

Emphasizing Ancient, Christian, and Modern Authors

Ancient Authors

The reality known as Western civilization has included in preeminent ways authors of rare quality who have contributed mightily to the course of human history and helped shape the purposes, thoughts, and lives of regimes and individuals in profoundly remarkable ways. While such authors have been characterized by unique thoughtfulness on matters of far-reaching importance, one also finds among them differing perspectives which have brought about radically new turns in the evolving destinies of humankind. In authoring what some have called seminal texts, such persons were keenly aware of notions and behaviors that dominated the lives of those amongst whom they lived. Yet, the great authors that we speak of have evidenced in explicit or implicit ways that they saw more deeply and more broadly than most of their contemporaries. In doing so, they often opposed the prevalent thinking of their own times.

In looking back over the passage of time in the West, one can readily see that the authors spoken of above initially emerged in ancient Greece and Rome and eventually came to be referred to as “classical”. The latter term has come to denote a particular historical time period, but also connotes a kind of excellence that is long-lasting and that is close to or at the very heights of human excellence simply. However this be, authors of classical antiquity have properly been associated with extraordinarily revealing and refined poetry, insightfully observant histories, and a rationalism acutely aware of the primacy of reason and the hierarchical order of human virtues. Their range of inquiry brought them to consider nature itself, the natures of particular realities, the make-up and working of the human soul, all matters human and those approaching what is divine. It is surely not accidental then that for many centuries after they had scaled the heights of human authorship many in the West turned and returned to them for enlightenment about life and the world.

With some exceptions, the pinnacles of Greek and Roman philosophy, poetry, and histories occurred roughly between the fifth century B.C. and the first century A.D. From the latter century on, however, Western civilization was to be decisively affected by events and thinking which emanated from what is nowadays referred to as the Middle East. In ways far surpassing the effects of belief in the many gods of Greece and Rome, biblical religion (Judaism and Christianity) came to change the West and the world. In having done so, the authors of one book and those writers who drew their thinking from that book have impacted the course of human existence and touched in perhaps unfathomable depth the hearts and minds of countless human beings – rulers and ruled, wealthy and poor, citizens and subjects, men and women.

Christian Authors

Leaving aside for now the history, struggles, and influences of God’s Chosen People, we observe that Christianity’s guiding star was Jesus Christ Himself as presented and reflected upon by those who knew Him and by the Church that He instituted. Additionally, both the Old Testament and the New Testament along with writings emanating from Church Councils and Church Fathers came to give form to a way of living that was new to the world. Then as time passed and Christianity spread, the Christian Church had to make important determinations regarding the education of Christian youth. The choice to be made

was whether or not to allow or include philosophy and pagan literature in the education of young Christians. Thanks to Churchmen like St. Basil, St. Jerome, St. Gregory of Nyssa, St. Gregory Nazianus, St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, and several others, the path chosen led to an important rapport as well as lingering tensions between Jerusalem and Athens. While some scholars and thinkers over the years have voiced or intimated concerns or grave reservations over the ultimate subordination of reason to faith, the fact remains that acquaintance with or, better, appreciative dispositions towards Athens were instrumental in the development of Christianity. In this vein and as recently as 1998 in *Fides et Ratio*, the Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church declared that “faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth...” In so doing, St. John Paul II supplemented or put into a broader context the previous characterization of philosophy as the “handmaid of theology.” Similarly, in his *Regensburg Lecture* (September 12, 2006), Pope Benedict XVI spoke of a “critically purified Greek heritage” as forming “an integral part of Christian faith.”

Nonetheless, while crucial connections between Christian faith and human reason were sustained over the course of centuries, the relationship was not without challenges. For, as important and as helpful as philosophic reason was to reflections on scriptural teaching and in providing human guidance in areas untouched by biblical Revelation, there was not and could not be absolute assurance that all philosophic minds would accept Revelation or see reason as subordinate to or an ally of religious thought. Philosophic minds who could not assent to Revelation or who deviated from the Church’s understanding of Revelation sometimes proceeded quietly or with considerable reserve. In 1210 and 1270, however, synodal and episcopal condemnations manifested more openly previously existing and ever possible tensions between faith and reason. But even in the face of recurring conflicts, a sometimes wary but fruitful coexistence between faith and reason continued.

