

THE SACRED WAY OF LIBERAL ARTS

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We may describe the purpose of a liberal education in various ways. We might, for example, focus on its practical benefits in relation to enhancing success in life and career. We might emphasize its role in personal happiness and fulfillment. Liberal education may serve the betterment of society by focusing on the maintenance of cultural tradition and the production of effective citizens for a democratic society. Although we may value one of these purposes over another, they probably all seem familiar to us. Liberal education advocates may also describe the purpose of education in a less obvious way, in terms similar to those used to discuss spiritual or religious concerns. We may assume this orientation without conscious awareness, and we may even initially reject the suggestion that we do so. On further reflection, however, such a perspective might prove useful in considering an alternative conceptualization of what we mean by liberal education.

My thoughts on this topic originated at the 1986 conference of the Association for General and Liberal Studies. I made my presentation, proposing that we might understand liberal education as a vehicle for encouraging students to think more comprehensively and to develop broad and integrative understanding, on the final day of the conference (McWilliams 1987). The companion paper in that session described the author's attempts to persuade the dean of the School of Agriculture at his university that agriculture students would benefit from a liberal education. The dean, it appeared, did not see the study of the arts, humanities, and social and natural sciences as particularly relevant to the lives of his students, whose primary educational goals focused on more effective ways to raise beef cattle. A lively discussion ensued among those present, each of whom

believed quite strongly that a liberal education enhances the lives of all humans, including cattle growers.

Following a good deal of debate, a member of the audience raised a point that went something like this: "I've been at this conference for three days and have heard a great deal of talk about how you all believe in the importance of a liberal arts education for successful living. These discussions have reminded me of the sort of thing I have heard at religious revivals. You have tremendous faith and commitment to these notions, and you express them with great fervor. You have not, however, presented any objective evidence supporting the value of this education in which you believe. Your belief in these values is akin to religious belief."

Like many in the audience, I initially resisted this comparison. I believed in the rationality of my commitment to the value of liberal education, which, rooted in an objective sense of human values, seemed different from religious beliefs, which seemed only to rest on faith. However, this comment remained in my awareness for several years. As I returned to it again and again, I came to believe that it reflects a compelling, valid, and fertile point. I find, as I attend conferences and have discussions with my colleagues, that we *do* tend to speak of liberal education in religious tones. We have great faith that a good liberal education makes people better and brings them closer to a higher ideal. We believe this deeply and personally. Yet, we might find it difficult to justify the claim that life becomes more fulfilling, satisfying, or meaningful to those who appreciate and are familiar with science, literature, philosophy, or the arts.

A "Church of the Liberal Arts"?

This line of thought has led me to ask whether I might enhance my understanding of the meaning and value of liberal education by applying an ecclesiastic metaphor. My willingness to entertain this metaphor, in a playful manner, rests on some assumptions about the nature of the relationship between reality and our constructions of it that I learned from reading the work of psychologist George Kelly (1955; 1979). Kelly found it useful to assume that the events in the world hold no allegiance

to the words that we use or the concepts the words symbolize. We might well understand our beliefs as our personal and social constructions, and consider them open to revision and replacement as we invent more useful ideas. We might also take the position that we need not necessarily disprove one proposition in order to entertain an alternative. We might then propose a novel way of looking at something just to see where it would lead us.

Elaborating on these assumptions, Kelly (1964) also proposed an invitational mood to language as an alternative to the conventional indicative mood of language which presumes that qualities inhere in events. In this invitational mood, we suggest a novel interpretation and take responsibility for it as our own construction, rather than assuming it reflects some inherent aspect of the events. With these ideas in mind, I wondered what might happen if we considered a liberal arts education as a sacred undertaking. Pursuit of this ecclesiastic metaphor does not require or imply rejection of alternative belief about the purpose of liberal education. Nor does it attempt scholarly thoroughness in addressing all that others have said about this complex subject. Instead, I wish to apply the metaphor "naively," to see what interesting ideas it will beget.

The use of this religious metaphor immediately invites application of a number of religious concepts to the way we think about liberal education. The distinction between church and state comes to mind. We find it useful to separate those human activities that have to do with practical and mundane matters from those with more lofty goals. We might consider it beneficial to talk about the components of higher education that concentrate on useful skills as serving the interests of the state. Perhaps the development of communication and mathematical skills and the concentration of a major, particularly in a professional field, serve these interests. We might then think of the core and distribution requirements of an undergraduate education program, and liberal arts subject matter that focuses on underlying epistemological processes and comprehensive understanding, as serving some higher interests similar to those addressed by the church. We could likewise apply the related concept of secular vs. sacred. We might benefit by emphasizing the practical importance of secular teachings and recognizing

that sacred teachings might concentrate on appreciation of universal and eternal issues that may or may not have immediate practical utility.

