

All Things Fulfilled in Christ

A Theological Apology for the Liberal Arts

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ABSTRACT: This article draws on the resources of the ancient Church and the Lutheran Reformation to argue for the continuing relevance of the Liberal Arts for Christian education.

Introduction

From colonial times onward, the Liberal Arts have been an important component of secular and religious higher education in the US.¹ For those unfamiliar, the Liberal Arts typically refer to the study of the Humanities. This may include the study of philosophy, rhetoric, literature, and art. In twentieth century America, Liberal Arts curricula primarily centered on the study of what has often been called the “Western Canon.” The Western Canon refers to the somewhat shifting body of essential works of literature that for many years stood at the center of a Liberal Arts education.²

At the University of Chicago in the mid-twentieth century, Mortimer J. Adler pioneered a “Great Books” curriculum³ (along with an accompanying book set sold by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in collaboration with the University of Chicago)⁴

1. Roger Geiger, *The History of American Higher Education: Learning and Culture from the Founding to World War II* (Princeton University Press, 2014), 1-125.

2. See: Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages* (Macmillan, 1995).

3. See: Mortimer J. Adler, *Paideia Proposal* (Touchstone, 1982); idem, *How to Read a Book: The Art of Getting a Liberal Education* (Simon & Schuster, 1940); idem, *A Guidebook to Learning: For a Lifelong Pursuit of Wisdom* (Macmillan, 1986); idem, *Reforming Education: The Opening of the American Mind* (Crowell-Collier Publishing, 1990).

4. See: Mortimer Adler and Robert Hutchins, eds., *Great Books of the Western World*, 54 vols. (Encyclopaedia Britannica/University of Chicago Press, 1952).

that became influential in many American colleges and universities. In courses that followed this curriculum, students would be asked to read Homer, Hesiod, Virgil, Dante, Milton, and others. Implicit in such an educational program is the notion that college students as members of Western society, and future leaders in that society, have the privilege and obligation to be custodians of a body of higher culture that communicates and preserves the distinctive values promoted in the Western Canon.

In spite of the importance and prevalence of the study of the Liberal Arts in American educational institutions, recent decades have seen a sharp decline in the teaching of the Liberal Arts in post-secondary education. Not only have numerous Liberal Arts colleges closed their doors in the last decade, but many colleges that have remained intact have begun to phase out the teaching of the Humanities.⁵ The reason for this decline is severalfold with the chief among these being financial considerations. Beyond this, these programs and majors are increasingly unpopular with students. Another reason for decline is the rejection of the program of Liberal Arts by various Modern and Post-Modern critics who see the Liberal Arts Curriculum as reinforcing certain unacceptable power relationships and privileging certain voices over others.

In this essay, we will examine the sources of the decline of the Liberal Arts in detail and offer a diagnosis of why this course of study has so many detractors in secondary education. Key to our argument will be that the financial and ideological reasons for the rejection of the Liberal Arts lie in the deep structures of a particular understanding of creation and human nature at odds with the basic commitments of the Christian tradition.

In the second half of this essay, we will draw on the resources of the ancient Church and Lutheran traditions in order to muster a theological defense of the Liberal Arts. Commitment to the teaching of the Liberal Arts stands in coherence with the recognition of God as a source of the good, as well as humans as his image-bearers, even after the distortions of sin. As both Luther and Melancthon argued, the study of the Liberal Arts aids the teaching both of the law and gospel. The law is nothing but a recognition of the goodness of God reflected both in the natural order and the conscience. Particularly for Melancthon, such a recognition is the basis of civil virtue and order. Likewise, the gospel is the center of Holy Scripture. A proper exposition of Scripture by pastors calls for an understanding of philosophy and literature as tools for discerning scriptural meaning. Luther and Melancthon, along with Lutheran Orthodoxy, shared this commitment to the study of the Liberal Arts on these grounds.

5. See: Jeffrey R. Docking and Carman C. Curton, *Crisis in Higher Education: A Plan to Save Small Liberal Arts Colleges in America* (Michigan State University Press, 2015), 11-21.

Sources of Decline

Before we enter our discussion of the value of the Liberal Arts from the perspective of the historic Christian tradition, it may be of value to examine the sources of the decline of the Liberal Arts over the last few decades in American life. Decline in these disciplines has occurred not only in student enrollment but also in administrators' lacking the willingness to promote these programs both as majors and as part of the general educational curriculum. As we will see, there are two sources of this decline with the first being financial and the second being ideological. Although these two causes may initially seem unrelated, they are intertwined with one another.

Although it is difficult to generalize in light of the differing circumstances of each individual post-secondary educational institution, financial considerations have been a major driving force in the decline and marginalization of the Liberal Arts. An example of the financial rationale for the marginalization of the Liberal Arts can be found in a recent article in the *Wall Street Journal* entitled "Colleges Face a Financial Reckoning. The University of Chicago Is Exhibit A." In the early twenty-first century, the University of Chicago sought to expand and secure its long-term viability as an institution. In order to achieve this, they intentionally ran significant deficits over the last fourteen years in order to expand campus life. These changes have taken the form of the financing of new science related programs, a new art exhibition center, more modern cafeterias, and updated dormitories. Part of the reason that the administrators were able to gain access to funding was the lower interest loans available before the pandemic. As a result of the administration's efforts, the enrollment of the University of Chicago has increased from a rough average of 3,500 students in the 1990s to 7,500 students today.⁶

Unfortunately, the university could not make up for the financial strain through new enrollment and, thusly, racked up a considerable debt. To maintain itself and begin to pay off its debt, the University of Chicago has limited the entry of new students into twenty Ph.D. programs, many of them in the Liberal Arts. The University of Chicago has shown restraint in fully cutting or removing Liberal Arts programs due in part to considerable protest from faculty and students. Nevertheless, other institutions operating on a smaller scale have removed their Liberal Arts programs or sought to remove Liberal Arts requirements to save money. Within the utilitarian, or pragmatic mindset, of administrators, the programs are simply not seen as valuable because they do not attract money and students the way business, law, or the hard sciences do.

6. Sara Randazzo and Heather Gillers, "Colleges Face a Financial Reckoning. The University of Chicago Is Exhibit A," *Wall Street Journal*, October 30, 2025: <https://www.wsj.com/us-news/education/colleges-face-a-financial-reckoning-the-university-of-chicago-is-exhibit-a-8918b2b0?st=a33e2L>

In keeping with this financially driven rationale, it is often the perception of post-secondary administrations that students have increasingly lost interest in the Liberal Arts. Particularly since the Great Financial Crisis of 2008, there is a belief that students need to be shown how they can utilize a degree in a future career. Liberal Arts subjects (philosophy, art history, literature, etc.) are seen by many critics as useless for gaining steady employment.⁷ The irony existing herein shows that, statistically speaking, while Liberal Arts majors make less money initially than STEM or Business majors, they actually make more money than their peers in other fields considered more practical throughout their working lives.⁸

The financial rationales for the marginalization of the Liberal Arts are very interesting because they reveal larger issues regarding the philosophical and even religious underpinnings of the present social and political system. As should be clear to anyone with even a marginal knowledge of world history, the amount of wealth that modern Euro-American society has generated in the previous two centuries is absolutely staggering compared to any previous period in human history. Since 1800, roughly 90 percent of the world's population has been pulled out of what has been characterized as "extreme poverty," a condition that has been the norm throughout history.⁹ Nevertheless, in the early twenty-first century, with unprecedented financial resources, we are told repeatedly that there are no resources to finance the Liberal Arts as there once was.

