

Liberal Arts Traditions
and
Christian Higher Education

A Brief Guide

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AT WESTMONT

Introduction

What is a liberal arts education? Given the frequent use of the term, it is remarkable how confusing it can be. Too often those involved in liberal arts education, faculty, staff and administrators, as well as students, have only a fairly vague sense of its meaning, and those meanings are often in conflict with one another.

Two associations are quite common. The first identifies a liberal arts education with general education. A liberal arts education is a broad education providing a student with a wide range of information and broadly transferable intellectual skills.

The second association identifies a liberal arts education with an integrated education. A liberal arts education reveals the connections between different areas of inquiry, enabling a student to bring a variety of perspectives to bear on an issue.

Though there are good reasons for these associations, neither appears essential to the historical understanding of liberal arts education. Breadth and integration might have been features of liberal arts education historically, but they were not the defining features.

Historical Trends in Liberal Arts Education

Liberal versus Practical Arts

This distinction goes back to the first use of the term “liberal arts” in classical antiquity. The liberal arts were studied as an end in themselves by those who did not need to engage in a trade.

Liberal Arts as Liberating Arts

This view can also be traced to antiquity, in particular to Socrates. But in its egalitarianism and its emphasis on freeing the mind from traditional beliefs accepted uncritically, it is more firmly rooted in the Enlightenment.

Liberal Arts Traditions

The tendency to contrast the liberal and practical arts has included from the outset two competing traditions. One commentator calls them the philosophical and the oratorical.¹ Better might be the scholarly and the gentlemanly (it really was the exclusive domain of the gentleman). This yields three major liberal arts traditions.

Liberal Arts vs. Practical Arts		Liberating Arts
Scholarly	Gentlemanly	Liberating
Goal is to discover truth	Goal is to shape character	Goal is to free the mind
Focus is on the discipline	Focus is on the student	Focus is on the student
Fosters disinterestedness	Fosters civic leadership	Fosters autonomy
Exclusive	Elitist	Egalitarian
Tends away from social engagement	Serves society by producing virtuous civic leaders	Serves society by producing critically minded citizens
Faculty are scholars	Faculty are teachers and models of moral and intellectual virtue	Faculty are teachers who facilitate enlightenment
Academic disciplines operate independently	Disciplines are parts of an organic whole	Disciplines' value lies outside themselves
Uninterested in the preservation or reform of social norms	Preserving of the community's heritage	Reforming, even iconoclastic

Practical Education

The three liberal arts traditions — the scholarly, the gentlemanly and the liberating — are by no means the only understandings of higher education. In fact they are in the minority today. Much of today's education is practical education in two senses:

Applied Research

Much of what goes on in research institutions, though related to the scholarly liberal arts tradition, is aimed at meeting social needs or wants — curing disease, relieving poverty, providing energy, strengthening the military, etc. With the gentlemanly and liberating traditions, the applied research model seeks to improve society. But it pursues that aim less through the transformation of individuals than by the advancement of knowledge. With the scholarly tradition, it seeks to expand knowledge, but not for its own sake — rather to solve social, or technological, or environmental problems.

Professional Preparation

Much of what goes on at all institutions, especially at the undergraduate level and in masters programs, is practical in an older sense — it is equipping students for a particular career.

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The recent resurgence in interest in the liberal arts has been marked by calls to integrate liberal and practical education. There are obvious pragmatic reasons for such integration. Schools ignoring professional preparation or applied research lose potential sources of revenue in the form of prospective students or research grants. But there are also principled reasons for such integration. First, while affirming the intrinsic value of knowledge stressed by the scholarly tradition, we can also affirm its instrumental value stressed by the applied research model. Second, the social role played in past centuries by the gentleman — civic leader — is today played by professionals with particular expertise in law, medicine, business, technology, etc. A purely gentlemanly education may make such a professional a better civic leader, but it may not equip a student to enter a profession that will make civic leadership likely. Finally, intellectual liberation may be a pressing need for all, but we risk failing the economically disadvantaged if we ignore their genuine economic needs, needs that can be met by an education that prepares them for a career.

Christianity and the Liberal Arts Traditions

Christianity and the Scholarly Tradition

This union dominated through the Middle Ages. In the wake of the Enlightenment, with its claim that scholarship must be free of religious or metaphysical assumptions, this union dissolved except perhaps at Catholic universities. Among Protestants, the Reformed tradition is leading the effort to re-establish this union.

Christianity and the Gentlemanly Tradition

This union goes back to the Renaissance and was the heart of many antebellum American colleges. Many contemporary Christian liberal arts colleges draw their inspiration from this model.

Christianity and the Liberating Tradition

Colleges emerging from the 19th century revivalist movement might be related to this tradition, given their concern for social transformation. In contemporary Christian higher education, talk of owning one's beliefs or having a self-critical or reflective faith is likely appealing to this model.