In the following I further elaborate this metaphor through four general examples of parallels between religious concerns and liberal education. We can well imagine a variety of additional examples. First, I suggest that sacred and secular approaches to knowledge derive from a singular tendency in humans to attempt to transcend the immediately manifest by seeking eternal and universal order. Second, I propose that both approaches may provide methods for legitimizing current values and beliefs as well as developing transcendent knowledge of "higher" values and beliefs. Third, I suggest that the religious concept of idolatry parallels our tendency to believe that our current knowledge represents a final truth. Fourth, I propose that the cognitive development that occurs through consciously reflexive education can generate a transformation of consciousness analogous to being "born again."

Science: Secular or Sacred?

In a fundamental way we might suggest that the secular and sacred pursuits do not represent essentially different aspects of human experience. Perhaps they derive from the same human urge. We often see science, for example, as an intrinsically secular area of human endeavor. We commonly assume that science deals with objective facts and reality, as opposed to religion, which we may see instead as rooted only in faith. Many people see science and religion as opposite, and even incompatible, modes of knowing about the universe. Study of the philosophy and history of science, however, does not support the view of science as a truly objective process. Kuhn's (1962) study of scientific revolutions demonstrates the inherent involvement of personal and political factors in the development of science. Feyerabend's (1978) analysis of the history of science shows that many well accepted discoveries did not follow the supposed rules of scientific methodology. From these studies we learn that scientists operate very similarly to other human beings in the way they pursue their understanding.

Perhaps scientists also ask questions similar to those asked by theologians. Bakan (1968; 1969) argues that both science and religion express a singular human impulse to appreciate the nature of existence and the possibility that human knowledge can transcend the obvious manifest reality to make contact with a more fundamental, unmanifest reality. Writing within a theological context, Torrance (1989) proposes that we inherently base our approach to modern western science in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which understands the universe as created by an intelligence whose unified order manifests itself on this earth in forms to which human understanding may gain access. He suggests that the practice of both science and religion assumes an ultimate order that transcends our immediate comprehension. We approach science and religion with an implicit awareness of this ultimate order and its constraint on our rational search.

Belief in order, the conviction that, whatever may appear to the contrary in so-called random or chance events, reality is intrinsically orderly, constitutes one of the ultimate controlling factors in all rational and scientific activity. The same belief in order, together with a refusal to accept the possibility of an ultimate fortuitousness behind the universe, lies deeply embedded in religious consciousness. . . . Science and theology are each dedicated in their own way, not only to clarifying and understanding order, but to achieving order, not only to probing into and disclosing the order of things as they actually are, but to the actualising or realising of order in our interaction with nature and with one another. That is to say, in theology and science alike, we are concerned with *the kind of order that ought to be*, through relating actual order to the ultimate controlling ground of order from which all order proceeds. (Torrance 1989, 17-19, emphasis in original)

This formulation parallels Polanyi's (1958; 1969) postcritical perspective that scientific discovery involves a passionate commitment of faith on the part of the scientist. As he describes it, science rests on personal investment in a process of deepening our understanding of the order that exists in reality. Since we

presume our commitment to a real universe, we must maintain awareness that it will reveal itself in an indeterminate range of ways as our knowledge evolves (Polanyi 1964). Thus, the ultimate order or laws of the universe lie continuously beyond our grasp, and we must remain forever mindful that the unknown, the unmanifest, continues to exist.

These perspectives suggest a value to perceiving the practice of science as sacred as well as secular. When it provides an immediately useful understanding of the universe and leads to technology that improves human lives, we can see it as serving the secular interests of the state. When science seeks to develop transcendent wisdom, it serves the sacred interests of the church. Suppose we consider the proposition that the roots of both science and religion lie in the search for transcendent understanding of unity and order. A science course taught from the "sacred liberal arts" perspective, for example, might emphasize the deep commitment of the scientist to a belief in the order of the universe and focus clearly on ways in which this belief informs scientific discovery. For example, Albert Einstein, although considered an atheist by many, understood the sacred nature of his scientific work.

