

## CHRISTIANITY, THE LIBERAL ARTS, AND THE QUALITY OF PUBLIC LIFE

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**F**or many years now, advocates of liberal education have felt progressively embattled on college and university campuses. Entering students seem increasingly less interested in the thrill of learning for its own sake, preferring above all else to acquire solid preparation for various jobs during the four years of undergraduate education. And even if the entering students are not themselves indifferent or hostile to liberal education, their parents often are. Meanwhile, the discourse about higher education now includes the vocabulary of crass, cost/benefit analyses. Just what economic return can be expected from a \$150,000 investment in a B.A. degree with a history major?

In the face of such questions, advocates of the liberal arts have sometimes shifted rhetorical strategies. They have increasingly defended the liberal arts on instrumental or utilitarian grounds. "The job market is rapidly changing; therefore, college graduates need to be prepared for jobs that have not yet been created. Moreover, most people will change jobs three or four times at least during the course of their lives. Therefore, students need the arts, skills, and habits of mind that only the liberal arts can cultivate. Students need to learn how to learn, to be enabled to be flexibly responsive to the global market, and to be secure enough in their own identities and convictions to endure the hardships and disappointments

they are bound to face. So if you want to be practical, get a liberal arts degree. Narrowly technical training makes no sense.”

Although this defense of a liberal education has much to recommend it, many of those who advance it do so grudgingly or with a guilty conscience. Guilt stems from the conviction that liberal education is diminished whenever its proponents stress its instrumental value over and above its intrinsic goodness. Knowledge for its own sake! Liberal education as an end in itself! To advance the cause of liberal education in any other terms than those that these battle cries suggest is to debase the currency of the liberal arts, thereby contributing to the narrowly practical mentality that has led—so the story goes—to the progressive demise of liberal education in our times.

Friends of the liberal arts should not be plagued by these doubts and self-recriminations. The history of liberal education provides ample warrants for defending it on instrumental grounds. Moreover, Christians who are friends of liberal learning should be more suspicious of claims that liberal education is an end in itself than of claims that the liberal arts are good for the sake of empowering and equipping human beings for various kinds of work in the world. Or, to put matters more positively, Christians should be guiltlessly disposed to use instrumental arguments to defend liberal education.

## II

Bruce Kimball’s *Orators and Philosophers: A History of the Ideal of Liberal Education* still remains, after twenty-five years, the most authoritative source on the history of liberal education. As the title suggests, Kimball identified two separate, sometimes competing, sometimes complementary versions of liberal education that began to develop in ancient Greece and that continue to the present time. The two arose simultaneously in the fifth century B.C.E. The first, the philosophical tradition or the “liberal free” ideal stemmed from Socratic notions of inquiry as a path to individual excellence, of self-examination as indispensable to human flourishing, and of contemplation, not action, as the most choice-worthy human activ-

ity. Contemporary defenses of liberal education that stress critical thinking, intellectual virtues, knowledge as an end in itself, the importance self-reflection, self-cultivation, and self-knowledge, and the never-ending project of disciplining and furnishing the mind to enable and secure the full realization of one’s own humanity all can trace their lineage to Socrates.

The oratorical tradition stemmed from the rhetorician Isocrates and came into full flower three centuries later in the work of the Roman philosopher Cicero. Liberal education, as it unfolded within this tradition, stressed speech and language, the moral virtues, good character, and knowledge for the sake of action in the world of public life. Contemporary defenses of the liberal arts that stress character formation, the primacy of inter-subjectivity over private thought, community, usefulness, civic engagement, and public service can trace their lineage to Isocrates and Cicero. Those who defend the liberal arts by stressing their usefulness for a life of action in the world, including professional life, can draw upon this tradition without a bad conscience.

As Kimball insists throughout his book, the two traditions he identifies were never really present in their “pure” forms; rather, they more often represent two intertwined strands of a single tradition. When he published his book in 1986, however, he believed that the philosophical or liberal free strand was very definitely in the ascendancy. Over the subsequent quarter century, the rhetorical strand has gradually overtaken the philosophical strand in the discourse about liberal education. Kimball himself came to believe, during the course of his work on American pragmatism, that in the United States at least, public, pragmatic philosophers, like the late Richard Rorty, shifted the discourse of liberal education away from the liberal free tradition and toward the rhetorical tradition. Moreover, the largest national association devoted to liberal education, the Association of American Colleges and Universities, has for about twenty-five years now, stressed “education for democracy” as one of its major programmatic emphases. The AAC&U has definitely come to understand liberal education as education for citizenship above all else.