However, earlier cultures that suffered from extreme poverty somehow found the resources to finance and promote the Liberal Arts. Even in the devastation left in the wake of the destruction of the western Roman Empire, the Carolingians (beginning with Charlamagne) sought to revive and promote learning. Charlamagne himself gathered all the great scholars and theologians of his time to his court at Aachen (notably John Scotus Erigena and Alcuin of York) in order to promote theology as well as Arts and Letters.¹⁰ The unifier of Anglo-Saxon England, Alfred the Great, sought to promote the Liberal Arts as part of his program of unification for England in the face of repeated Viking invasions and attempts at settlement (the "Danelaw").¹¹ Obviously, neither the Carolingian Empire or Anglo-Saxon England

7. Jennifer Frey, "Guest Essay: This Is Who's Really Driving the Decline in Interest in Liberal Arts Education" *New York Times*, July 17, 2025: <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/07/17/opinion/liberal-arts-college-students-administration.html>

8. Allie Grasgreen, "Liberal Arts Grads Win Long-Term" *Inside Higher Ed*, January 21, 2014: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/01/22/see-how-liberal-arts-grads-really-fare-report-examines-long-term-data>

9. Rainer Zitelmann, "Anyone Who Doesn't Know the Following Facts About Capitalism Should Learn Them," *Forbes*, December 21, 2021: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/rainer-zitelmann/2020/07/27/anyone-who-doesnt-know-the-following-facts-about-capitalism-should-learn-them/>

10. See: Friedrich Heer, *Charlemagne and His World* (Macmillan, 1975), 191.

11. A.F. Leach, *The Schools of Medieval England* (Macmillan, 1924), 71-73.

had the vast resources of modern Euro-America to finance the Liberal Arts, yet they considered it important.

Considering this stark contrast between our present society and earlier cultures regarding the importance of the Liberal Arts, what actually seems to be at issue are values and priorities rather than money. A large percentage of modern Euro-Americans consider anything that does not pay or give concrete life-gains in the material world to be impractical nonsense. As Charles Taylor has noted, modern people remain stuck in an “immanent frame”¹² wherein all goods can only be conceived in terms of their temporal value. This is rooted in a materialistic and naturalistic outlook on life that also reduces humans to biological machines essentially built to primarily pursue physical goods and pleasure.

Beyond the economic and utilitarian sources of decline, there have been internal struggles within academia itself that have called into question the usefulness of the Liberal Arts. Particularly since the late 1960s, there has been a pushback from many quarters of academia against the value of the Liberal Arts, at least in the form taught by previous generations. One major target has been “Great Books” curriculums and the belief in a Western Canon of great literature as being a proper matrix of educational formation. The detractors of “Great Books” and the Western Canon have been dubbed by the late literary scholar Harold Bloom, a looming proponent of the Western Canon, as the “School of Resentment.”¹³

In his book *The Western Canon*, Bloom sees numerous traditions of thought in modern academia as belonging to the “School of Resentment.” Notably he mentions: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, and Semioticians. Such groups perceive the very notion of the Western Canon as promoting a hegemonic discourse. To the extent that they are interested in the Liberal Arts, they seek to harness it to the goal of social change.¹⁴ Many thought traditions of the post-Enlightenment West have correctly observed that social and cultural realities are not simply self-evident or divinely wrought givens but contain within them attempts at establishing power relations convivial to certain groups. Whereas it would be difficult to resist the validity of this insight into how fallen humans organize culture and society, what distinguishes members of the “School of Resentment,” or what James Lindsey and Helen Pluckrose call “Cynical Theories,”¹⁵ is their belief that every aspect of human society is an artificial construct bent on implementing covert powerplays. With Post-Structuralists¹⁶ in

12. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 539-593.

13. Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 4, 7.

14. Bloom, *The Western Canon*, 27-28.

15. Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsey, *Cynical Theories: How Activist Scholarship Made Everything about Race, Gender, and Identity—and Why This Harms Everybody* (Pitchstone Publishing, 2020), 24-27.

16. See: Madan Sarup, *An Introductory Guide to Post-Structuralism and Post-Modernism* (University of Georgia Press, 1993), 66-69.

particular (perhaps less so with the Critical Theorists¹⁷ who Bloom also mentions), there is no “real” that critical-reason purifies from sinful distortion but rather simply different cultural-linguistic frameworks that serve the purpose of enhancing one group’s power at the expense of another’s. For this reason, it is very difficult to critique or argue against the positions of these groups since they view logic, or in some cases even empirical evidence, as simply powerplays or ideological ploys that seek to enhance a speaker’s particular group. For this reason, it should be stated that the following critique of their position is undertaken from the perspective of our own tradition and paradigm of Christian critical realism.

When the principles of the “School of Resentment” are applied to the study of the Humanities, the intrinsic value of specific classic texts is very quickly called into question as simply arbitrary and violent. What often is seen as problematic about the Western Canon and the Humanities in general by the “Cynical Theorist” in the “School of Resentment” is that choosing a classic like Homer or Hesiod over another text (perhaps a contemporary African American writer) arbitrarily privileges certain texts over others. We are often told by members of these groups that “Great Book” curriculums allow the voices of “dead white men” to drown out the voices of women and persons of color.¹⁸ As throughout most of Western history only elites could read and write, the system prioritizes the voices of the aristocratic classes over the disenfranchised masses. Some radical versions of Postmodern theory even question why we should privilege any one form of literature over others. For example, a postmodernist may seriously inquire why a “Frosted Flakes” commercial would be considered intrinsically less meaningful than *King Lear*?¹⁹

Much like our critique of the utilitarian and pragmatic rationales for marginalizing the Liberal Arts, the rationales of the “School of Resentment” bear the clear marks of certain ontological and anthropological presuppositions standing at odds with historic Christian orthodoxy. Although we do not have the space to go through each thought-tradition represented by the “School of Resentment,” one thread that holds together many streams of post-Enlightenment hermeneutics of suspicion is the claim that every facet of life and society can be explained in terms of covert

17. It should be noted that both Adorno and Horkheimer appreciated the Western canon and the classical arts. Many of the complaints about the “culture industry” (i.e., Hollywood, pop music) and Jazz music come from a concern with preserving high culture against low mass culture. See: Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford University Press, 2002), 94-136. Also see: Stephen Eric Bronner, *Critical Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford University Press, 2011); idem, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* (Routledge, 2002).