My religion consists of a humble admiration of the illimitable superior spirit who reveals himself in the slight details we are able to perceive with our frail and feeble minds. That deeply emotional conviction of the presence of a superior reasoning power, which is revealed in the incomprehensible universe, forms my idea of God. (Barnett 1962, 101)

We may rarely find science expressed this way in the academy. We may find instead that descriptions of scientific knowledge, in both the natural and social sciences, emphasize facts and interpretations that support a more materialistic undertaking and a limited view of our everyday world, rather than the pursuit of a deeper sense of order. Perhaps this failing reflects two different ways in which we understand and teach both the liberal arts and religion: one that emphasizes tradition and practicality and another that emphasizes the seeking of higher-order, transcendent wisdom. I would like to pursue this theme

by describing its expression by two writers whose work has made significant contributions, one in the liberal arts and the other in religion.

Liberal Arts: Legitimizing or Transforming?

Kimball (1986; 1990) describes the history of the idea of liberal arts (*artes liberalis*, in the Latin). He distinguishes between two parallel, yet antithetical, traditions that have evolved together over time. The origins of this concept, according to Kimball, trace to the Greek city-states during the Homeric period of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE. The rise of democratic institutions led to a great deal of interest in the transmission of the culture to future generations of free citizens who would participate in democratic governance. Kimball describes how the Greek term from which the Latin *liberalis* originated related both to the political freedom to participate in governance and the leisure time that members of the advantaged classes possessed. The debate about the appropriate education for these free individuals focused on two perspectives. One, the *oratorical*, emphasized the arts of grammar and rhetoric and the ability to prepare and present a persuasive speech in the context of participatory democracy. This approach supports the *legitimization* of the traditional virtues and order of the society. The other, the *philosophical*, emphasized the rational path of logic and mathematics as the disciplines by which we might further human understanding and *transform* it through analytical and critical thought. This approach, as it has reemerged in later centuries, emphasizes "free thinking" and the search for order and transcendent laws, instead of the reading of classical texts. As Kimball points out, the debate over which of these two traditions represents the "true" liberal arts continues unabated to this day.

Kimball embeds his arguments within a broad discussion of the meaning of the term "liberal" and its relation to liberal arts and suggests that the philosophical tradition, which includes science, has gained ascendance over the rhetorical in modern American colleges. More recently, this emphasis has focused on the professional, discipline-specific specialization of individual

scholars rather than the more general "liberal arts" pursuit of unified knowledge, which remains perpetually elusive. Kimball suggests that those fortunate enough and free enough to pursue liberal education must choose between these two traditions.

In a conceptualization intriguingly parallel to Kimball's orator/philosopher distinction, Wilber (1983) distinguishes between *exoteric* and *esoteric* religious practices. Exoteric practices or teachings, similar to the oratorical approach, reflect "the degree of integration, organization, meaning, coherence, and stability of" particular cultural and personal understandings (252). Individuals and cultures tend to seek *legitimacy* in their present structure of understanding. A successful society should provide its members with a world view that enables them to validate their existence by translating their experiences into terms that provide meaning and consistency to that world view. Esoteric practices, more philosophically, seek to assist individuals, and hence the society, in authentic *transformation* of the structure of understanding to higher levels beyond those currently acknowledged or accepted within the culture. This distinction might lead to a suggestion, similar to Kimball's, that the seeker of religious knowledge, like the liberal artist, must choose between the two approaches.

However, Wilber believes that a religion should offer both of these features; it should seek to validate the legitimacy of present knowledge as well as enable its transformation toward higher levels of development. Wilber's thesis rests on a central assumption that as we evolve we incorporate legitimate knowledge as a component within transcendent understanding, enabling us to operate on the earlier knowledge from a higher-order perspective. In applying this metaphor, we might suggest that the oratorical approach to liberal education can provide students with a meaningful sense of integration, stability, and purpose. We could further propose that the philosophical approach has the potential for supporting transcendental aspirations "characterized by genuine study and discipline aimed at effecting authentic transformation" (Wilber 1983, 254). Drawing the parallels between Kimball's and Wilber's arguments, and pursuing our religious metaphor, we might propose that a "church of the liberal arts" should include both the oratorical

emphasis on the classic texts and traditional virtues, legitimizing traditional cultural and individual frameworks, as well as the philosophical emphasis on seeking potentially transcendent frameworks of knowledge.

For example, we might consider multicultural education from a "sacred liberal arts" perspective. It might provide legitimization by assisting students to learn about the traditions of a variety of cultures, including their own, endowing them with a deeper sense of identity and understanding of their heritage. It could also contribute to transformational knowledge by helping students to transcend the particulars of a single cultural perspective and develop a more inclusive, tolerant view of the nature of culture and universal aspects of human experience. Joseph Campbell's (1949) conceptualization of the "monomyth," in which he demonstrates a similar pattern among the religion myths of a wide variety of cultures, represents a notable example of a perspective that can help us learn about our own culture as well as many other cultures, and develop a higher-order perspective for viewing all cultures.