Such a conception is far from an innovation. Rather, as Archbishop Rowan Williams reminded the Oxford University community seven years ago in his Commemoration Day Sermon (20 June, 2004), the medieval universities in England arose primarily from the practical need for lawyers, doctors, and clergymen, especially for trained canon lawyers. The Arts faculty was from the beginning a part of a larger educational enterprise devoted to the preparation of “public people,” in Williams’s words, people who were equipped to go forth into the world enabled to distinguish between good arguments and bad ones, to honor the importance of reasoned speech, and to contribute to the common good through the exercise of their professional skills. For example, what later became a mere class marker or an avenue to historical and cultural understanding, the study of Latin, was initially a very “practical” undertaking. Latin was the language in which legal and ecclesiastical business was transacted. Thus, those who today scorn language courses that “merely” prepare, say, social workers to deal with growing Hispanic populations on the grounds that such study is not really liberal learning may have forgotten the principal rationale for language study in the medieval university.

Christian academics today should be defending liberal learning in a way that honors this “medieval practicality,” as Williams called it, not only because the medieval university arose under decidedly Christian auspices but also because Christians should agree, along with everyone else, that the quality of public action and public discourse has been steadily declining for years. Almighty God gave to human beings the gift of reason, which, when disciplined through the arts of the *trivium* (we today would call these arts and skills of critical thinking, interpretation, and clear expression in writing and in speech), equip men and women not only to read the Scriptures (which is the principal reason why the Reformers defended a liberal arts education) but also to elevate the level and the tone of public life. Historians of higher education in the United States will someday ponder the question of which came first: the abandonment by some English departments (to name only one field of study that should cultivate the arts of the *trivium*) of careful attention to close

reading, careful writing, and good argument for the sake of the study of critical theory and the pursuit of fashionable publication, or the decline of liberal arts majors. Surely the two developments, widely reported and increasingly lamented, are deeply connected. Defending in a persuasive way, in word and deed, the liberal arts as “practical” skills should be one primary strategy for reviving them in our time.

### III

Should nothing be said to elevate in the public mind the “liberal free” ideal, the idea of a liberal education for its own sake? Is it not a good thing to invite men and women to examine fundamental questions through the study of great texts in order that they might become more fully human? Is it not good to strengthen and furnish the mind through the practice of the liberal arts? Is the capacity to think critically not a noble end in itself? Perhaps the most eloquent defense of the idea of liberal education as its own end was mounted by Cardinal Newman in his *The Idea of a University*. No book on higher education has been in our own time so widely revered in theory and so little honored in practice. Though Newman recognized very well that a liberal education would inevitably have all sorts of practical results, he refused to defend it on those grounds. Rather, he insisted that general knowledge (what we would today understand as a combination of general education and liberal education) disciplined the mind through the cultivation of intellectual virtues like sound and balanced judgment, careful reasoning, and synthetic comprehension. To be able to bring to bear upon any subject the several perspectives of the academic disciplines in a thorough, careful, and fair-minded way for the sake of understanding the subject both steadily and in all its various dimensions: this was the ideal of a general, liberal education. It was, and it remains, an exalted and even a compelling ideal, since Newman insisted, unlike most of today’s educators, that theology had to be a part of the circle of learning (the *encyclo-paedeia*) that constituted general knowledge. Properly circumscribed and qualified, Newman’s idea of liberal education remains as worthy of defense by Christians today as it was in the nineteenth century.

The qualifications and circumscriptions are critically important, especially if the liberal arts are being defended within the precincts of a church-related academy. Newman distinguished the intellectual virtues of a liberal education very sharply from moral virtues on the one hand and from saintliness on the other. No amount of general knowledge and no amount of liberal learning could by themselves make a man morally virtuous. “Quarry the granite rock with razors, or moor the vessel with a thread of silk; then may you hope with such keen and delicate instruments as human knowledge and human reason to contend against those giants, the passion and the pride of man.” And it was the Church, not the university, that made saints, Newman insisted. The university at its very best, through the practice of liberal education, could only produce, in the language of Newman’s time, the gentleman. Thus, for example, the university may induce modesty, an intellectual virtue associated with the recognition of the limits of one’s own knowledge, but only the church could form the spiritual virtue of humility based on the understanding that all of the knowledge in the world counts for naught when one stands alone before the judgment seat of God.