18. See description in: Bruce Bawer, *The Victims’ Revolution: The Rise of Identity Studies and the Closing of the Liberal Mind* (Broadside Books, 2012).

19. See the classic text: Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (Paladin, 1972). Barthes shows interest in the interpretation of the professional wrestling as a cultural text. Also see: Angela McRobbie, *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (Routledge, 1994).

power-seeking behavior.²⁰ John Milbank has argued that in the realm of the social sciences, this interpretative paradigm is rooted in a form of “ontological violence” rather than the Trinitarian “ontology of peace.”²¹

Likewise, there is an assumption that there is no God, or even transcendental ground of being, that might form the basis of or be manifested in the Good, the True, and the Beautiful.²² In the same way, there is no underlying assumption that the Good, the True, and the Beautiful might express itself in the Arts and Sciences or the choices of the Western Canon. Hence, humans are not configured to recognize that good since they are nothing but power seekers who superimpose the good with the paintbrush of power relations on the canvas of reality.

On one level, the historic Christian tradition recognizes the phenomenon of injustice and arbitrary violence present in human social life and culture. Following Paul Tillich’s definition, one might even say that these forces of oppression fall within the range of the “demonic” as anything immanent and temporal that enslaves humans by putting itself in the place of God.²³ Nevertheless, these facets of human life are not intrinsic to humans or creation but are manifestations of the corruptions of sin. Sin is a privation and a parasite on the fundamental goodness (*privatio boni*) hardwired into human nature and the ontology of creation²⁴ (sin is an “accident” rather than the “substance” of human nature- as the Formula of Concord affirms).²⁵ As such, the goodness of creation is purified by Christ and liberated from demonic forces, not cancelled or replaced.

Although distorted by sin and the need for self-justification before others (i.e., powerplays, overt or covert), the human mind contains within it a remnant of the *imago Dei* that can perceive the goodness and rationality of creation as an expression of the goodness and rationality of God.²⁶ This finds expression in human cultural

20. See good example in: Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (Pantheon Book, 1980), 109-133.

21. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2006), 13-18.

22. See argument in: George Steiner, *Real Presences* (University of Chicago Press, 1989).

23. See: Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Life and the Spirit, History and the Kingdom of God*, vol. 3 (University of Chicago Press, 1963), 102-103.

24. Augustine, *City of God*, 11.9; Philip Schaff, ed., *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 14 vols. First Series (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 2:210. (Hereafter “Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, First Series” cited as “NPNFa.”).

25. FC SD, 1.1-5; Robert Kolb and Timothy Wengert, eds., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. Charles Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, Jane Strohl, and Timothy Wengert (Fortress Press, 2000), 531-533.

26. According to Luther, human reason is “something divine” – suggesting a remnant of the *imago Dei*. See: Disputation Concerning Man (1536); *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, 55 vols. Eds. Pelikan and Lehmann (St Louis and Philadelphia: Concordia and Fortress, 1955ff.), 2:45. (Hereafter cited as LW.) 34:137. Also see similar conceptions in early Lutheranism in: Johann Gerhard, *On Creation and Predestination*, trans. Richard Dinda (Concordia Publishing House, 2013), 322-326.

productions such as philosophy, literature, and works of art. As numerous histories of the early Modern period have shown, such a belief in the remnant of the *imago Dei* and the rationality and goodness of creation found in the Christian metanarrative likewise formed the basis of the Scientific Revolution.²⁷ Human learning and artistic expression (i.e., the Liberal Arts) therefore mirror the goodness of God, albeit in an incomplete and distorted fashion.

Finally, it should be observed that the critical rationality that post-Enlightenment critics of Western society have sought to exercise is by no means a bad thing. Indeed, it stands in perfect harmony with the accusing function of the law, which critiques the structures of human self-seeking and self-justification. Nevertheless, it should be observed that it is only possible to give an account of the critical rationality promoted by post-Enlightenment traditions with reference to a remnant of rationality and conscience offered by the *imago Dei*. Ontologically, there must be something that makes reason reasonable and gives it access to the structures of the created order or, at minimum, the patterns of cultural-linguistic reality that form human interactions with reality.²⁸ Likewise, there must be a moral order of the universe with which hegemonic discourses are out of harmony.

Ultimately, as Plantinga noted in his naturalistic argument against naturalism, it is only by assuming that God has created our minds to be able to comprehend and absorb the truth that makes truthful claims possible. A pure Naturalist cannot make claims to truth in the quest to curtail self-seeking but can only say that the evolutionary process undirected by divine providence has given us a mind that promotes useful beliefs, not true ones.²⁹ One could apply Plantinga's critique of Naturalism to the "School of Resentment" and the "Cynical Theories" themselves. Any claim that insists that all truth claims are hegemonic discourses is self-defeating in that it does not escape the critique of being a hegemonic discourse itself.

It should of course be noted that these observations regarding the self-refuting nature of the claims of the "School of Resentment" are offered from the perspective of our own tradition of biblically informed critical realism. For those who operate within the paradigm of the "School of Resentment," nothing but power-relations exist between people, and any appeal to the self-contradictory nature of their philosophical proposals would constitute an exercise in begging the question regarding

27. See: Alister McGrath, *Scientific Theology: Nature*, vol. I (T & T Clark, 2006), 197-203. Also see: Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages: Their Religious, Institutional and Intellectual Contexts* (Cambridge University Press, 1996); Reijer Hooykas, *Religion and the Rise of Modern Science* (Regent University Press, 2000); Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the End of Slavery* (Princeton University Press, 2015), 121-201.

28. See: Paul Hinlicky, *Paths Not Taken: Fates of Theology from Luther Through Leibniz* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2009), 24-31.

29. Alvin Plantinga, "Is Naturalism Irrational?" in *The Analytical Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James Sennett (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 72-96.

the validity of epistemic principles such as the law of non-contradiction. Hence, the arguments offered above are offered not to those who stand outside the Christian paradigm but rather to those standing within the Christian tradition who seek a basis for continuing to value the Liberal Arts.

The Theological Value of the Liberal Arts

Unlike the claims of certain anti-intellectual, sectarian, and Fundamentalist strains of modern Christianity, historic Christian orthodoxy has always valued the Liberal Arts. As we will see below, this has been the case not only for the pre-modern Church but also for the Wittenberg Reformation. Indeed, it is incontestable that the Magisterial Reformation would never have happened without the interest in Arts and Letters found in the tradition of Renaissance Humanism, particularly those strains of the Northern Renaissance promoted by figures like Erasmus of Rotterdam.³⁰

Why is it the case that historic Christian orthodoxy cannot do without the Liberal Arts? The answer lies in all three articles of the Creed. Although Christian theology has identified the *imago Dei* with various faculties within the human person, most theologians and exegetes have seen a deep connection between the *imago Dei* and a remnant of moral conscience and rationality in the human subject.³¹

Consequently, although humans are damaged by the Fall, they necessarily remain in the image of God to an extent, thereby retaining their capacity for a limited rationality and conscience. Hence, many persons in the early Church held that in anticipation for the coming of God's presence and truth in Christ, there is a kind of dual preparation for the gospel: prophecy among the Hebrews of the Old Testament and philosophy among the Gentiles. Therefore, like supernatural revelation, philosophy (as one of the Liberal Arts) was seen as a preparatory condition for Christ functioning as a light to the Gentiles (Isa. 49:6).³²

Likewise, in the vein of the second and third articles of the Creed, God's revelation in Christ meant that God conveyed his truth through a historical person (Jesus) and embodied means. In the power of the Spirit, Christ becomes present in and speaks to believers through the embodied means of the sermon and the commentary on God's inscripturated revelation in the Bible.

