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Liberal Arts College

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THE ROLE OF HISTORY IN THE CATHOLIC LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGE

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Any one acquainted with the Catholic insistence on tradition as a source of doctrine would expect history to have a very important place in the Catholic liberal college. That such is not the case in this country can be attributed to the regrettable lack of American Catholic scholars in modern historical research and to an equally debatable prejudice for mediaeval concepts in Catholic higher education. Of the two causes I would place the prejudice for the mediaeval as the most important obstacle to a proper appreciation of history because this prejudice, based one might add on an unhistorical concept of mediaeval Europe, does not find the modern type of history in the mediaeval university and seeks the totality of education in a philosophical synthesis modeled after the synthesis of mediaeval times. Catholic administrators, trained in such notions of university education, try to integrate the Catholic college curriculum according to an ideal that in the Middle Ages was defective in history and which today has no provision for modern technical advances, particularly in the field of social science. Against these philosophically minded educators the teachers of history and the social sciences who are endeavoring to give the Catholic student a liberal education better adjusted to the modern world have a hard time.

One of the most lethal attacks on history and the social sciences comes from the philosophers who charge that the multiplicity of information contained in these modern subjects is the very enemy of the great mediaeval synthesis, more recently dubbed integration. Against such an attack the historian must insist that philosophy is just another body of knowledge and another subject, and that it must not be confused with the general synthesis of all knowledge—that Christian philosophy of life which

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gives philosophy as a subject its proper category, in a niche lower than theology, and which gives to all the subjects their overall purpose and rank. Knowledge lacks unity only in the unbalanced mind, whether that be the mind of a theologian, a philosopher, a historian, a literateur, or a scientist. The purpose or the unity of a college curriculum is not the subject of any particular class. The role of history in the curriculum is not determined by philosophy or science but by this general Christian philosophy of life.

There has been an effort to use history as the integrating factor as there have been efforts to use philosophy, literature, and other subjects of the curriculum, but in this effort history is not conceived as a subject in the curriculum but as a historical approach to the ideals of modern civilization. This effort has its value because it avoids the serious relativism of some who try to study the great writings of the past without a critical appreciation of the occasions, the purposes, and the limitations of the authors. But generally speaking, history as a subject should not try to teach philosophy or science or literature, but should content itself humbly with its own specific duty in cooperation with the other subjects in giving the student a unified and well-balanced liberal education.

In attempting to define this role of history in the Catholic liberal college I wish first to make two points clear. The first point is that I limit the discussion to the Catholic liberal college. The Catholic liberal college generally has not taken on the formlessness of the secular liberal college because it has retained the requirement of at least a basic course in philosophy and religion and because it has retained traces of its original derivation from the old classical curriculum. The second point I wish to make is that, while I consider history primarily a humanities course, much that distinguishes it from other humanities courses makes it a participant in the field of social sciences. Those who attack modern scientific history are usually unfriendly to the social sciences and see little of value in the studies of political science, economics, and sociology in a liberal college. While I deprecate this hostility toward the social sciences among so many Catholic educators I do not intend here to defend the social sciences.

Perhaps a further distinction is necessary between history as the traditional study of the past and the civilization courses in many colleges today which study history not as the past in itself but as an introduction to contemporary civilization. The contemporary civilization course does not consider history worth knowing in itself but according to its pragmatic and evolutionary concept of truth studies the past merely as an instrument of culture. This latter use of the study of history is so closely bound up with the philosophy of instrumentalism or pragmatism that I feel I need not discuss it here. I do think it worthy of note, however, that the contemporary civilization course at Columbia University is the progenitor of the Great Books courses and has given to them an inheritance of all-pervading pragmatism. I shall confine my discussion to formal history, especially modern technical and scientific history as it is taught in our colleges and universities.

Many factors have changed the nature and purpose of the history course in the American college. Originally history was read only as a form of literature. Modern scientific history came into being less than two hundred years ago, and among the factors determining the character of modern history three stand out. The first was the rise of modern nationalism towards the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. This nationalism gave rise to a zeal for national histories, along with national literatures, and for the cultivation of the national languages of submerged nationalities. The second factor was the influence of the nineteenth century "idea of progress," especially after the rise of Darwinism and the attempts to trace the evolution of all present day institutions. The third factor was the increased devotion to the scientific method with the attempt to evolve a science of history and of man. While this attempt to evolve a strict science of history failed, it did develop certain technical methods of analysis and synthesis in the study of the past which have enabled history and its auxiliary sciences to improve the certainty and clarify the important details of our knowledge of the past.

