would a Christian get a PhD in humanism since humanism is opposed to God?" After several minutes of trying to explain to him that I did not spend years pursuing a degree in humanism, but in the humanities, I yielded to him and said, "I'm not sure." Willful ignorance trumps learning and persuasion almost every time. Within the academy, I gave up years ago trying to explain the value of the study of the humanities to my colleagues in the "hard and social sciences." As they have boldly declared in various ways, "We know how things really work in the world with the aid of our disciplines." I have decided that there are certain treasures that ought not to be placed before certain critters where mud-like ignorance is the grime of their habitation.

There are things many humans desire toward a different end than merely knowing those things. Most college students now attend college, not to learn for the sake of learning, but to acquire the skills necessary for gainful employment. Times have indeed changed. Not many decades ago, the primary motivation for attaining a college education turned toward the immediate end of earning wages. Oddly, we are at a moment when many, if not most, graduate with neither.

To paraphrase Scripture, what does it profit a person to go to college for four years? It seems the answer now is to establish the beginning of twenty-five years of student loans and a certificate of achievement, still called a diploma. The sad fact is that the college diploma has become synonymous with the elementary school award, "Everyone Is a Winner."

In the best and highest sense, a liberal arts education is a liberation from something and for something. It is liberation from the kind of narrow training that restricts one to a single trade, or skill, and a myopic vision of all that is good, true, and beautiful. Humane learning is that which moves us toward a life of happiness beyond labor, feeding, and rest. When a human soul has been expanded and ennobled by liberal learning, he is able to recognize, and desires to embrace, that which makes him distinctly human.

A human who has reaped the full benefits of a liberal arts education knows how to recognize the true even when swimming in a sea of propaganda. He knows the good even in an age that humorously declares there is no good. The privileged human who has received that rarest of education will know and treasure the beautiful in an age of crass consumption.

Ideally, a liberal arts education, fully informed by Christian conviction, will make students unfit for the modern world. Much of our Western world, shaped by the odd marriage of Enlightenment arrogance, Romantic consciousness, and Industrial consumerism is contrary to the virtues of those who inhabit the kingdom. While there are tensions and some inconsistencies intellectually within the Great Tradition—ones that Mortimer Adler argued should be forced to speak with one another so that the truth can be heard—there is much more of compliance, agreement, and derivation to be found here.

Thinking Christianly about the liberal arts means not merely to give attention to the content, but is the very means of thinking about that content. In other words, in addition to what is analyzed, it is the process of analysis that was historically, thoroughly informed by the Christian faith. Within the history of the Christian intellectual tradition, the liberal arts have been appreciated first and foremost as pillars of wisdom and also as intrinsic goods gifted from God, even when discovered in Egypt and Babylon. The consensus among early Christian thinkers was that all truth is God's truth

and this remains the consensus to this day among those who have learned from the one greater than Solomon. When faithfully adhered to, this conviction provides freedom.

A major contention of thinking Christianly about the liberal arts, implicit throughout the West until the Enlightenment, is that if the liberal arts are to survive in a meaningful manner or even thrive with new and significant scholarship, it must be among Christians—unique communities, and institutions shaped by Christian conviction. While I know and trust that there are those old school humanists still fighting the good fight, their days are numbered. I desire to be counted among a people who recognize the eternal value of this kind of education rooted in the permanent things. It is to those people I offer encouragement: you are not alone. There is hope and help from the great cloud of witnesses to the Great Tradition. We are strengthened and aided if we have but ears to hear and eyes to see.

Books mentioned in this essay may be found in the *Imaginative Conservative* Bookstore.

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