“You’ve Got to Recapitulate the Positive”

The religious identity of many American liberal arts colleges is often experienced, to the extent that it is at all, only vaguely. It is, effectually, ignored by many professors and students. When it shows up, it may be disconnected from the main current of academic life, as in a dream when an acquaintance appears out of place only to disappear just as nonsensically. Though there are many causes of this, at least one is respectable: to the extent that the institution remains dedicated to liberal learning, its religious identity cannot be interwoven easily or well into all courses and academic programs. There are other causes, too. Many students and professors have been acculturated into a public culture in which any mention of the divine is seen as an embarrassing exposure of a private issue, or as a rude intrusion into others’ private zones. For some, any mention at all of the divine – e.g., in teaching Aristotle or Descartes –may seem overbearingly religious. In addition, many faculty members at religious liberal arts schools have no experience *as students* of the type of school they ended up employed by, and, recalling their grad school ambitions, they may feel their school is inferior. To many academics their school’s religious identity may, therefore, appear either irrelevant to or hostile to their desire to meet the standards of schools they understand and respect more. Despite such commonly lamented problems, for which I offer no cures or even palliatives, it is worth recollecting the positive force a religious identity can have on students. This positive academic force is worth recapitulating, *especially* when only a few departments and courses directly serve this identity. Even the choir needs preaching sometimes. The choir sets the tone for the congregation, and nothing brings down a liturgy as much as either good music done badly or bad music.

§1 To the things themselves

Let’s start from the things themselves, the facts as they face us in our climate of opinion. Many students and professors are animated by a utilitarian view of education in which the goal is to render students more useful. Various types of usefulness are presented as key, with professional goals first on this list. Students often expect courses either to be obvious steps toward their professional goals or, failing that, to be fun and easy. Consequently, even disciplines not intrinsically oriented toward professions are drafted into pre-professional service: e.g., history and literature are there for future teachers, the natural sciences are there for future health professionals. An English professor friend has complained to me that many of her colleagues don’t see literature, but only writing courses, as valuable, because they teach a useful how-to.

Likewise, when my colleagues speak about what I teach, philosophy, I often feel they value not philosophy but only ethics, seeing ethics as a How-Not-To-Be-Bad-To-Others course. That is, when raising their eyes above the professional usefulness of academia, generally people fix their gaze onto another type of utility: civic usefulness. Even to appreciate this end of education requires a broader view, one recognizing the person’s place within a political community. Still, this goal measures education by the aim of making the students more useful.

I don’t wish to downplay the worthiness of these goals. It is quite right for students to desire professional success. Civic virtue is a real good and a proper aim of liberal education, and professional excellence also contributes to the common good. My point is just that these exhaust the obvious answers to the questions, Why do schools exists? Why be educated? Why educate?

I recently had a conversation with some very good students about the aims of education. Once the modes of usefulness were exhausted, I asked whether there were any *intrinsic* reasons to be educated, or whether their sole goal was to become more useful to themselves and others. In answering, the students pointed to the fun of learning about what one likes, but when pressed no one gave a reason for this beyond personal tastes: some people like Chaucer, others like video games. Cultural literacy also came up: this basically means being able not to embarrass oneself in a cocktail party conversation. And after that, nothing at all. Blank stares. They blink.

The next class session discussed the Allegory of the Cave. The Allegory is very useful for putting into perspective the typical answers to the question, Why education? It turns out, in terms of the Allegory, that the answers we have ready to hand reinforce our bonds to life in the shadows. This is a domain in which our gaze has been fixed downward. In the Allegory, Plato’s Socrates presents education as drawing out the power, belonging by nature to each soul, to see, to understand a reality which includes but is not limited to the domain of shadows. After working through the typical exegesis of the text, I re-raised the previous week’s question, “Why be educated?” Suddenly these students easily apprehended a new reason: To expand their contact with reality. They not only saw this as a possible preference, another taste to tolerate; they recognized its overriding importance and recognized that this answer respected them *as persons* in a deeper way than did the previously rehearsed answers. The other answers were still operative in them as motives but were no longer the sole or the highest focus.

Human beings want reality. The problem with suggesting to students (or colleagues) that this is the ultimate goal or “outcome” of liberal education is the implication that people do not already possess reality adequately. The Allegory warns us about this: our natural assumption is that we perceive reality well enough already, and just need to map, navigate, and manipulate it better. The power of the Allegory is to make us worry that what we see may not exhaust what is.

§2 Proletarianization

In his classic *Leisure, the Basis of Culture*, Josef Pieper emphasizes that essential to the liberal arts is its distinction from “the servile arts,” a phrase we no longer employ as it implies inferiority when we now assume usefulness makes for superiority. For Pieper our penchant to speak of intellectual activity as another form of work, thus our failure to recognize the liberality of the liberal arts, reflects a crisis in our ability to affirm the person as intrinsically good. The fight for the liberal arts is a struggle to protect the person as not merely a functionary, whose worth lies in usefulness. Casting intellectuals as workers implies a chilling claim: Like other workers, “The intellectual worker is also bound to his function; he too is a functionary in the total world of work… And something … even more pointed is being said: nobody—whether he be an ‘intellectual’ or a ‘hand’ worker—nobody is granted a ‘free zone’ of intellectual activity, ‘free’ meaning *not* being subordinated to a duty to fulfill some function” (21).