In connection with this third point it is well to restate that, granting human freedom, since there are no certain laws governing human actions our historical knowledge of the past gives

us only relative and moral certitude about the past based upon incomplete testimony of human witnesses. History is then scientific in its method and not in its generalizations about men. The subject matter of history is individual, whether it be a single fact, a group of facts, a movement, or any other event of the past.

History, therefore, is the science of inquiry into the past of the human story which seeks to find and relate as correctly as possible that past. History does not generalize, except the generalization is found in the evidence of the past, and history does not predict. In the curriculum of the liberal college the function of history is to show the student factually the past of the human race and the sequence of events and movements that have brought about the modern world.

Because of these limitations the historian comes under the scornful scrutiny of the physical and biological scientist and the philosophers. To the physical and biological scientist the historian may reply that while history cannot have the experimental knowledge expected in those sciences, those sciences in turn are still mute when faced with the factor of human freedom in the past. History must take over the field that they neglect. To the philosopher, if we exclude revealed truth from the field of speculation, a different answer must be given. One of the most disconcerting attitudes faced by the trained historian is that of the philosophically trained cleric who is ready to speak apodictically on any historical subject. The disconcerting factor here is that this philosopher is seldom wrong. He simply is not speaking historically or factually at all. He is often as ignorant of history as a child. Let us take a case in point. Someone relates the inglorious events of Pope Alexander VI, the Borgia pope, and the cleric blandly answers that of course those papal scandals do not in any way endanger the doctrine of papal infallibility. Is the cleric wrong? Theologically we say he is not. But he is not speaking historically because, unless he has done a lot of historical research, he cannot say what Alexander VI did or did not do as pope, and only a knowledge of the facts enables one to speak historically. Examples of this distinction between philosophical and historical knowledge can be multiplied endlessly. By reason of their seminary training in

philosophy and theology clerics often generalize blissfully about the rise and fall of nations, the defeats of armies, the decay of universities or of religious communities without a single bit of concrete evidence. The same criticism can be leveled against many evaluations of Catholic education in the United States which are made without recognition of the facts of peasant backgrounds, linguistic difficulties, and financial limitations.

I will cite one more example. Religious leaders and atheistic writers in recent months have been appealing to the writings of Thomas Jefferson to prove the Catholic or the atheistic character of our government. Neither group seems to have examined the historical facts to find out whether deistic Jefferson used these terms with the meanings they now attach to them or whether he had any authority to define American law when he used them. Historically these interpretations would be false unless scientific investigation supports them in both of these facts. Actually philosophers must begin with historical fact if their reasonings and generalizations deal with the real world of men. Some philosophers insist on the contrary that they do not need history because they can intuit being and go on from there for their philosophical speculations. In fact, philosophers must remain in their abstract world unless they accept from the historian that the real men lived. Philosophical principles can say that a thing cannot be and not be at the same time, but that does not prove that anything really exists.

This is not the place to discuss the techniques which modern historians have evolved to test the evidence that has been accumulated about the past or the rules for the compilation of the synthesis represented in the best historical narrative. Nor is it related to this essay to belabor the historical scholar for his failures to achieve more perfect results. Modern history is the result of centuries of labor by hundreds of historians. In the study of history as part of the college curriculum we see the result of years of research of thousands of scholars. The core of such a course in the college curriculum is usually a textbook or syllabus in which the names of the chief personages, the correlation of events, and the chronological settings are presented in the best perspective possible. Generally speaking only the highest trained historian can grasp fully all that a college history

textbook implies. The history class then is a period of study in which the trained teacher brings his own learning to the enlightening of the text and leads the student to understand as much as possible of this boiled-down research, and directs him, where possible, in expanding this basic knowledge in the more important phases by more extensive readings in the documentary evidence of the period or the accounts of other scholars who have studied that evidence. In this way the study of history can go on indefinitely, and the advanced student is usually content to pursue the more definite searches into only one or two phases of the past where he finds the human story especially attractive and useful.