30. See: Erika Rummel, *The Confessionalization of Humanism in Reformation Germany* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 9-29.

31. See discussion in: Ian McFarland, *The Divine Image: Envisioning the Invisible God* (Fortress Press, 2005); Lucy Peppiatt, *The Imago Dei: Humanity Made in the Image of God* (Wipf & Stock, 2022).

32. See: Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (Yale University Press, 1993), 3-39. See classical Patristic compendium of this apologetic: Eusebius of Caesarea, *Preparation for the Gospel*, 2 vols., trans. Edwin Hamilton Gifford (Clarendon Press, 1903).

The idea of the Liberal Arts as a preparation for the gospel worked its way out from a number of early Christian thinkers. Philosophy as one of the Liberal Arts functioning as an “Ancillary” or “Handmaid” to the “Matriarch” of theology is an important concept in patristic and medieval theology.³³ Such a notion begins as early as the mid-second century apologists. Justin Martyr worked with the Stoic conception of what is sometimes called the *Logos Spermatikos*. In this conception, the divine principle of the Logos was an immanent organizing rationality that pervaded the universe.³⁴ Humans as rational beings possessed a share in such a divine rationality. In Justin’s Christianized version of this doctrine, Christ as the Logos pervaded creation and also expressed himself in a partial sense in the writings of the pre-Christian philosophical tradition. All humanity,³⁵ along with Socrates, Plato, and others, possessed a share of divine rationality present in Christ since in their fallen human reason, they reflected the divine truth. Christ truly embodied the truth since he himself was the Logos, the second person of the Trinity.³⁶

Another example can be found in the work of Clement of Alexandria. According to Clement, philosophy functioned as a preparation for Christ among the Gentiles as much as prophecy was amongst the Hebrews.³⁷ Indeed, “Plato [is] but Moses speaking in Attic Greek.”³⁸ In light of this belief that God had given an anticipation to his full revelation of himself in Christ through both the pagan Liberal Arts and in Hebrew prophecy, Clement headed up the Catechetical School of Alexandria. Here, Scripture, along with philosophy and the other Liberal Arts, was taught in service of the Christian revelation.³⁹ His successor at the school, Origen, not only maintained Clement’s educational program⁴⁰ but employed Hellenistic techniques of literary scholarship on Scripture, such as the use of a kind of primitive textual criticism as a means of establishing the earliest and best manuscripts of Scripture.⁴¹

Indeed, educational culture and theological metaphors possess a dominant role in early Christianity. In Frances Young’s recent work, *Scripture: The Genesis of*

33. Fredrick Mayer, *A History of Modern Philosophy* (American Book Company, 1951), 75.

34. See: Justin Martyr, *The Second Apology*, 13; Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, 10 vols. (Hendrickson Publishers, 2004), 1:192-193. (Hereafter “Ante-Nicene Fathers” cited as “ANF”). Also see: Carl Andersen, “Justin und der mittlere Platonismus,” *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft und die Kunde der älteren Kirche* 44 (1952/1953): 157–95; L.W. Barnard, “The Logos Theology of Justin Martyr,” *Downside Review* 89 (1971): 132-141.

35. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 6; ANF, 1:164.

36. Justin Martyr, *The First Apology*, 46; ANF, 1:178.

37. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 6.17; ANF 2:517-518.

38. Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata*, 1.22; ANF 2:334-335.

39. James Riley Estep, C. E.: *The Heritage of Christian Education* (College Press Publishing, 2003), 7-9.

40. Estep, C. E.: *The Heritage of Christian Education*, 9-10.

41. Peter Martens, *Origen and Scripture: The Contours of the Exegetical Life* (Oxford University Press, 2012), 7, 42-49, 83, 86, 122.

Doctrine,⁴² she has noted that the ancient Church would not have appeared to the Greco-Roman world that it inhabited as a new religious movement. In both Judaism and paganism, religion primarily centered on sacrifice, something that for Christians had been completed and been done away with in Christ.⁴³ Rather, the Christian Church would have looked to pagan observers like a network of schools. The clergy and catechists looked like teachers in a highly egalitarian school system. All were admitted—women, slaves, and the low-born. In this school, believers were instructed in the meaning of the Creed, with its three parts embodying the threefold name that they would be baptized into.⁴⁴

Indeed, in response to the Gnostic heresy, both Irenaeus and Clement spoke of salvation history as being a kind of *Paideia*, or “education,” important to the purpose of citizenship in a *polis*.⁴⁵ Perhaps the church is the true “*polis*” that the divine *Paideia* prepares Christians for citizenship in. For the polemical context of this teaching, it should be recalled that the Gnostics pointed out that YHWH in Genesis 2-3 had prohibited Adam and Eve from eating from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Presumably, the knowledge of Good and Evil was a good and salutary thing, and if the God of the Old Testament was denying it to the first humans, then it meant He was an evil imposter (Demiurge, *Yaldabaoth*) and the Serpent was in actuality a hero, seeking to liberate humans from ignorance and tyranny.⁴⁶

Irenaeus taught that, much like for children, certain knowledge was appropriate at different developmental stages.⁴⁷ God would have eventually given the knowledge that they had sought from the tree in the midst of the Garden but only at a later and more appropriate stage of development. Humanity had inappropriately attempted to take hold of the knowledge from the Tree beforehand.⁴⁸ The subsequent history of salvation was the preparatory education of the children of Israel and humanity for the coming Christ. Irenaeus speaks of Christ as the grown-up human being originally intended in Adam. As the true and fully developed human, Christ gives true knowledge to humans and allows them to grow up by his grace and truth to his full stature.⁴⁹ In a similar strain, Clement speaks of salvation history as an education and Christ as the true “Pedagogue.”⁵⁰

42. Frances Young, *Scripture: The Genesis of Doctrine* (Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2023).

43. See: Maria-Zoe Petropoulou, *Animal Sacrifice in Ancient Greek Religion, Judaism, and Christianity, 100 BC to AD 200* (Oxford University Press, 2008); Guy G. Stroumsa, *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (University of Chicago, 2009).

44. Young, *Scripture: The Genesis of Doctrine*, 15-19.

45. See: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 4.20; ANF, I:487-492.

46. Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. Robert MacLachlan Wilson (T & T Clark, 1998), 97-101.