Attempts to transform knowledge may well encounter both societal and personal obstacles. The rhetorical tradition tends to support the existing understanding and "regard the goal of liberal education to be training the virtuous citizen who will participate in and guide the polity" (Kimball 1990, 16). If advocates of the oratorical tradition incorporate science and philosophy at all, they tend to view them as sources of information that they might use in furthering the rhetorical goal, rather than as vehicles for pursuing transcendent wisdom. Hence, "the traditional virtues of that community tend to be accepted uncritically, while the search for new knowledge, particularly in the nonhuman sciences, is minimized or neglected" (16-17). We may liken this tendency to common practice in exoteric religion, perhaps more particularly in its fundamentalist interpretations, in which citizens achieve virtue by following established rules of moral behavior rather than by pursuing higher consciousness.

We might apply additional religious metaphors to some overly rigid practices within the oratorical approach. (I shall raise several examples for their potential future fertility without exploring them thoroughly at present.) Those who empha-

size the study of traditional texts may identify "canons" and treat them like the "holy scriptures." Some practitioners, like "fundamentalists," may interpret texts absolutely and literally, in contrast to those who see them more metaphorically or as meaningful within a cultural context. We might compare the debate regarding what texts properly belong in the canon to similar debates regarding authentic biblical texts. Some may propose "apocryphal" texts in the liberal arts canon. We might understand the various perspectives within the "political correctness" controversy in terms of accusations of "piety" and "heresy."

The Danger of Idolatry

Perhaps we can understand some of the hazards of these tendencies by applying yet another religious metaphor: *idolatry*. Idolatry occurs when we treat a product or manifestation of the human quest for understanding as the final truth (Bakan 1966; 1967; Barfield 1988; McWilliams, in press). We commit idolatry when we forget that reality remains indeterminate and may continue to manifest itself in ways that we cannot yet anticipate. Idolatry arises from our failure to appreciate our knowledge as a human invention that can only *represent* reality but cannot *be* reality. We may transcend idolatry by becoming aware that nature does not furnish our beliefs. Instead, we construct them as active products of our human consciousness. To avoid idolatry, a "sacred liberal arts" approach to scientific concepts might understand them as inventions that we use for anticipating events, rather than as the truth. Modern physicists, for example, understand that they intimately influence their observations and acknowledge that concepts such as "quarks" and "charm," used to describe subatomic particles, or "wave" and "particle" to describe light, represent their metaphoric human constructions (Zukav 1979). They realize that the unknown perpetually exists. These realizations may enable us to use our constructed representations metaphorically and imaginatively, seeking for new knowledge, with full human participation in the shaping of the universe.

The Fear of Transcendence

We also resist the transformation of our understanding for very personal reasons. In the evolution of transcendent knowledge, "every transformation in development necessitates the surrendering of the [exclusive allegiance to] . . . the particular present translation" (Wilber 1983, 116). New transformation inevitably involves the frustration of the present understanding and the ways it helps us to explain events (its translations). This theme recurs in a wide variety of approaches to understanding human development (Kegan 1982; McWilliams 1989). Our self-structures develop to provide meaning and order to our experiences. Further evolution to more complex and comprehensive structures involves "letting go" of our exclusive identification with the earlier structures and embracing their replacements with new, higher-order structures. The earlier structure that the individual experienced as the whole self remains as a part within the new self-structure, as when we incorporate knowledge that gave legitimacy to an earlier understanding as a component within a newly transcendent framework. This process requires "dying to" the identification with the old self, an often difficult and painful process. We much prefer the security of our existing mode of understanding, and so we typically resist experiencing the pain of these transformative changes unless they become inevitable. We see undergraduate students struggling with this issue in their religion classes when they confront the necessity to give up their familiar "Sunday School theology" in favor of a more mature and contextual understanding of biblical teachings.

Liberal Arts as a Sacred Practice

We may find it necessary consciously to embrace specific techniques to overcome the obstacles to transcendence and pursue a transformational approach to liberal arts. These methods require that we focus our awareness upon the assumptions of our existing understanding in a way that frustrates its continued automatic application. Many esoteric religious practices, such as meditation techniques and Zen koans, aim specifically to

interrupt attempts to continue to understand the world in terms of current translations and to encourage the transformation of understanding to newer and higher levels. Some psychotherapy techniques such as psychoanalysis, gestalt, and cognitive therapies use similar methods. These practices have in common an injunction that we observe and accept, but do not act upon, our automatic responses. This required break in the exclusive hold of the lower-order translation ultimately results in a higher-order transformation. Parallel methods in teaching of the sacred liberal arts might provide us with a different way of seeing ourselves, our students, and our subject matter. This new way of seeing might include several basic components: 1) an emphasis on awareness of assumptions and the process of knowledge acquisition rather than an exclusive consideration of content, 2) a focus on the universal and eternal in addition to the particular and temporal, 3) a willingness to embrace more comprehensive understanding in which our previous belief structures become components within new structures, and 4) an awareness of the temporary, replaceable, *ad hoc* nature of our beliefs.