Modern Authors

Matters changed radically, however, in the early 16th century. For reasons that go beyond the scope of this statement, Niccolò Machiavelli took it upon himself to wage a deliberate war of destruction against the religion that had come to dominate a good portion of the civilized world. At the same time, too, he voiced in sometimes thinly veiled fashion major opposition to and rejection of much of classical thinking. For the Florentine, it was imperative that a new mode of living and a new order of things go into effect and he did his best to call the world’s attention to a new promised land. Thus, over the course of ensuing centuries, key ones of his objectives have taken effect as much of the world made its way towards a secular mindset and orientation. While not agreeing with all of Machiavelli’s views and recommendations, a number of philosophers came to join themselves in a variety of ways to important ones of his objectives. In doing so, some softened Machiavelli’s harshness and made course corrections. In the end, he and those who drew much from his thinking contributed greatly to the inauguration of a new era in human history: modernity. The latter has been characterized by startlingly new notions, seismic political and technological changes, and claims of previously unanticipated human progress. — It remains, however, that we who live in the midst of this new era of human living have good reasons to ponder the far-reaching implications set in motion by what has happened and is still happening.

Why Does It Matter?

In all of the above regards, it is not nearly enough to go about our workaday lives, ride the current wave of technological wizardry, and ingratiate superficial curiosities and pleasures through daily “kicks” of information, gossip, and messaging. — For those persons desirous of a broader and deeper awareness of our true situation, our most important responsibilities, and the authentic measures of human dignity, an education which introduces us to the centuries-old roots of present-day life as well as to the insights, arguments, and claims of our political, poetic, philosophic, and spiritual forbears is of crucial importance. It is so because an education principally focused upon the necessary and appropriately satisfying rewards of professional employment and conventions cannot speak to our deeper selves, cannot touch those dimensions of the human soul which lie in wait for a deeper wonder and a sharp-sighted clarity that goes to the heart of things. It is only fair to say, of course, that our times do accord us much in the way of opportunities, conveniences, health, and longevity. But an education that unveils to us the extraordinary reaches of human and religious aspirations enhances our humanity in ways that exceed what is merely necessary, useful, and of limited range.

Additionally – and most importantly – conflicts and differing perspectives among authors who purport to teach humankind originate and point to contemporary confusion about the purposes or ends of human life itself. Thus, an education that brings into relief this confusion and the permanent importance of getting our priorities in order is an education that is worthwhile in itself, amplifies inquiry, and can come to guide our most profound needs. At the same time, an education steeped in the great books is an education that introduces us to humanity’s recurring questions and to the most thoughtful answers of history’s most intelligent and serious statesmen, historians, scientists, poets, philosophers, and theologians. More particularly, what such an education can do is to unearth or shed light upon alternative understandings of ultimate ends and ways of life as articulated in the greatest classical, Christian, and modern authors. In a variety of fashions, we who live in the 21st century – knowingly or unknowingly — have been touched or affected by more than a few such authors and carry within us concomitant tensions. And while such tensions may not keep us awake at night, they nonetheless invite (or compel) us to seek a proper ordering of the ends and inclinations that have made their way into our souls and to seek as well for the true bases of such an ordering.

Ultimately, to be sure, the highest or best education that one can experience would be directed to as *true* and as *comprehensive* a grasp as possible of the whole of reality or, more realistically and simply, of the most important matters and of the most important questions facing thoughtful human beings. At the risk of oversimplification and important omissions, the following listing points to such matters and questions: the existence and character or nature of God; the nature of the relationship between God and human beings; the nature of grace; the nature of nature itself; what being human entails; the hierarchy of ends or purposes in human life; the fundamental bases or underpinnings of such a hierarchy; the best way for human beings to live; what human happiness entails; the nature, character, and problematic aspects of human love; the character, variety, and ordering of human virtues and excellences; the nature of the human soul; the kinds of souls and human beings; the nature and challenges of friendship; the nature of politics; the kinds of political regimes; the character and possibility of the best regime; the importance and kinds of education; the best or highest kind of education; the meaning and importance of philosophy; the meaning and importance of art and poetry; the meaning and importance of religion; the connection between religion and politics; the meaning, importance, and place of modern science in human life; the meaning, importance, and place of history in human life; the origins, character, and implications of modern technology; the character, importance,

and problematic aspects of modern science; the nature of beauty and its importance in human life; the nature and importance of laughter in human life; the problem of evil; the character and origins of nihilism.

The above areas of inquiry and study are no doubt inexhaustible and in their fullness beyond the ken of all human beings at all times. Nonetheless, the greatest minds have probed with extraordinary intensity, concentration, and depth such questions and issues. In having done so, they have often come to radically opposed views and conveyed these views in writings that benefit and challenge their readers. It is possible, of course, that their disagreements or quarrels will be sources of disquietude for some. Happily, however, we can also look upon their differences as a fortunate invitation to examine the views of those who have claimed advanced wisdom and through such examinations to learn from and be inspired by them, arrive at qualified responses to them, and in some instances, reject them outright. Education then at a high level – the highest level – would surely include careful consideration of those views that are said or claim to be wisest. Doing all of this is undoubtedly the unfinishable work of a lifetime and can in fact only be done in ways and degrees allowed by circumstance, individual propensities, and personal abilities. So understood, an education in the great books at the college level comprising as careful an examination of claims or instantiations of wisdom emanating from history's greatest minds as the college years allow would be a rare blessing. — Such an education would be an importantly, though not an exclusively, dialectical one: dialectical in the sense spoken of in Plato's *Republic*. That is, an education largely focused upon giving and receiving accounts in friendly fashion. Great authors (theologians, philosophers, scientists, poets, historians, statesmen) in their individual ways give accounts of things. Classroom teachers, students, readers receive accounts of things. One could say that great authors are masters in the giving of accounts and that classroom teachers, good students, good readers strive (in accordance with ability and seriousness) to become adept at receiving accounts. — Receiving an account does not imply blind acceptance of or submission to an author's vision of things. It rather entails very careful consideration of, sifting through, pondering, and re-pondering what an author says.