While this type of history is modern, something the mediaeval educator did not know, devotees of the ancient classics should not forget that there was plenty of history in the old classical program of Latin and Greek. As a matter of fact, until the development of modern techniques practically all the mediaevalist knew of the past came from these ancient historians and their commentators, although history was considered merely a phase of literature, whether written in poetry or prose. At first these classical historians were merely supplemented by accounts of the later history, but as research into ancient history developed even the ancient historians were supplemented by the accounts of modern scholars. I have found an interesting commentary on this increasing role of history in the development of the program of liberal arts at the University of Notre Dame, and since the curricula at other Catholic colleges in the country are now much the same I presume their developments are in general parallel. The earlier catalogues do not say much about the subjects in the various curricula, but by 1870 the annual catalogue does point to some definite trends in the accepted classical liberal arts curriculum.

By 1870, while ancient history and American history were required in the two-year preparatory school, in the collegiate program ancient history was taken care of by the usual programs in Latin and Greek literature. "Modern history," which included all since the classical era, was taught during the second year and was included with English composition and literature under the general heading of English. When the scientific cur-

riculum was announced, about that time, the classics were replaced in that curriculum by ancient history and ancient geography, although "modern history" was taught in both the classical and scientific curricula. During the 1880's a year of the history of England was added in the second year, and later a one-half year course was added in the senior year in the "philosophy of history." During the 1880's the science course dropped the ancient history and geography but retained the course in "modern history" and "the philosophy of history."

In 1888 the University made its first real concession to those who could not master the classics in the institution of an "English course." The "English course" besides its emphasis on literature and composition substituted French for Greek but retained "modern history" as well as ancient history and the history of England. In 1895 in the regular classical curriculum ancient history replaced English history in the sophomore year, but "modern history" was retained in the freshman year. In 1897 the University was divided into four schools; these were called colleges in 1905; and the College of Commerce, with its more practical courses for business, was added in 1920. But even the business course retained European and American history.

In the period following the first World War we find the more direct development of the present Arts and Letters course. By that time, the Catholic educational movement begun at the turn of the century had blossomed out in countless high schools and academies, in which the traditional Latin and Greek gave way before classes in manual training, bookkeeping, domestic science, and the like. Further, the Hierarchy began urging the youths from these high schools to go to college. The vast majority of these prospective college students, very few of whose parents had been given a high school education, were unprepared for the traditional classical college program. Neither were many of these boys and girls qualified for work in the scientific schools. The business or commerce curricula which were instituted at that time absorbed large numbers, but even they were not the answer. For those without classical training who wanted a liberal education compromises had to be made. In Notre Dame's Arts and Letters program in the twenties there were offered at least seven degrees in Arts and Letters from the old classical

program leading to the Bachelor of Arts to a half practical course leading to the degree of Bachelor of Library Science. Finally the last bastion of the old classical curriculum fell and it became possible to receive an A.B. degree without either Latin or Greek. Many colleges retain a minimum requirement of two years of Latin but without much justification. Frankly, I do not think the Catholic college ever really made up its mind what was the proper substitute for the classical program. At Notre Dame, possibly because the new Dean of Arts and Letters at the time was an English teacher, English was the chief course of the reconstructed curriculum. But as the English class ceased to be concerned with language and grammar it became just an adjunct of the philosophy course. Gradually philosophy seems to have usurped the chief place and has maintained it to the present day in nearly every Catholic liberal arts curriculum. The present Arts and Letters graduate of the Catholic school is a philosophy major whether he wants to be or not. In sociology, economics, and political science the philosophy of these subjects rather than the social sciences themselves are taught. And even this philosophy major has not been the equal of the philosophy major from the secular college, partly because his philosophy course was not adapted to the secular student, and chiefly because the other courses in the curriculum containing the information requisite for a balanced education were not fully taught. Of these other subjects I am concerned with history.

