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## Reviewing *Reforming the Liberal Arts*

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***Reforming the Liberal Arts.*** By Ryan C. McIlhenny. Beaver Falls, PA: Falls City Press, 2017. 170 pp. ISBN 13: 978-0986-40512-9 (PAPERBACK) \$14.99

**D**oes the book title, *Reforming the Liberal Arts*, mean that the traditional curriculum of liberal arts education needs reforming? Perhaps the American educational system needs reforming, or maybe the traditional liberal arts curriculum needs to reflect reformed theology as its major foundational worldview. Ryan C. McIlhenny, the author of the book, informs the reader that

1. The traditional liberal arts curriculum is sufficiently Christian in its origins and perspectives.
2. Traditional liberal arts is essentially built on reformed theology at its core.
3. Liberal arts should be the foundation of all American educational practice and information.

Liberal arts study attempts to help students achieve meaning, not just information, and therefore must include theological understanding, which comes from an extensive knowledge of the integrated subjects included in such an education.

McIlhenny treats his subject first by revealing the inadequacies of our 21st-century social media informational hyperactivity. Social media tends to create a “togetherness-separation paradox,” which confuses reality recognition. People think the world of technology in media is a real one when, in fact, it is not. Through social media we think we are connected but only in a technical, mechanical sense—as one may be connected to a chair when sitting on it. The closest analogy would be the use of a telephone or a calculator in the past. Technology provides tools that are specific but restricted—similar to hand-tools such as a hammer or screwdriver. Different tools are used for specific tasks, but our contact with another human via a tool does not make much of a relationship. McIlhenny indicates that education proposes relationship, and liberal arts education is the most extensive through its dedication to provide an opportunity for relational meaning.

Additionally, McIlhenny presupposes that the liberal arts are grounded in theological tradition and the reformed tradition “provides the most consistent, coherent, and cogent summary of the sovereignty of God and His work in all of life” (p. 21). The reformed theological tradition emphasizes the sovereignty of God and His interconnection with humans throughout history. The development of the liberal arts began in 5th century B.C. Greek culture, which built education through the study of philosophy. Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle proposed to study reality, ethics, art, and epistemology as these subjects interacted with the world. As Arthur F. Holmes (1977) has said, “all truth is God’s truth” (p. xx). Reformed theology purports to identify and recognize God’s hand in all truth, in all cultures, and in all times—hence the value of diversity. In the liberal arts, we find the best way to understand the nature of reality—hence the meaning of life as individuals. Education without a true metaphysical balance of knowledge that helps us find the proper meaning of life makes our pursuit of understanding unfulfilled. McIlhenny refers to the liberal arts as they have been classified since the Middle Ages: the Trivium consisting of grammar, logic, and rhetoric; and the Quadrivium, which includes arithmetic, geometry, arts, and astronomy. Learning about all these fields includes increased learning about God, since He is involved in all things that pertain to human life. There should always be a recognition of His presence and connection in all fields of knowledge.

“Faith drives learning,” says McIlhenny (p. 70). There should be no separation of learning and religion; theology is necessary to a truly effective education. Some Christian educational programs even separate theology into its own specialized field of courses, which assumes no recognition that God and faith interact with “secular” subjects. This implies that religion is not involved with the fields of physics or business. We try to cram as much factual information related to the subject as possible into each special course and relegate theology to its own series of theological courses. So we have missed the intent to reveal God in all of life. The liberal arts provide an integrated connection of God and subject information—a coherent meaning and purpose for all things in Him.

McIlhenny asserts that for people to develop a realistic picture of the world, critical and creative thinking must go together. The best way of providing for this development is through liberal arts education. The world is not spiritual versus physical; everything is connected, integral, interactive, and coherent. Faith is the key to this development. We all have faith in something or Someone. We believe in creation or evolution; we believe in the principles that make our tools work, or we believe in the ways we see life happen or anything else that proposes to suggest meaning. Liberal arts, especially grounded in reformed theology, will justify our position of faith in God, creating the picture of reality. That comes through God. Obviously, we are encouraged by Scripture to seek wisdom through learning but to also realize that we never get to the pinnacle of having gotten all the wisdom we need. Christians should be life-long learners, which helps us to attain wisdom for living in the world (Romans 12:2, “Do not be conformed to this world but be ye transformed by the renewing of the mind...”).

Community is the best setting for learning, and a religious community grounds students in the best learning environment. That way, diversity enters the best values practices that education should promote. Online learning, according to McIlhenny, has serious weaknesses and limited usefulness for education. Face-to-face learning experiences are the most effective, and technology promotes our current culture’s penchant for isolation and escapism. Social interaction is inherent in humanity. “An artificial world creates an artificial self” (p. 120). Our understanding of self comes from the influences of our natural and nurtured experiences, such as parents, family, friends, activities with others, and culture.

Finally, McIlhenny claims that liberal arts education should be considered a spiritual practice—a ministry to the world. He wishes readers to “meditate on the inescapably religious nature of higher education” (p. 22). The teacher’s responsibilities include helping students construct an educational edifice of subject substructures that identify meaning from deeper learning experiences. Worship of God must involve the person’s heart as well as conceptual knowledge. Truly effectual learning must include and affect the inner self—the essence of the person. Good learning then promotes the knowledge of God

as a Person who is connected to all aspects of human life. McIlhenny concludes that “a liberal arts curriculum reflects an understanding of the interdependence of various disciplines and how they work together to provide a richly meaningful educational experience” (p. 161).

## REFERENCES

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