Additionally, receiving an account on the part of a student can often and should as much as possible involve or lead to a student's own account of what an author says and of the issues themselves. The most important elements of such an education would then entail the following: turning one's attention to the essential matters presented (explicitly or implicitly) by great authors; hearing and discussing what a classroom teacher and fellow students say about an author's work and teaching, and formulating (however tentatively or provisionally) one's own thoughts on the matter(s) thereby addressed.

Persuaded as we are of the crucial historical and contemporary importance of the classical, Christian, and modern perspectives referred to above and of the need for a dialectical cast to education at its highest level, we judge that a significant portion of a great books curriculum should feature authors and texts which are among the most important and impactful of each of the perspectives. Moreover, it appears to us pedagogically advisable to allot two semesters of study and discussion to each perspective. Such an arrangement of courses would then feature in both semesters of the freshman year texts representative of classical thought. Such texts would include classical historians, poets, and philosophers. Subsequently, in the fall semester of the sophomore year, texts studied would be ones representative of Christian thought. More specifically, biblical texts and selected texts from the writings of St. Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas. In the spring semester of the sophomore year and in the fall semester of the junior year, those texts which feature different stages of modern thought are to be

studied. And in keeping with our determination to devote two semester to each perspective, the spring semester of the junior year would comprise additional texts in Christian thought.

With students in this kind of educational experience having studied classical, Christian, and modern thought over a three-year period, it would be fitting as a kind of culminating experience in the senior year to select texts from one or more perspectives that bring to the forefront of students' awareness issues and questions of critical importance in modern times and ones of immediate importance to students about to venture forth into today's world. Among matters of major, if not urgent, importance in the preceding regards would be the following: 1) the meaning and importance of history and the idea of progress; 2) the nature, importance, and implications of modern science and technology; 3) virtue ethics and the discourse of rights; 4) the drama of atheistic humanism 5) love and marriage; 6) modernity in the vision of poets; 7) globalism, nationalism, and the limits of commerce. Texts selected for the senior year would be ones which articulate the views of great theologians, philosophers, poets, scientists, and historians as well as those of renowned contemporary scholars who have themselves been the beneficiaries of careful readings of great texts.

Among the important outcomes of the first three years of this program will be an enhanced student awareness of the wide range of matters addressed in the three main perspectives studied as well as the array of agreements and disagreements among them. Through such an experience students can rise to a comprehensive sense of the broad ranges of thought in Western civilization and thereby be exposed to the diverse articulations of the most important questions facing human beings of today, yesteryear, and future times. Such a host of considerations cannot but broaden and deepen participating students, lead them to greater thoughtfulness, a sense of goals high and low in human life, and a sober realism in the face of contemporary challenges. In important and timely ways, the educational experience described above will be especially helpful to students of faith and to those persons in their lives who do not share their faith. For, not only will Christian students draw from the deep well of Christian wisdom; they will also have encountered authorial views which have contributed to the emergence of a world variously predicated on the efforts of reason unassisted by Revelation and grace. Anyone who is part of this increasingly secular world would benefit from conversations with and examples from Christians who have a more than passing knowledge of the essence of matters Christian and who can convey when necessary or appropriate the simple and subtle truths of their religion. — In a related vein, it cannot but be profoundly helpful for non-believers to experience Christians who speak the language of reason and have developed an ability to join or dispute with them on matters that can be considered on exclusively rational grounds. For, while the assistance of grace and Revelation cannot be over-estimated, it would be an unfortunate under-estimation of the power and "grandeur of reason" (Benedict XVI, *Regensburg Address*) not to exercise it on matters of importance that Revelation does not explicitly or implicitly address. — In the final analysis, dialogue with the modern world and with modern human beings can only be enhanced by an articulate awareness of the character of modernity, its strengths and weaknesses, and a sober assessment of what some have called the "discontents" of modernity. Lastly, it almost goes without saying that the content and direction of an education conducive to these results differs considerably from and far surpasses a nostalgic yearning for the past or an inducement to seek refuge in the ideological enclaves of the day.