We might, for example, focus on an examination of the accepted and traditional assumptions about how we understand the universe, both socially and individually, by devoting more conscious attention to the processes by which we acquire and affirm our knowledge. A balance of the oratorical and philosophical approaches could assist us in studying classic texts both for their universal validity and for their value in the critical examination of their social and epistemological contexts. We should approach this study in a consciously *reflexive* way, in which we turn our analytical methods upon our own human processes, recognizing that we humans carry responsibility for our understanding. Such a perspective can assist in weakening exclusive attachments to existing knowledge systems and stimulate a consideration of higher order, but as yet mysterious and potentially threatening, new insights. As those who have attempted to introduce undergraduates to significantly different ways of understanding know, students will receive these methods with a good deal of resistance and argument.

Through this approach, students may come to experience some frustration with continuing to use existing views in the traditional fashion when we make those views themselves the

object of study. If we choose to help students embrace this frustration, however, it can lead to a more comprehensive understanding. Our original beliefs or knowledge, which constituted the context for defining reality, come to make up the content, or components, of a more abstract, inclusive, and integrated higher-order belief system (McWilliams 1988; 1989). For example, students enter college with a personal cultural heritage that they use as a context for interpreting their experience of the world. Reflective learning about the history and assumptions of their native culture combined with exposure to practices of other cultures can lead them to develop explicit awareness of their tacitly held values and opinions and, further, to a more general conception of the process and implications of acculturation. Their original assumptions, previously used "unconsciously," become examples or components within this more abstract understanding of culture. An active and conscious emphasis on the constructed nature of our beliefs can also assist students to develop awareness that any new belief system also falls short of the ultimate, and that the search for unified understanding of the eternal order must continue indefinitely. Authentic sacred liberal arts practitioners would, ideally, develop the lifelong skill of studying their beliefs and assumptions and would remain open to continuing transformations.

Suppose that we could succeed in developing liberal arts teaching practices that facilitate the pursuit of transcendent wisdom, in addition to the oratorical tradition's emphasis on preserving the traditions of the culture. We might think of liberal education as the transformation of human consciousness from a lower, more limited view, toward a higher, more comprehensive perspective. We could then have a different understanding of the purpose or goal of a liberal education. Again, we might use several terms from both Western and Eastern religions metaphorically to assist in further articulating this transcendent goal of liberal arts. If the development of transcendent wisdom required the death of the previously held assumptions, might we then describe the process as being "born again" to higher understanding? Might we appropriately use terms like "salvation" or "redemption" to describe the process of being delivered from the danger of limited understanding? Could we say that a transformative liberal education might lead to a kind of "enlighten-

ment," in the literal sense of "disillusionment" which comes from seeing the delusional nature of our typical thoughts? Might we say that it brings us a little closer to "heaven" or "nirvana"?

To return to the discussion at the meeting of the Association for General and Liberal Studies that prompted these thoughts, I might hope that consideration of these issues and questions would have convinced the dean of agriculture to provide stronger support for liberal arts education for his students. I suspect that, at a minimum, these ideas might have raised the fervor of the participants in the discussion, which, to add one further metaphorical element, could have exemplified "preaching to the choir." Based on the response to a presentation of some of these ideas to the "choir members" at the 1991 AGLS conference (McWilliams 1991), others who teach the liberal arts appeared to find the metaphor helpful for supporting a more transcendent view of liberal education that embraces the deeper values of a variety of cultures. Perhaps the primary importance of the sacred liberal arts metaphor lies in its help in focusing the value and objective of liberal education on its impact on the personal life of the individual student and, ultimately, on the evolving consciousness of humankind. We might further this process by considering the objective of liberal arts education to correspond to that of authentic spiritual practice: to liberate the individual from the confinement of a limited perspective of self and the universe and to assist the person in embracing a larger, more inclusive view.

The notion that we might view liberal arts as a sacred process invites further elaboration of the questions raised here as well as others that it might stimulate. Pursuit of this metaphor might advance our understanding toward a more profound perception of the potential of a truly "higher" education. In the context of this venture, we might advance our comprehension of the deeper implications of liberal education.

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