Christianity and Practical Education

Christianity and Applied Research

Though the applied research model is now very widespread in the United States, it has emerged only fairly recently and Christian institutions have tended not to make it central to their identity. Nevertheless, the clear connection between the Christian call to love one's neighbor, and the use of knowledge to improve the lives of others leads many individual Christian scholars to make this model fundamental in their understanding of higher education.

Christianity and Professional Preparation

This has been the most widely-embraced understanding of higher education in the Christian tradition. Training clergy has been a central goal of Christian higher education since very early in the church's history. Many denominational colleges in America were founded for this purpose as well as to train teachers and medical professionals.

Rationales for Higher Education in Various Christian Traditions

Different Christian traditions have different theologies and have emerged in different social contexts. They will thus have different rationales for education and will connect with different trends in liberal or practical education.² (The following is merely suggestive. The omission of other traditions is due strictly to ignorance.)

Catholic Tradition

- Generally optimistic about humans' capacity to know without the aid of special revelation from God.
- All things are worthy of study, since all things — having come from God — reveal something of God.
- Reason is an aid to faith, whether preparing one for faith, or helping one articulate and defend one's faith.

Reformed Tradition (especially as understood by Abraham Kuyper)

- A strong doctrine of the fall leads to pessimism about unaided reason discovering truth.
- Basic commitments (one's "worldview"), including religious commitments, partially determine the outcome of inquiry. So whether one is a Christian will matter to the results of one's scholarship and there can be a distinctly Christian perspective in any field of inquiry.
- A strong view of God's sovereignty provides a mandate to bring all fields of study under divine lordship by articulating a fully developed Christian worldview.
- "Worldview" ideology is holistic and thus lends itself to the integrative understanding of liberal education.

Anabaptist Tradition

- Though historically skeptical of higher education, its strong orientation toward service provides a clear rationale for practical education.
- Offers a powerful corrective to the sometimes anti-pragmatic tendencies in the liberal arts tradition.

Lutheran Tradition

- Humans can and should engage in inquiry about non-theological matters and can do so productively without commitment to theological truths.
- The content or methodology of a Christian's scholarship will not differ from others' by virtue of differing religious commitments (pace Kuyper).
- What is distinctive about Christian scholarship is that the Christian scholar exhibits certain (arguably spiritual) virtues in doing their scholarly work.

Wesleyan/Holiness Tradition

- The affirmation of reason, experience, and tradition, as well as scripture, as valuable sources of knowledge provides a rationale for studying all domains of inquiry.
- The emphasis on personal sanctification yields a view of education that includes the cultivation of virtue.
- Strong emphasis on social as well as personal sanctification grounds education for social engagement.

Evangelical Tradition

- Its roots in 19th century revivalism connect it to the Wesleyan/Holiness tradition and its emphasis on education for personal and social transformation.
- The influence of early 20th century fundamentalism provides strong rationale for education for service, though has left residual skepticism of extra-biblical sources of knowledge, of the value of learning for its own sake, and of the possibility of social transformation in the absence of direct divine intervention.
- Evangelicalism's populism can militate against the elitism sometimes found in the liberal arts tradition.
- The hybrid identity of many Evangelicals — e.g., as evangelical Presbyterians, or evangelical Anglicans — provides a wide array of traditions to draw on in shaping higher education, though may threaten coherence.

Theological Issues Informing Philosophy of Education

- Doctrine of the fall and its consequences — is the intellect distorted or merely limited?
- View of the sources of religious authority — scripture or scripture and tradition?
- Relative emphasis on the doctrine of creation — is the natural world worth studying in its own right?
- Understanding of discipleship — personal holiness or social engagement?
- Doctrine of conversion/sanctification — radical break or long process?
- Doctrine of the Holy Spirit — what is God's role in guiding the intellect of believers?
- Eschatology — are social and environmental ills cured by radical divine intervention or the continued work of the church?
- Doctrine on the church/world relationship — engagement or separatism? reform or conversion?

Conclusion

Obviously most institutions exhibit elements of all three models of liberal education and both models of practical education. And many Christian institutions, even those affiliated with a denomination, are shaped by a variety of theological traditions. This can lead to a fair degree of Incoherence in a student's education and tensions within the faculty and between the faculty, administration, and student life staff. But both the incoherence and the tensions can at least be mitigated by greater self-awareness on the part of educators and students.

Educators need greater self-awareness of the educational models informing their work and greater understanding of the models shaping the history of their respective institutions. Students need to see that there are a variety of possible purposes for higher education and that different institutions, different departments and different individual faculty and staff will have different assumptions about the nature and aims of higher education.

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