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The Church and the Liberal Arts and Sciences: An Opinion, delivered in The Free Spirit magazine in Fall 2000

Arend D. Lubbers

Grand Valley State University

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The Church and the Liberal Arts and Sciences

-- An Opinion ---

The church is often in tension between its role as the guardian of eternal truth and its exploration in fields of knowledge that provide for new insight. The monks in medieval monasteries discovered ancient manuscripts bringing Plato, Aristotle and other Greek thinkers into intellectual play in the development of western thought in ways that ultimately changed Christian theological understanding, and the way the Christian religion was practiced. Copernicus, Galileo, and others involved in scientific investigation made discoveries accepted today, yet in their time, did not match the belief held by the church. These were Christian scholars who unsettled the theology of their day yet remained in their religious tradition. Their ideas eventually prevailed throughout the western Christian world as the church adjusted to and learned from the discovered knowledge without surrendering its core message of forgiveness and redemption.

In the development of the United States, learning and worship are closely related—even intertwined. The western church both Protestant and Catholic came with the European settlers. By the 19th century, the building of a school followed soon after the church sanctuary, and schools played a role in communal life dating to the 17th and 18th centuries. Colleges began in the colonial period because parishioners wanted an educated clergy. Higher education in America moved across the country with the frontier, sponsored by the churches of the pioneers and immigrants. The curriculum in these colleges was comprised of the liberal arts and sciences. Over the years the courses that comprised a liberal arts curriculum changed and expanded, but to
be educated meant to know the fields that encompassed human experience from the beginning to the present.

If the church knew, preached, and taught God’s eternal truth why were many of its members so committed to learning? Of course, some of the curriculum was intended mostly to study what was necessary to know more fully the approved theology. But science and philosophy could always lead to uncharted places, and history and literature open the mind to the way others lived and thought. There is within human consciousness, perhaps even the subconscious, the desire to know and feel sure about the truth, and also to use the mind and spirit to continually make the unknown, known. The human desire to certainty and the desire to acquire knowledge that has the potential to undermine the certainty is a paradox in the human experience. The 20th century theologian, Rheinhold Niebuhr claimed that we may well come closest to the truth in paradoxical situations. The church lives in the paradox of proclaiming truth and discovering truth. The discovering part is found in the church’s sponsorship of education throughout its development in the west from the cathedral schools and early European universities to the rich liberal arts tradition that permeates higher education in America.

The learning moves in two directions: first, it leads to objective, new knowledge for all who care to contemplate it; second, it adds to an individual’s capacity for deeper personal understanding, for the understanding of relationships between and among people, and for a relationship to nature. Each person who delves seriously into history, philosophy, literature, mathematics, chemistry, biology, art, music, and the social sciences will not only increase his or her knowledge, but through that knowledge, deepen the spirit as well. This second kind of learning often enhanced by the first is personal. Each person who embarks upon it must have the
will to do it. A person can encourage, assist, and enable another to learn; but the learning is individual. It makes one more sensitive and brings with it a fullness of spirit.

In the New Testament Jesus tells Nicodemus that one must have a second birth, a rebirth of the spirit. In the historical teaching of the Christian church that rebirth comes with the embrace of Jesus as the Son of God and Savior from sin and death. The original intent of the western Church in its embrace of learning may have been to seek greater understanding of this mystery expressed in Jesus’ words to Nicodemus. The church functions then as a proclaimer and a seeker of truth as it leads individuals to a rebirth of the spirit. Knowledge properly sought, learned and applied contributes to the transformation of people and, thus, to their spiritual growth.

Though education and religion were essential functions of the church throughout most of western civilization, education today is sponsored, supported, and to a degree controlled by secular society more than it is by the church. Yet, wherever the human mind roams in its search for knowledge and understanding it is dealing with the stuff that shapes future beliefs and interpretations including those held within the church. The church is likely to continue indefinitely because it has demonstrated a capacity for reform. Whenever humans try to take charge of God and create God in their image, knowledge about life and nature undermine them. Open again to revelation through knowledge as well as need a new church emerges. The process isn’t neat. It does not necessarily bring unity. It takes a long time.

Periodically the human race has to peel away the anxiety that is covered up by misplaced certainty in some cases and cynicism in others. In the people where that process is completed forgiveness and redemption live, and where those people join together the church lives as it should. The proclaiming and seeking, the knowing and the seeking to know, are where we live if
we want to live best. We in the church can proclaim the truth and at the same time be open to
new understanding of the truth we proclaim. There is God given truth, but we are not the authors
of that truth. We seek it. Perhaps that is why over the centuries the wisest thinkers in the church
advocated a liberal education. They knew that human beings needed to use all that was available
to them in the seeking. To calibrate correctly the tension between proclaiming and seeking,
knowing and not knowing, certainty and uncertainty, confidence and humility is the task for the
ture church. Preaching the gospel and advocating liberal arts education is an important way
towards meeting that task.

Arend D. Lubbers
President
Grand Valley State University
To: Jeri Bell
Date: 9-5
Time: 11:45 A.M.

Miss
Mrs. Marty Arnold
of The Free Spirit

Wants to see you
Called on you
Phoned you
Will call back
Returned your call
Asks that you phone

No.

Desires an appointment

When

P.S. 1-A-13

12/91

Signed

asked for

9-18

MEMO: She sent her 2 mail on the 22nd. Did you receive any question?

It: an article that all doing for the Free Spirit.

791-4534
I'm resending this per your request.

----- Original Message -----
From: Marty Arnold <mailto:arnet8@home.com>  
To: Don <mailto:tlosey@gvsu.edu> Lubbers  
Sent: Tuesday, August 22, 2000 2:37 PM  
Subject: your article for The Free Spirit magazine

I have attached an unsolicited essay by Gary Eberle (English Dept. chair) at Aquinas College. (He contributed to our first issue last spring.) I told him about the feature article you were writing and within a week I received this essay with instructions that I could print it or toss it. It is a good overview of the question I posed to you and it could make a good sidebar to your article if you feel it would add anything.

Please read it and let me know if you think it would make a good addition. I will leave it up to you.

I have also attached the contributor guide. Please read it carefully. There's a lot of important information in it about deadlines, audience, bios, etc.

The latest edition has just been delivered to church. If you want a copy stop by any time, or you should receive it in the mail by September 8.

Thanks for your help, Don. I'm really pleased to have you as a contributor.