The teaching of history in the Catholic colleges, in the meantime, did not keep pace with the development of the modern American curriculum. There simply were no Catholic historical scholars in the English speaking world, with the exception of a few converts who received their training elsewhere. History in Catholic schools was in disrepute because it was taught by men and women untrained in history and from books written against the traditions of the Church or books badly translated from some foreign language and out of touch with American life. Even in the field of the teaching of the classics, which was gradually confined to clerical students, the classic authors were not supplemented by proper courses in ancient, modern, and American history and in modern social science. History in Catholic colleges became the unwanted orphan of the curriculum. It has

only recently become a subject of respectability, although in far too many Catholic colleges the history course begins as late as 1500.

The result of this development has been that the Catholic collegiate scholar has lost his classical training and has received at best meager instruction in ancient or mediaeval history and superficial training in modern history and the social sciences. The graduate of the Catholic liberal arts college has generally faced the world babbling a series of philosophical and religious formulas which he cannot connect either with his own Christian tradition or with the great social, political, and economic problems of the day. The present program of liberal arts in our Catholic colleges, centered around philosophy, has failed, and the proposed substitute of a philosophical course founded on Great Books does not correct the essential element in that failure, which is the teaching of philosophical principles without respect to the real history of man and without a background in the great social and economic problems of the present day. History then has a definite place in the well balanced liberal arts program.

This then is the role I would give to history in a revised liberal arts curriculum: the tracing, as fully as possible, the rise of Western civilization together with the rise and fall of the institutions of Western culture. The course must be increased in depth both by reading the sources of history and by practice in the writing of historical essays, and by the intensification of the parallel courses in literature and in the social sciences. Philosophy should be in the curriculum not as a solution of all problems but as the balanced explanation of life and its purposes and of the source and criteria of knowledge, but taught in a well-balanced, rounded course of one year, or two at most. Revealed religion should be taught at the college level. The parallel courses in literature should include the masters of prose and poetry and constant exercise in expression. Sufficient knowledge of the current world would be taught in balanced courses in the social, physical, and biological sciences. In this I am not speaking of the specialist at all—the specialist properly begins after the college curriculum—although such a program would leave room for some advanced courses in particular fields

To be specific, to make such a program work I would break up the present pre-seminary course in philosophy with its special courses in the branches of philosophy and substitute a well-rounded one year course covering the whole of philosophy with a shorter course in the history of philosophy to follow. I would eliminate from the collegiate curriculum all classes in the elements of language and require for college credit that the student be able to enter into the literature of a language, ancient or modern. The idea of receiving credit for learning a few paradigms and being able to translate a few sentences, or for reading in the nursery way three books, like Chaucer's *Tales*, *Crime and Its Punishment*, and a book of Mark Twain, in English is ridiculous. I favor the present high trend in the teaching of religion which gives the layman a fair grasp of theology so that our lay leaders can speak intelligently where religion touches the higher learning. And in the social sciences, and other sciences as well, the real sciences must be taught, not philosophical theories and short cut answers to the great technical problems of the day. In such a program history can give the historical background for modern civilization depending upon the other subjects to give greater depth to its concepts, critical evaluations, and practical applications.

In conclusion I have in mind one example that seems to illustrate the reason for this study. I once asked a priest who was planning a history of modern philosophy what he thought of Peter Ramus and was not particularly surprised to find that this priest had never heard of Ramus. Ramus, who lived in the sixteenth century, becoming disgusted with the decadent scholasticism of his day, decided to throw it all out the window and turn to Aristotle anew. His followers accepted only his first action and threw away scholasticism, and "Ramism" became the basic theme in most of Western Protestant philosophy, which is so foreign to our scholastic thought. But where do you find out about Ramism, this great factor in the development of English culture? Not from the philosophers because no one bothered to follow his philosophy. Not from the Great Books—no one reads his book, which was influential by accident. But from history, which alone has been able to show the fact of an influential book which was not read but which changed the

thought of the dominant people in the modern world. And in our present liberal arts curriculum the strengthening of the required history courses and the courses in the social sciences is needed to lessen the contrast between Catholic and secular education and to give reality to the philosophical and religious principles which are the core of Catholic education.

History may not fit the sweeping generalization of the orator or the philosophically inclined but it will lead the student into the real world and teach him patience, precision, and humility in the face of truth. And that is no mean element in any liberal education.