47. See: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 4.38; ANF, I:521-522.

48. See: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 4.37-39; ANF, I:518-525.

49. See: Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, 5.1; ANF, I:526-527.

50. See: Clement of Alexandria, *Christ the Educator*, trans. Simon Wood (Catholic University of America, 2008).

Like the Patristic theologians, the medieval theologians saw philosophy as an ancillary to theology and promoted the Liberal Arts in the form of the Trivium (*Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric*).⁵¹ Nevertheless, Renaissance Humanism represented a new birth of Christian interest in the Humanities.⁵² The Southern Renaissance had sought social and political reform of the Italian city-states through a retrieval of Arts and Letters from the Greco-Roman city-states of the past.⁵³ Following this model, Erasmus and other Northern Humanists sought to retrieve the wisdom of the ancient Church through rhetorical and literary criticism in order to serve as a model so as to reform the contemporary Church.⁵⁴ In the case of Erasmus, this took the form of the creation of critical editions of the Church Fathers (notably Jerome, his theological and scholarly hero)⁵⁵ as well as the original Greek text of the New Testament.⁵⁶

Both Luther and Melanchthon were heirs to the work of the Northern Renaissance in general and Erasmus in particular.⁵⁷ Although Melanchthon was more strongly focused than Luther on educational reform and the promotion of the Liberal Arts, Luther also considered philosophical and Humanistic learning to be of supreme importance in the reform of the Church. Although many accounts of the young Luther have painted the Reformer as decrying philosophy (notably Aristotle and his works) concerning its role in theology,⁵⁸ this represents a superficial understanding of Luther's interaction with Aristotelianism. As Theodore Dieter has noted in his work *Der junge Luther und Aristoteles*, for the late medieval university, Aristotle was "the Philosopher."⁵⁹ Luther certainly contested many of Aristotle's

51. James Ginther, "Liberal Arts," in *The Westminster Guide to Medieval Theology* (Westminster, 2009), 117-118.

52. Jens Zimmermann, "The Cultural Context for Re-Envisioning Christian Humanism," in *Re-Envisioning Christian Humanism: Education and the Restoration of Humanity*, ed. Jens Zimmermann (Oxford University Press, 2017), 137-161.

53. See: Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance* (Princeton University Press, 1966); J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Early Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton University Press, 1975), 83-103.

54. Carlos M. N. Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650* (Yale University Press, 2016), 90.

55. See: Hilmar Pabel, *Herculean Labours: Erasmus and the Editing of St. Jerome's Letters in the Renaissance* (Brill, 2008).

56. See: Kaspar von Greyerz, Martin Wallraff, Silvana Seidel Menchi, eds., *Basel 1516: Erasmus' Edition of the New Testament* (Mohr Siebeck, 2016).

57. See: Lewis Spitz, *Luther and German Humanism* (Routledge, 2016); Robert Kolb, Nicole Kuroepka, Irene Dingel, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds., *Philip Melanchthon: Theologian – in Classroom, Confession, and Controversy* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2012).

58. For example, see portrayal in: Gerhard Ebeling, *Lutherstudien*, 3 vols. (Mohr Siebeck, 1971-1989), 2.3: 17-24, 27-32; Julius Köstlin, *The Theology of Luther in Its Historical Development and Inner Harmony*, 2 vols., trans. Charles Hay (Lutheran Publication Society, 1897), 1: 132-134.

59. Theodore Dieter, *Der Junge Luther und Aristoteles: Eine Historisch-Systematische Untersuchung zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Philosophie* (Walter De Gruyter, 2001), 14-18.

ideas (notably his view of God as the inert “Prime Mover”) and condemned the influence of Aristotle on late medieval theology’s concepts of human agency and ethics.⁶⁰ At the same time, he did so while consciously or unconsciously utilizing Aristotelian concepts, logic, and modes of conceptualization.⁶¹ He was, in a sense, disputing various versions of Aristotle and Aristotelian inspired Scholasticism from within these traditions themselves.

Regarding Luther’s engagement with the larger emergent Humanistic tradition, it is of course well known that the Reformer considered the study of Scripture and early Church authorities in their original languages to be essential.⁶² In his early Psalms lectures, Luther increasingly relied on the Humanist principle of “back to the sources” (*ad fontes*) and sought to study the Old Testament in its original languages.⁶³ Prior to the arrival of Melanchthon at Wittenberg in 1518, but even more so afterwards, Luther also sought to study the New Testament in Greek to correct certain doctrinal errors based on the annotations he found in Erasmus’s 1516 edition of the Greek New Testament.⁶⁴ Finally, following a Humanistic program of educational reform and promotion of the Liberal Arts, Luther also sought wider access to education for both boys and girls. This was intended not least for the promotion of biblical knowledge and the inculcation of the truths of the faith.⁶⁵

Within the Wittenberg Reformation, Melanchthon stands out as an apologist for the Liberal Arts. His advocacy for a program of learning based on Aristotelianism and Humanism became a model for German education in coming centuries, thereby earning him the title of the “Preceptor of Germany.”⁶⁶ Such a model became the basis of his reorganization of the Wittenberg University’s curriculum.⁶⁷ Moreover, Melanchthon’s advocacy of learning stood in coherence with the deep structures of his theological commitments. Melanchthon’s commitment to the Liberal Arts was rooted in both his understanding of Christian anthropology and the proper distinction between law and gospel.⁶⁸

60. Dieter, *Der Junge Luther und Aristoteles*, 64-129.

61. This comes out strongly in these sections: Dieter, *Der Junge Luther und Aristoteles*, 257-275, 302-429.

62. Timothy Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel in Luther’s Early Correspondence: Taking All Things Captive* (Routledge, 2001), 112, 156, 170.

63. Maria Grossmann, *Humanism in Wittenberg, 1484-1517* (De Graaf, 1975), 78.

64. Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel*, 92.

65. Dost, *Renaissance Humanism in Support of the Gospel*, 32-34.

66. See older, but classic study: James William Richard, *Philip Melanchthon: The Protestant Preceptor of Germany 1497-1560* (G.P. Putnam Sons, 1998), 125-141.

67. Steven Ozment, *The Age of Reform, 1250-1550: An Intellectual and Religious History of Late Medieval and Reformation Europe* (Yale University Press, 1981), 310-314.

68. See: Sachiko Kusukawa, *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy: The Case of Philip Melanchthon* (Cambridge University Press, 1995), 107-108, 166-167, 176-188.