Absent the strictures that Newman placed around his own ideal of liberal education, the “liberal free” tradition has become in some places, over the course of the last two centuries, a rough equivalent of the “religion” of the secular academy. As Professor Jim Turner has shown, in his book *The Liberal Education of Charles Eliot Norton* and in several articles, at the same time that the research university was marginalizing Christianity from the formative role it had played in the ante-bellum colleges, the liberal arts and various fields of study (especially the humanities) came to replace Christianity as the source of intellectual synthesis, aesthetic cultivation, and moral formation within the academy in the United States. Within this broader context, Norton’s “invention of Western Civilization” (both the course and the concept) was but one of the most durable and successful efforts to shape the souls and moral sentiments of students in a manner that had once fallen within the province of religion. For the secular academy, this development

may well be regarded, even by Christians, as salutary. But within the church-related university, unqualified defense of the “liberal free” ideal is problematic.

The replacement of Christianity by some version of the “liberal free” ideal within the secular academy may simply have been the inevitable result of a deep conflict between them. Leon Kass, considering the different ways in which “Athens and Jerusalem” have understood and pursued wisdom, has argued that the “liberal free” ideal may finally be incompatible with the Judeo-Christian tradition. Three years ago, during a conversation with me about liberal education, he spoke of the incompatibility between Athens and Jerusalem “if you rightly distinguish two points of departure: wonder seeking its replacement by knowledge, which makes the perplexities go away, on the side of Athens, versus, on the side of Jerusalem, the fear or reverence for the Lord, which is only the beginning of wisdom but which is never superseded by a kind of full understanding or by comfort in the sufficiency of one’s own powers. The spirit of these two points of departure is very different. Moreover, the wisdom of Jerusalem makes extraordinary demands on how you are to live. What begins with the fear and reverence for the Lord soon issues in a long list of commandments about how to live your life. By contrast, the pursuit of wisdom in the manner of Plato and Aristotle, following the model of Socrates, produces no obligation to family or community, and it seems that the highest kind of life is a private life of self-fulfillment through the pursuit of wisdom and reflection.”

In sum, for Christians the defense of liberal education in our time represents a vitally important but extremely complicated project. The liberal arts, justified in rhetorical terms, are quite compatible with Christianity, since their exercise belongs to the social and political realms in a way that provides for human flourishing. Christians can readily join with their secular counterparts in extolling the virtues of the contemporary counterpart of the *trivium* in promoting a spirit of public service and in forming “public people” who practice reasoned speech, careful argument, and honest and civil engagement with fellow citizens in word and deed. The mo-

tives for such advocacy may differ, but there is no disagreement over ends. As the great monastic Bernard of Clairvaux said in the century preceding the formation of the medieval university, “Some seek knowledge for the sake of knowledge. That is curiosity. Others seek knowledge that they may themselves be known. That is vanity. But there are still others who seek knowledge in order to serve and edify others, and that is charity.” Most Christian and many secular educators today would agree with Bernard.

The more “philosophical” tradition of liberal education, the one that promotes critical thinking and self-examination as practices leading to a life of private self-fulfillment and self-sufficiency, can be advocated by Christians within church-related academies only if, like Newman, they stress both the powers and the limitations of this ideal. I myself would argue that the philosophical tradition of liberal education can only become most fully itself, purged of its own inherent tendencies toward a proud and self-sufficient intellectualism that mistakes corrosive skepticism for logical rigor, in constructive engagement with religious traditions like Christianity. It may well be that within the secular academy, the philosophical ideal of liberal education is the very best that can be offered as both a source and a bearer of wisdom and moral formation, and the durability of that ideal offers grounds for recommending it. Even so, the contemporary disenchantment with the liberal arts may be connected in part to the increasingly unappealing character of the good life for humankind as envisioned by the “liberal free” ideal of Athens.

#### IV

The liberal arts today are best advanced through an alliance of all academics in defense of the rhetorical tradition of liberal education. That defense should not be terribly difficult to muster in the face of the decline of education at every level in the United States relative to other countries. The decline has been especially acute in areas of scientific literacy and achievement and in basic skills like reading and writing. The cause of the liberal arts should only be advocated, however, by academics who are mindful of the major issues facing

higher education today: the swelling of athletic budgets at many schools, the staggering and increasing decline in the number of hours students actually spend studying any subject in college, the lack of access to higher learning, the continued emphasis upon research in place of teaching rather than as an essential part of it, the rise of student indebtedness, and the alarming graduation rates at most schools.

In the face of all of this turmoil and dismay, it may be comforting to know that students majoring in liberal arts fields like humanities, social sciences, natural sciences, and mathematics, outperform all other students on the Collegiate Learning Assessment test that offers a rough measure of critical thinking skills. But unless and until colleges and universities mount a convincing case, in both speech and deed, for the rhetorical tradition of liberal education, the liberal arts and the academy in general will continue to suffer gravely.

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