Pieper is not downgrading the importance of work: “what is normal is work… But the question is . . . can the world of man be exhausted in being ‘the working world’?” (24). Pieper sees this total functionalization of the person as dehumanizing; thus he forcefully rejects the Marxist attempt to erase class divisions by making everyone proletarian. He seeks de-proletarianization, identifying three causes of proletarianization, *three* ways human beings can be bound to the working process in a way that squeezes out leisure: *first*, real poverty, a “lack of property,” hand-to-mouth living; and *second*, oppressive state power. De-proletarianization requires enabling people to work well enough to save, to acquire some stability in property, and it also requires limiting the state, maintaining a citizenry that can check governmental power. We should be thankful that most talk about higher education recognizes these as goals, for some deformed educational settings cast the goal of education as serving the state. Material and political poverty will always be with us, and they will always require the urgent attention of a large portion of people. But by themselves these legitimate goods – relief from material and political poverty – cannot de-proletarianize anybody. Alone they would further bind people to the world of use. The third cause of proletarianization, the condition of being bound to the world of total work, is “spiritual poverty.” This is the threat we face. Pieper concludes, “A true *de-proletarianization* . . . would consist in making available for the working person a meaningful kind of activity that is not work.” And this is the goal of liberal education.

In contrast to the various types of training human beings receive, liberal education is supposed to prepare the person for the activity of *intellectus*, *nous*. This recapitulates the Allegory of the Cave, as it is our ability to receive reality actively and intellectually. One might summarize Pieper’s view of the liberal arts with the phrase, ‘*nous*, not use.’

“The leisure of man,” Pieper says, “includes a celebratory, approving, lingering gaze of the inner eye on the reality of creation” (33). For this reason, Pieper emphasizes, humanism alone cannot protect the human person, since we need also to affirm reality itself as good and knowable. This requires times and places set apart for celebration and worship. “The deepest root, then, from which leisure draws its sustenance—and leisure implies the realm of everything that, without being useful, nevertheless belongs to a complete human existence—the deepest root of all this lies in worshipful celebration” (55). In the Pieperian view, and I think this has been evidenced by the seventy years since his essay was written, humanism can get you job training and citizen training, but humanism’s ability to sustain the liberal arts is weak. In the Pieperian view, by maintaining these places of worship and moments of festival, the religious identity of a school asserts that human beings are not exhausted in being functionaries and that knowing the world is worthwhile apart from whatever else it may get us.

If Pieper is right, what Simone Weil argues in her wonderful piece “Reflection on The Right *Use* of School Studies with a View to the Love of God” is not quite adequate for helping us understand the role of religious identity in maintaining the liberal arts. It is perhaps even dangerous. “The development of the faculty of attention forms the real object and almost the sole interest of studies” (588), she tells us, and what she means by this faculty of attention is very close to Pieper’s leisure: “attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object.” Yet she proposes that the sole point of developing this faculty, and this must be our entire *aim* in studying, is to increase the quality of our prayer. Notice how this differs from Pieper’s insistence that leisure “includes a celebratory, approving, lingering gaze of the inner eye on the reality of *creation*” (33). Were we Cathars, believing this physical world to have been created by Satan, we could still affirm studies as *useful* in increasing our ability to attend to the good God.

That is to say, Weil’s account seems consistent with a rejection of the world as worth our “celebratory, approving, lingering gaze.” The study she advocates cannot be liberal; it is, instead, measured by its religious usefulness. In Pieper’s account, the world and our ability to know it can be encountered as gifts, and the presence of the Giver does not smother but rather shields the inherent goodness of our freedom to question and consider the world in its variety. There is a danger that religious schools may seek to play out their religious identity as the crow flies, going to religious life too directly rather than maintaining their liberal character.

§3 The Breadth of Reason

Benedict XVI in his Regensburg Address, and as Josef Ratzinger in his pre-papacy book *Truth and Tolerance*, emphasizes that affirming the universal and permanent relevance of the ancient Greek enlightenment is an essential part of the Christian faith. The threats to the faith he enumerates in the Address take the form of attempts to *dehellenize* the faith and Western culture. One aspect of this dehellenization reduces the faith to social ethics, to its practical functioning. (This shows up at many religious academic institutions as a reduction of “mission” to service.)