Melanchthon was concerned with Humanistic learning from the beginning of his work as a professor at Wittenberg. Hired on the partial recommendation of his Humanist uncle, the Hebraist Johannes Reuchlin, Melanchthon's original role at Wittenberg was as a teacher of Greek.⁶⁹ In his inaugural address, Melanchthon stated his scholarly goal was not only to purify the "true Aristotle" from Arabic and medieval Scholastic commentary but also to promote the study of Plato, Homer, Horace, and Virgil.⁷⁰ Although Melanchthon retained an interest in a purified Aristotelianism, after his arrival at Wittenberg his interest shifted very quickly to the study of Greek as a means of explicating the New Testament and other early Christian literature.⁷¹

When Melanchthon began to study the New Testament and Christian doctrine, he sought to incorporate techniques of Renaissance rhetorical criticism as a means of explicating the Bible. Through the mediation of Erasmus, Melanchthon drew on Dutch Humanist Rudolf Agricola's work. Agricola sought to find the best models for argumentation in classical authors by finding passages that displayed the best model arguments. In his book *De Inventione Dialectica*, Agricola referred to these passages in classical literature as "*sedes rhetorica*," or the "seats of rhetoric."⁷² Melanchthon adapted this idea to the enterprise of Christian systematic theology by identifying in Scripture the "*sedes doctrinae*," or the "seats of doctrine," that contained the articles of the faith. Such grammatically clear passages could be gathered together and mutually interpret one another to form doctrines of the faith within a "loci" or specific treatise on a doctrinal topic. These topics could in turn be gathered into a textbook of Christian doctrine and organized according to a creedal structure—although in Melanchthon's first attempt in 1521, he used the salvation history model of the structure of the Epistle to the Romans. Such textbooks were referred to as "*loci communes theologici*," or "common theological topics."⁷³

Beyond the use of Humanist methods of rhetorical criticism as a basis for the task of dogmatic theology, as a Humanist social reformer, Melanchthon had a keen interest in the humanities, natural theology, and the primitive science of the day

69. Gregory Graybill, *The Honeycomb Scroll: Philipp Melanchthon at the Dawn of the Reformation* (Fortress Press, 2015), 142-143.

70. Philip Melanchthon, "De Corrigendis Adolescentiae Studiis," in *Corpus Reformatorum*, ed. Karl Gottlieb Bretschneider, 28 vols. (Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1963), 11:15. ("Corpus Reformatorum" will hereafter be cited as "CR").

71. Graybill, *The Honeycomb Scroll*, 179-200.

72. Willem Van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism* (Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), 87-92; Sandra Bihlmaier, *Ars Et Methodus: Philipp Melanchthon's Humanist Concept of Philosophy* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 107-124; Richard Muller, *The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 2000), 109-110.

73. See Robert Kolb, "The Ordering of the *Loci Communes Theologici*: The Structuring of the Melanchthonian Dogmatic Tradition," *Concordia Journal* 23, no. 4 (1997): 317-337.

as means of bolstering civil righteousness. The context of these educational and philosophical endeavors was the iconoclastic disturbance created by Karlstadt and the Zwickau prophets while Luther was in the Wartburg in the early 1520s. The prophetic claim to have “the Spirit” and the issuing of orders based on those claims of authority caused public chaos that disturbed Melanchthon. Melanchthon argued that one needs to be able to use natural reason to establish the law in a way that everyone could recognize. Only then would it be possible to reform public institutions and establish greater civil righteousness.⁷⁴

Perhaps a second motivating factor for Melanchthon’s interest in the humanities and the sciences as a means of promoting civil righteousness is the revival of Epicureanism in the early Modern period. This revival of Epicureanism stood in both tension and continuity with the Renaissance Humanists. On the one hand, it undermined the moral reforms that the Humanists sought. On the other hand, Epicureanism was also part of the rediscovery of the Greco-Roman heritage that the Humanists sought to promote.

Throughout his writings on the Liberal Arts, Melanchthon repeatedly mentions and castigates Epicureanism, thereby suggesting that he saw this thought-system as an increasing threat.⁷⁵ As Ada Palmer has shown in her book *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance*, due to the rediscovery of Lucretius’ book *On the Nature of Things*, a tradition of underground Neo-Epicureanism arose in sixteenth century Europe.⁷⁶

Epicureanism held that the world was made up of atoms that were pushed together by physical pressure at random. The world was, therefore, not designed by a creator and did not have intrinsic meaning but was arranged according to mechanical laws. Although the gods existed, they were largely indifferent to the fate of humans. Death meant the dispersion of the atoms that made up the human subject and, thusly, also the disillusionment of the self.⁷⁷ As Melanchthon frequently comments, such a worldview is not only antithetical to the Christian faith but also undermines the teaching of the law and civil righteousness. Therefore, the teaching of literature, philosophy, and many of the sciences could inculcate the law as well as bolster the case for a creator, thereby counteracting the poison of Neo-Epicureanism.

In terms of his philosophical and natural theological enterprises, Melanchthon favored Aristotle’s system of philosophy.⁷⁸ Implicit in many of his accounts of the

74. Bihlmaier, *Ars Et Methodus*, 277-282; Sachiko Kusakawa, “Introduction,” in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, trans. Christine Salazar (Cambridge University Press, 1999), xiv-xv.

75. See for example: Philip Melanchthon, “On Natural Philosophy (1542),” “Preface to the *Commentary on the Soul* (1540),” in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 136, 150-151.

76. Ada Palmer, *Reading Lucretius in the Renaissance* (Harvard University Press, 2014). Also see: Catherine Wilson, *Epicureanism at the Origins of Modernity* (Clarendon Press, 2008).

77. Tim O’Keefe, *Epicureanism* (Routledge, 2014), 11-50, 155-174.

78. Kusakawa, “Introduction,” in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, xvi-xvii.

value of Aristotle's philosophy is that Melanchthon saw it as a type of media between the nihilism and materialism of Epicureanism as well as the determinism and fatalism of Stoicism. The former system's nihilism and hedonism militated against civil righteousness in obvious ways. Stoic determinism called into question the necessity of moral self-discipline to attain to civil righteousness.⁷⁹ In Aristotle's metaphysics, the philosopher also spoke of the existence of a kind of God and a system of civil righteousness based on virtue ethics.⁸⁰

Melanchthon wrote an introduction and commentary on Aristotle's *On the Soul* (*De Anima*) and works on human anatomy, thereby giving an account of the structure of the soul, human cognition, and the general constitution of human nature. Such an account bolstered civil righteousness in two ways. First, although depraved by sin, humans are made in God's image and are a mirror of the divine life even in the state of sin.⁸¹ Since God is the author of the created order, and it ectypally mirrors his will and intellect, humans as divine image bearers are a kind of microcosm of the macrocosm.⁸²

The design of the human subject by God made knowledge and virtue possible. Regarding the question of philosophical epistemology, as Sachiko Kusukawa notes in his book *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy*, Melanchthon eclectically borrows from other emergent philosophical sources present in Renaissance Europe.⁸³ Most notably, Melanchthon relies on the concept taken from Stoicism and Epicureanism of "common notions" (*koinai ennoiai*).⁸⁴ "Common Notions" are foundational ideas or experiences that humanity universally shares. As a result, common notions can serve as an epistemic foundation of judgment regarding the reality or non-reality of a particular proposition. Melanchthon states that for natural humans even in a fallen state, there are three such common notions or certainties: the self-evident nature of morality (i.e., conscience), the self-evident reality of mathematical truth, and universal human experience (i.e., fire is hot, etc.). Christians have a fourth source of certainty, which is the work of the Holy Spirit inculcating in the human subject the reliability of Holy Scripture.⁸⁵

Secondly, Melanchthon sees the form and *structure* of the soul as being a proof of God's existence. Contrary to the claims of Epicureanism, Aristotle correctly saw

79. Melanchthon, "Dedicatory Letter to Melanchthon's Epitome of Moral Philosophy," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 140-141.

