

Brian Welter

The Heart of Culture
by Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership*

This simple yet hopeful book, the outcome of the work of the University of St. Thomas, Minnesota, Catholic Studies program, provides readers with an overview of the productive fusion of Greek thought with the truth of the Catholic faith. A wide range of readers will benefit from *The Heart of Culture*, including university students, teachers, and parents. The authors take a chronological view of western education, starting by describing Greek *paideia* and showing its universalistic vision. The ancient Greeks saw their search for the truth as relevant to all of the cosmos, which centuries later would fit into the Biblical worldview.

The authors stress that what we need today to correct grave errors in western education is not a specific plan of action, but a set of principles. A given plan or teaching platform, likely due to technology, may need to change. Such change can be good or even desirable, but we must remain faithful to the essential principles of western education. These principles include the cultivation of wisdom and virtue.

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The Heart of Culture asserts the vital role of rootedness for the soul's growth. Education is a religious endeavor because it concerns the development of the soul:

The implications of the Incarnation for Catholic education are far-reaching. The Incarnation seeks the dialogue and, ultimately, the complementarity of faith and reason. This entails a generous interdisciplinary engagement of an incarnational faith with literature, math, philosophy, sciences, politics, history, economics, and the fine arts. It is the reason the Catholic Church started schools and universities and not Bible schools or only seminaries.¹

Christian education encompasses all of the teaching and learning process because it addresses the whole human person and all of society.

Over time, ancient Greek *paideia* developed many concerns that Christians would come to share, including a focus on personhood. The authors describe this process in easily-grasped ways:

In a process similar to the way the chivalric ideal of the medieval knight was transformed into the ideal of the courtly gentleman, the Greek understanding of *arete* underwent a change away from military training alone toward the formation of the ideal person in whatever walk of life. The point of education for the Greeks was increasingly the full development of all human faculties such that they resulted in a harmonious whole.²

The Heart of Culture traces the remarkable consistency of this movement from ancient times onward, greatly buttressed and enriched by the Christian appropriation of *paideia*. Early Church fathers such as Justin Martyr and Augustine showed how *paideia* could take on a Christian perspective. A more thorough description of this vital period in the history of the relationship between Greek thought and Christianity would have clarified even more the relationship between Athens and Jerusalem. The authors nonetheless show how across many centuries and territories, *paideia* never lost its founding principles. Christendom added

¹ Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership, *The Heart of Culture*, iv.

² *Ibid.*, 13–14.

and deepened its application and understanding of these principles. A concern for the whole person and for more than material success marked western education and fashioned a dynamic mentality.

This dynamism meant that western education saw several renaissances, all of which looked back to the original *paideia*, though each in distinct ways. The three great renaissances in the eighth, twelfth, and fifteenth centuries, all of which remained faithful to the founding principles of western education, contributed to European education each in unique ways: “The Medievalists were consumed by an increasing desire for knowledge and especially for the ordering of all knowledge into systematic form.”³ *The Heart of Culture* insightfully notes that the Carolingian renaissance focused on grammar, the twelfth century on logic, and the last on rhetoric, corresponding to the *trivium* which along with the mathematics-oriented *quadrivium* constituted the base educational curriculum of the Middle Ages. More on these two educational paths would have buttressed the argument by shedding light on their holistic nature, which included both the study of the cosmos and reflection on metaphysical and Biblical principles.

The authors trace the dynamic nature of western education and philosophy well, including revolutionary changes in modern times. “Having mastered the three arts of the *trivium*, Europeans after the Renaissance would turn more decisively to . . . the *quadrivium*,” that is, a focus on math and natural science.⁴ It was not this fresh focus per se that sparked deep change, but instead the Enlightenment’s antipathy for Christianity, which *The Heart of Culture* covers well. While Christendom had maintained the relationship between faith and reason at the heart of religious belief and educational practice for centuries, the Enlightenment managed to pull these apart. The authors portray the result-

³ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

ing confusion and chaos well: The French, led by the mathematicians Descartes and Condorcet, generally prized reason, while the Germans and Jean Jacques Rousseau generally favored sentiment above all else. One side chose reason, the other faith in emotion, in other words.

Another closely related issue was at stake:

For advocates of a Graeco-Christian culture of *paideia*, emphasis on the maintenance of their tradition was not simply a matter of preferring what was familiar or what was ancient; it was understood as keeping hold of what was perennially true, even if those truths needed continual reformulation to maintain their continuity. Hence the repeated “renaissances,” retranslations of perennial realities into the social idiom of each age. But for the Enlighteners, the past was no good guide to the present; in fact, it was almost certainly a bad guide. Humanity had now grown up.⁵

The Enlightenment presents a grave and enduring challenge to western education, in other words, not only because of the resulting confusion, but because of the desire to wipe the slate clean of all Christian influence.

The juxtaposition of progressive educational reformers Heinrich Pestalozzi and John Dewey with the traditionalists Jean Baptiste de la Salle and John Henry Newman helps readers understand the educational *Kulturkampf* in which we still find ourselves. The analysis of the underlying objectives and nature of the social sciences helpfully reveals their danger to traditional education and even to the faith. The social sciences are “less departments of strictly scientific exploration than expressions of a social movement with a guiding theology and an accompanying set of definitive moral norms.”⁶ They directly challenge Christianity and traditional education. For the American Dewey, a Darwinist, “education was to be understood not as the passing of a set body of wisdom or truth, but as the process by which an individual learns to

⁵ *Ibid.*, 67.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 91.

adapt to his or her environment.”⁷ By the end of the chapter, readers have a clear sense that the progressive versus traditional educational battle is really a spiritual battle.

The Heart of Culture ends with hope. It outlines Newman’s vision of a university, particularly the humanizing role of the colleges. They not only became homes away from home, but also checked student pride. They hearken back to the religious roots of the university: “The Church, seated in the college communities, provided the spiritual, moral, and relational context necessary for the university to accomplish its purpose.”⁸ That purpose is ultimately religious and metaphysical. Thus Jonathan Reyes in the Afterword cites Pope Benedict’s famous observation: The “encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance.”⁹ Reyes observes with hope that the world has become fatigued of the strictly materialist, anti-religious, anti-traditionalist nature of education. People are searching for the truth. This means that despite the Enlightenment’s seeming takeover of the classroom, we must work diligently to make the best of current opportunities.

Readers will come away inspired by the possibilities that an education based on the truth can bring. Renewal and growth of the person will prompt corresponding renewal and growth in faith, families, and society. The authors do not want a rerun of the Middle Ages. Given the dynamic nature of western education, we can hope for something even more imaginative and productive.



⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 115–116.

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SUMMARY

This paper is a review of the book: Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership, *The Heart of Culture* (Providence, R.I.: Cluny, 2020). The author highlights that the book (1) takes a chronological view of western education, beginning from its roots in ancient Greece, through its development by Christianity, up to its present crisis, and (2) stresses that what western education needs today to correct its errors is not a specific plan of action, but a set of principles, including the cultivation of wisdom and virtue.

KEYWORDS

Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership, culture, western education, *paideia*, Christianity, person, wisdom, virtue.

REFERENCES

Habiger Institute for Catholic Leadership. *The Heart of Culture*. Providence, R.I.: Cluny, 2020.