Benedict emphasizes that modern rationality, construed solely as mathematical reason subject to empirical verification, is not reason itself, but only a part of reason. If we think that this part of reason, this “self-limitation of reason,” is the whole, then it becomes a “mutilation of reason.” The very technological success of this *part* of reason establishes—for most of us as a vague expectation, for some as an explicit claim—a rigorous standard of certainty to be applied to *all* claims to truth. But this standard cannot be met by all types of knowledge. Our knowledge of morality, of the common good, of God, of the origins of the universe, and of the ultimate meaning of human existence cannot be, and we should not expect them to be, verified with this type of mathematical or experimental evidence. Benedict argues, to accept a mutilated part of reason as the whole is unreasonable, and it leads us into an irrationalism because the most meaningful questions driving the human eros for knowledge are relegated to being “subjective.”

This “self-limitation of reason” shows a humble and tolerant face, but, Benedict suggests, this is a false appearance. In fact, by severely narrowing reason, it relegates everything that is not mathematically or empirically demonstrable to being irrational. The true and the good in the moral and religious spheres get demoted into the merely subjective. Which is the better band—Led Zeppelin or The Who? Well, we all have our preferences, and if two people get involved in a heated debate about this we are prone to think they are unhinged, intolerant of others’ tastes, a bit tyrannical. Arguments about morality and religion are now placed in this category, too. And to make objective, universal claims to moral or religious truth appears similarly unhinged, intolerant, tyrannical. We are prone to ask, Hasn’t this person heard that there is no truth about that type of question? Of course, moral and religious claims matter a lot more than claims about the best rock-and-roll band, and that we can have reasonable beliefs about the ultimate human good and the truth of the universe is essential to our personhood. Thus, Benedict argues, this mutilation of reason results in a diminution of man; it seems irrational, in our climate of opinion, to seriously pursue answers to the questions that are the most important to us. This explains why we tend to see cultures as worldviews or value systems rather than as inherently in the game of truth (and falsehood). Modern, limited reason has been quite successful on one level, but “the laws of method that have brought it success have, through being generalized, become its prison.”

A religious liberal arts school—where the religion protects the liberal arts, and religious questions are undertaken in the mode of liberal education—resists this modern self-limitation of reason, and by doing so, a religious liberal arts school defends the breadth of reason and opens up for discussion questions that are marginalized or outright excluded in other settings. This deserves emphasis: a religious identity does not only or primarily restrict academic freedom, but broadens it by expanding the territory of questions we can authentically and publicly explore.

The presence of a theology faculty is crucially symbolic in this regard. A theology faculty – and not merely a Religious Studies Department (Benedict notes that to do this theology must be present *not* as one of the human sciences) – a theology faculty is perhaps the easiest marker of a school with any religious identity at all. It is by having something extra, something elsewhere shut out, that we mark ourselves. This is essential to our dedication to the full breadth of reason. This breadth cannot be provided in the same way by extra-curricular groups and activities. Schools that permit religion only or primarily as part of extra-curricular student life imply that these are not reason’s questions. Academically, we have more, not less.

§4 Conclusion

Eric Voegelin contrasts classical and modern education as follows:

*Classic*: Education is the art of *periagoge*, of turning around (Plato). *Modern*: Education is the art of adjusting people so solidly to the climate of opinion prevalent at the time that they feel no ‘desire to know.’ Education is the art of preventing people from acquiring the knowledge that would enable them to articulate the questions of existence. (654)

Voegelin states this in an amusingly brusque way, but he is basically right. Our climate of opinion views the world, education, and thus the person, in terms of usefulness and mathematical-empirical proof, and thereby muffles the human *eros* to indulge in a “*celebratory, approving, lingering* gaze of the inner eye on the reality of creation” or to wonder about its source and our destiny. By institutionally recognizing the breadth of human enquiry and by sheltering a place for the questions of existence, the religious identity of a school provides invitations upward, which some students accept, even if many don’t.

One positive role of religious identity on the academic character of a school is to resist the cultural force that would have us measure education and thus the person by utility. For this reason, these schools cannot maintain their religious identities academically merely by retaining a theology faculty or requiring a few theology courses, though these are essential. For it is also in maintaining continuity with the pagan Greek enlightenment that these schools institutionally resist both the opposing temptations *either* to make all learning subservient to religion *or* to preserve their identity nominally by checking off the “Religion” box in the curriculum.

Another positive role of religious identity on the *academic* character of a school is to erect certain pointers inviting student attention to a possible outside of the cave. The three most important of these signposts are, first, the institution’s official statement that students have souls and that there is a transcendent reality deserving consideration and affording study; second, a Theology Department; and third, the openness by professors of other disciplines to consider seriously the theological perspective when it touches their discussion topics. Questions and perspectives are available that in other contexts are implicitly or explicitly refused. Some students ignore these signs, some notice them with annoyance, but some follow them, or wonder about them, and thus worry about whether what appears as reality to our climate of opinion is the full thing. Even if many choose not to follow these signposts, religious identity, as long as it is maintained at all, provides structural pointers inviting students and professors inward and upward. Academic life in such institutions is not (just) restricted, but broadened, since the place inward may be named and the space to move upward is reopened.