80. Melanchthon, "On Aristotle," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 204-211.

81. Melanchthon, "Preface to the *Commentary on the Soul* (1540)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 146-147, 151. Also see: Bihlmaier, *Ars Et Methodus*, 266-267.

82. Melanchthon, "On Anatomy (1550)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 158.

83. Kusukawa, *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy*, 179.

84. Ralph Doty, "Ennoêmata, Prolêpseis, and Common Notions," *Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 7, no. 3 (1976): 143-148.

85. Melanchthon, "*Liber De Anima*," in CR, 13:150-155.

that the soul did not come together by chance but is clearly designed by a higher intelligence. Indeed, Melanchthon was deeply interested in proofs of God's existence from design (teleological argument) and causation (cosmological argument) and directly connected such arguments to the study of the arts and sciences.⁸⁶ In a similar vein, Melanchthon was interested in anatomy and in medical literature (particularly the works of Galen) since he saw such complex forms as a proof of design by God.⁸⁷ This seems also to be the motivation behind one of Melanchthon's later writings in which he gives a glowing profile of the Islamic philosopher Avicenna because of his contributions to medicine rather than philosophy and theology.⁸⁸

In his various orations, Melanchthon commends the study of astronomy as an aid to belief in the existence of an intelligent creator, thereby rejecting Epicurean nihilism and upholding a moral order to the universe. Again, such a moral order could serve as the basis of the civil order of society.⁸⁹ Like many persons in the sixteenth century, Melanchthon also held that astrology served the same purpose. Although modern Euro-Americans typically associate astrology with occultism, for many individuals in the sixteenth century, astrology was a genuine science that predicted events in the manner that bears a passing resemblance to modern meteorology. In Melanchthon's estimation, there is no contradiction between astrology and the Christian faith. God rules all things, and even if the stars exercise a hidden influence on events and persons on earth, it remains a medium through which he exercises his sovereign, providential care over his creation.⁹⁰

Beyond an interest in natural theology and the sciences as means of upholding civil righteousness, Melanchthon also upholds the importance of the emergent canon of Western literature. Not only does Melanchthon affirm that such literature is a model for fine writing but sees it as a further means of inculcating virtue. In his ode to Homer, Melanchthon holds that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are the greatest books written next to the Bible.⁹¹ Like the other pursuits of knowledge, Melanchthon views the writings of Homer as promoting civil righteousness. Since the *Iliad* centers on the recovery of Helen of Troy from her kidnapper Paris, the clear message is the importance of the Sixth Commandment. According to this understanding, the Achaeans showed their belief in the sanctity of the marriage bed by fighting for ten

86. Melanchthon, "Preface to the *Commentary on the Soul* (1540)," "Preface to *Book on the Soul* (1553)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 146, 154.

87. Melanchthon, "On Anatomy (1550)," "On the Merit of the Art of Medicine (1548)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 158-166, 169-174.

88. Melanchthon, "On the Life of Avicenna (1549?)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 220-226.

89. Melanchthon, "On Astronomy and Geography (1536)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 113-119.

90. Melanchthon, "The Dignity of Astrology (1535)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 124-125.

91. Melanchthon, "Preface to Homer (1538?)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 42.

years and sacrificing tens of thousands of lives to uphold it.⁹² Somewhat ironically, there is little reflection on Melanchthon's part on Odysseus' (or the other Greek heroes, for that matter) lack of interest in the Sixth Commandment in their dealings with women. Likewise, the Iliad promotes the virtues of training the body and physical strength with its many battle scenes. The *Odyssey* by contrast promotes the intellectual virtues, since much of the plot revolves around Odysseus' use of his intelligence to get home through various traps and overcome the large force of suitors.⁹³

In summary, Melanchthon, like the Church Fathers, provided an account of how Christian theology could find value in and appropriate the Liberal Arts along with the sciences. What makes Melanchthon's manner of engaging the Liberal Arts superior to that of the Church Fathers is that it can appropriate the cultural productions and learning of the pre-Christian tradition in a more critical manner by recognizing a sharper distinction between law and promise and placing the Liberal Arts clearly within the framework of the law.

Critical Appropriation

As should be clear from this summary of the teachings of the ancient and Reformation era Church, historic Christian orthodoxy has generally had a positive engagement with the Liberal Arts and the sciences. Indeed, in both the work of the Church Fathers and Melanchthon, we can even see the notion that there is a preparatory and indirect knowledge of God as creator in the learning and cultural productions of pre-Christian civilization. Nevertheless, an objection might be lodged to this positive engagement from the perspective of the Barthian tradition. It could be argued that a belief that philosophy and other positive cultural productions reveal and inculcate the divine distorts the gospel by ceding too much authority to a knowledge of God or merely divine goodness that is established apart from any revelation of Jesus Christ.⁹⁴ In other words, if humans are fallen, does that not make all knowledge of God apart from grace suspect due to the darkening of the human intellect because of sin? Does this not override God's sovereignty in choosing who He reveals Himself to?

Such a set of criticisms could be validly waged against some of the Ante-Nicene Fathers that we examined above. Prior to Augustine, the deployment of free will

92. Melanchthon, "Preface to Homer (1538?)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 44.

93. Melanchthon, "Preface to Homer (1538?)," in *Orations on Philosophy and Education*, 44.

94. See: John Hart, *Karl Barth vs. Emil Brunner: The Formation and Dissolution of a Theological Alliance, 1916-1936* (Peter Lang, 2001). Also see: Karl Barth, *Nein! Antwort an Emil Brunner* (Christian Kaiser Verlag, 1934). Although it should be recalled that Barth later in his career speaks of the "great" and "lesser" lights of the truth, and "secular parables of the Kingdom." See "The Light of Life" in: CD IV/3.1.38-165.

theodicy as a means of overcoming the Gnostic argument that the creator-God must be evil led to what anachronistically might be called a naïve Semi-Pelagianism.⁹⁵ Hence, the idea of the history of the world as a kind of “*Paideia*” or the Logos gradually guiding and preparing the pagans through philosophy and the other Liberal Arts for the truth of Christ might suggest that the main problem facing human beings is not a radical moral incapacity calling for the intervention of an equally radical divine grace but rather a need for education. The issue is not depravity but lack of proper information. Hence, the Incarnation and the coming of the Holy Spirit become little more than a continuation and completion of fallen humanity’s cultural projects.

