



# PLAY IT AGAIN, SAM?

The Liberal Arts in High School and College

BY DR. BEN REINHARD

When I describe Christendom’s curriculum to high school students, it’s not unusual to be greeted with some form of the sentence, “Oh, I did that in high school.” It’s an innocent enough statement, but it conceals a weighty implied challenge: isn’t it a waste of time to go through this all again? Truth be told, the question is a thoroughly sensible one. Students (and their parents!) naturally want to get as much as they can out of a college education, and simply repeating material from high school does not, on the surface, seem like the best investment. Combined with widespread cultural anxiety about the economy and increasing institutional support for the STEM fields, the sense of redundancy and futility becomes hard to resist. Nonetheless, it should be resisted.

Before launching in to the main argument, however, it is important to give credit where credit is due. The resurgence of classical humanities in American high schools is one of the great educational success stories of the past generation or so, and the countless dedicated educators who made it possible deserve our thanks. Students who study at such schools are initiated into the great tradition of Western Civilization - and they have every reason to be proud of their education. Does this mean, then, that the continued study of the liberal arts is superfluous?

I am unconvinced. First, and most importantly, collegiate study differs in kind, not merely degree, from the sorts of learning that are done in even the best high schools. The primary focus of high school education is – rightly – the acquisition of knowledge and basic cultural literacy. This is appropriate to the age of the students and the training of their teachers. In college, however, the game is different: while it is still necessary to have a “big picture” understanding of the humanities, students are given the tools for independent investigation and research. To put it another way: in high school, students learn what historians have said. In college, they learn to think and read like historians. Students at Christendom read and grapple with primary sources, not textbooks – and they do so under the guidance of professors who are recognized experts in their field.

Because of all this, it’s no surprise that the amount of overlap between high school and collegiate liberal arts is usually overstated. Indeed, in my experience, the overlap is usually limited to a portion of the literature core. I have taught hundreds of students in five years at Christendom, many of whom had already read some of the literature core: Homer and Vergil and the parts of the Divine Comedy, for instance. But I’ve never met a freshman who had completed a careful,

six-semester sequence on Thomistic philosophy, or a rigorous year-long study of Sacred Scripture.

Despite all this, it is all but inevitable that there should be some overlap: in order to make the more advanced upper-division study possible, Christendom needs to ensure that all of her students have the same basic understanding of the history and culture of Western

Civilization. Some incoming students will have been exposed to some of these sources before. Aren't these students, at least, wasting a little time?

There are two responses to this. In the first place, for those who believe in liberal education, repeated reading of the great books is not optional: it is a necessity. As C. S. Lewis noted, "There is hope for the man who has never read Malory or Boswell or Tristram Shandy or Shakespeare's Sonnets, but what can you do with a man who says he 'has read' them, meaning he has read them once, and thinks this settles the matter?" A reader who is satisfied with a first reading of such a book, Lewis suggests, hasn't really read the book at all. And the books contained in the Christendom core are precisely the sort of books whose meaning cannot be exhausted on a first reading. They should be revisited, again and again, throughout life; as the reader grows in maturity and experience, the books reveal more of their wisdom. Like Aslan in Lewis' Narnia, they grow along with the reader.

This brings us to the second point. Given that the great books should be revisited, it is especially important that they be revisited when the student is on the verge of full adulthood. Cardinal Newman noted that the college years are an "all-important"

time of life "especially favourable to mental culture"; because of this, "a youth who ends his education at seventeen is no match (*cæteris paribus*) for one who ends it at twenty-two." Cardinal Newman's intuitions are backed up by modern scientific studies, which have highlighted the importance of young adulthood (ages 18-24) for the formation of personality, the development of memory, and the full maturation of the brain. These are the

years in which we become who we will be for the rest of our lives. It's hard for me to imagine cutting Homer, Aristotle, Aquinas, and Shakespeare out of that process.

Despite all this, it's not hard to find teachers, counsellors, and writers who argue that the high school is for liberal arts, and college for career training. This idea strikes as not merely wrong, but dangerous: if the liberal arts are worth studying at all, they are worth studying in college. Liberal education is after all oriented towards the

cultivation of the intellect; to abandon it just before the final, "all-important" stage of intellectual development is to admit that we never really believed in it in the first place. Students are, unfortunately, quick to pick up on the suggestion. Truth, goodness, beauty – the objects of a liberal education – belong to high school. They are (at best) optional in the real, adult world of careers, ambition, and money.

This isn't to say, of course, that those who choose a vocational education are doomed to a life of vice and drudgery. It is a call to reexamine our priorities, and to look again at the purpose of collegiate education. In all the confusion and anxiety surrounding higher education in the 21st century, we have lost sight of the defining question: not "What are you going to do?" but instead "Who are you going to be?"

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