Although from the perspective of the mainstream of the Lutheran tradition Melanchthon held some erroneous positions on human agency later in his career,⁹⁶ his approach to the Liberal Arts overcomes many of the problems implicit in the Ante-Nicene Fathers. As Sachiko Kusukawa has shown, Melanchthon is ultimately able to accommodate the value of the pre-Christian classical tradition of Liberal Arts and science because of the distinction between law and gospel.⁹⁷ In this vein, one could also mention the distinction between two kinds of righteousness.⁹⁸

Melanchthon distinguishes between the knowledge of God on the basis of the law and the gospel. Indeed, in the Apology to the Augsburg Confession, he states that all Christian doctrine can be summarized in the form of the distinction between law and promise.⁹⁹ In his commentary on Romans I, Melanchthon affirms that a knowledge of God is possible apart from revelation, but it will not save humans because it will invariably be a knowledge that God exists, and He demands compliance with the moral law.¹⁰⁰ It is possible to come to the knowledge of God and his law through nature and also human cultural productions without compromising the Reformation principle of *sola gratia* because the knowledge of God from the law is never saving.

For Melanchthon, the natural knowledge of God and fallen human learning nonetheless has value as a means of inculcating civil righteousness. The human will in earthly things can make better or worse decisions (active righteousness, *coram mundo*), even if it is paralyzed in spiritual matters (passive righteousness, *coram*

95. See: John Toews, *The Story of Original Sin* (Pickwick Publication, 2013), 48-72.

96. See controversy in: Robert Kolb, *Bound Choice, Election, and Wittenberg Theological Method: From Martin Luther to the Formula of Concord* (Fortress Press, 2017), 84-102.

97. Kusukawa, *The Transformation of Natural Philosophy*, 107-108, 166-167, 176-188.

98. See: Two Kinds of Righteousness (1519); LW 31:297-306. Sermon on Three Kinds of Righteousness (1518); WA 2:43-47. Also see: Charles P. Arand, “Two Kinds of Righteousness as a Framework for Law and Gospel in the Apology,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 15 (2001): 397-423.

99. Apology to the Augsburg Confession IV.5-6; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 123.

100. Philipp Melanchthon, *Commentary on Romans*, trans. Fred Kramer (Concordia Publishing House, 1992), 76-79.

Deo). By contrast, in the Barthian tradition, there is more of an emphasis on the unitary character of revelation. Instead of their being two words of God (i.e., law and promise), there is a single unitary Word of God, that is, the revelation of God's election of humanity in Christ.¹⁰¹ The revelation of God's election of humanity in Christ contains both grace and law,¹⁰² and, therefore, natural theology would logically represent not law standing in contrast to gospel but an epistemic Pelagianism that accesses God's grace (i.e., all revelation is a kind of grace) without God's initiative.

Seen from the perspective of law and promise, it can also be observed how Lutherans might critically appropriate the concept of human history in general and salvation history in particular as a divine "*Paideia*." Paul also states that God educated humanity prior to the era of the New Testament through the giving of the law as a pedagogue leading to Christ (Gal. 3:24). It should be noted that this does not suggest that the law was something of a kind tutor guiding its students into greater and greater degrees of maturity, but within Paul's ancient context, a pedagogue was often portrayed as a physically unattractive slave placed over a recalcitrant child for his discipline.¹⁰³ In the case of non-believers outside of the sphere of the Sinaitic revelation, such a revelation of law and divine wrath is available in "things that were made" (Rom. 1:20) as well as the conscience (Rom. 2:12).

Concerning the *Coram Deo*, such a revelation of God through nature and history is the source of numinous existential dread (Rom. 1:18),¹⁰⁴ whereas in *coram mundo*, such a revelation can have the positive effect of giving rise to the intellectual traditions of what Jaspers called the "Axial Age."¹⁰⁵ Humans are free in things below them and therefore are capable of working civil righteousness apart from faith.¹⁰⁶ In this sense, the law as it is manifest in the various world religions and pre-Christian philosophical traditions was also fulfilled in Christ's atoning work for humanity. This can be said without any danger of suggesting that such religious, ethical, or philosophical traditions outside of the revelation of Christ are sources of salvation.

In that Christ fulfills the law in the Incarnation and the cross, He not only fulfills the Old Testament revelation but also law as manifested in the form of the Good,

101. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. Trans. G.T. Thomason et al. (T & T Clark, 1936-1977), IV/2.3-377, IV/2.116-119.

102. Karl Barth, "Gospel and Law," in *Community, State and Church: Three Essays*, ed. Will Herberg (Doubleday, 1960), 71-100.

103. Hans Dieter Betz, *Galatians: A Commentary on Paul's Letter to the Churches in Galatia* (Hermeneia/Fortress, 1979), 177.

104. Luther writes: "Anything that exposes sin, wrath, or death exercises the office of the Law . . ." Theses for the Second Disputation Against the Antinomians (1538); LW 73:54. Also see: Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford University Press, 1958).

105. Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, trans. Michael Bullock (Routledge, 2021), 8-29.

106. Augsburg Confession, 18; Kolb and Wengert, *The Book of Concord*, 50.

the True, and the Beautiful as embedded in the varieties of pre-Christian tradition. This applies not only to Hellenism (as the Church Fathers thought) but also to the cultural productions and wisdom of the various other Axial Age civilizations. To paraphrase Augustine, through the gospel, the gold of the Egyptians (pre-Christian learning) can be crafted into the furnishing of the Tabernacle devoted to the *cultus Dei* (i.e., Christian theology).¹⁰⁷ Freed by the gospel, the law can serve its proper place as a guide to vocation. As Melancthon showed, the Liberal Arts as a manifestation of the law are no different. They serve the purpose of training in civil righteousness. They also represent important intellectual tools for organizing and expounding theology in the pulpit and in the classroom.

Conclusion

From this brief exploration and defense of the Liberal Arts in light of fundamental Christian theological commitments, we can glean several things. First, following the Christian doctrine of creation and anthropology, it should be affirmed that in spite of the fallenness and vitiation of humanity and nature by the power of sin and evil, God's transcendental goodness and truth remain knowable in "things that were made" (Rom. 1:20). Due to the presence of God's goodness, truth, and beauty expressed in the structures of creation and the human subject, fallen humans can engage in the cultural productions that express themselves in the Liberal Arts. The Liberal Arts are part of the works of the law. They help build human civilization, thereby promoting a recognition of goodness and what constitutes proper civil righteousness. In that Christ fulfilled the law by his incarnation, life, death, and resurrection, He also fulfills the goodness of the law as it is expressed in all previous human cultural productions insofar as it expresses the law revealed in nature and conscience. Having fulfilled and redeemed the goodness of human civilization and cultural productions, those free in Christ may utilize the Liberal Arts as a means of promoting good works, Christian vocation, the love of neighbor, and pastoral formation.

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107. Augustine, *Confessions*, 7.9; NPNFa, 1:109.

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