

By Matthew T. Brennan
Assumption College, Class of 2012

Introduction

What is wrong with the world? “They say the world is evil,” Fr. Emmanuel d’Alzon wrote, summarizing the answers of the world’s diagnosticians (d’Alzon 74). “No doubt,” he concurred, “passion turns it away from what is good” (d’Alzon 74). “But,” he countered, “I believe most of all that the world is ignorant” (d’Alzon 74). So afflicted, the world’s treatment rests upon its education “in words it can understand” (d’Alzon 74). “The most intimate thought of my soul,”

d’Alzon explained, “is that the world needs to be penetrated through and through by a Christian idea” (d’Alzon 74). Christian education could make right what was wrong with the world. With this idea in mind, d’Alzon founded the Augustinians of the Assumption, a congregation of Catholic religious whose aim was the Christianization of learning and teaching (d’Alzon 23). Through this genuine education, he envisioned “reaching those who from want of a really Catholic culture of the mind become lost to God later on amid the pitfalls of a merely rational intellectual development” (d’Alzon 23). d’Alzon dreamed of establishing a Catholic university as a setting of this Christian education. With the establishment of Catholic universities prohibited by the regime of the Second French Empire, d’Alzon died without seeing his vision come to fruition. For d’Alzon’s congregation, the work went on, the cause endured, the hope still lived, and the dream remained alive. With the founding of Assumption College in 1904 as a Catholic liberal arts institution, the Augustinians of the Assumption assert, d’Alzon’s dream became a reality. But did it really? In the essays, letters, and talks of d’Alzon, collected by the Augustinians of the Assumption, that d’Alzon never mentions liberal education is remarkable.

That the most positive statement that he makes about Greco-Roman literature is that there is not time available to spend on it is also noteworthy (d'Alzon 90).

There would appear to be a tension between d'Alzon's understanding of Christian education and the Western understanding of liberal education. Guided by the readings assigned in The Idea of a Liberal Arts College course, this essay will examine these two understandings of education, placing particular emphasis on the seeming tension between them, and will conclude that the two, while compatible, are not necessarily harmonious.

Liberal Education

"What is the chief and highest end of man?" (Flannery 4) According to political philosopher Christopher Flannery, this is "the central animating question" of the tradition of liberal education, the foundation on which the tradition is built. The tradition traces the origin of the question to the classical thought of ancient Greece (Flannery 3). There, Greek rationalists reflected on the question. As "a structured and systematic body of reflection" emerged, Greek teachers sought to establish a curriculum grounded in this body (Flannery 3). Roman statesman Marcus Terentius Varro "codified this slowly developing curriculum" and "introduced it to Rome" (Flannery 3). Roman Catholics refined the curriculum, naming it liberal education (Flannery 3). This education, according to political philosopher Russell Kirk, allowed students to ask "what it is to be a true human being," "aware of the transcendent and moral truths" (Kirk 1)."

Liberal education means "an ordering and integrating of knowledge for the benefit of the free person" (Kirk 1). The education, theologian John Henry Cardinal Newman elucidated, is a "process of training," by which the intellect "is disciplined for its own sake, for the perception of its own object, and for its own highest culture" (Kirk 3). The process involves both the student and the teacher, according to political philosopher Michael Oakeshott. The student, in his telling, must learn to "acquire knowledge," "distinguish between truth and error," and "understand and become possessor of" the human achievements which compose his inheritance (Gamble 640). The teacher must get his student to "make the most of himself" by teaching him to "recognize himself in the mirror of" these achievements (Gamble 640).

Through learning to recognize both the achievements of man and himself in these achievements, the student's intellect and imagination are cultivated (Kirk 1). This is the purpose of liberal education. As a side effect of this purpose, Newman noted, the student develops a lifelong "philosophical habit of mind," "of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness,

calmness, moderation, and wisdom" (Kirk 1).

The education, Flannery added, also secures "the liberation of the mind from those many fetters that can bind it," of which he included "ignorance, pride, prejudice, and the influence of passions" (Flannery 4). In and through the freedom of a philosophically habituated mind, the student's "humanity" is revealed (Flannery 4). "The person," Kirk reminded his audience, "has primacy in liberal education" (Kirk 1).

The cultivation of the student's imagination and intellect is for his own sake (Kirk 1). Liberal education's development of the individual is a service to the individual, not to his community. However, there is a side effect of liberal education's purpose that does serve the community. Namely, the education "gives to society a body of young people, introduced in some to degree to wisdom and virtue, who may become honest leaders in many walks of life" (Kirk 2). As liberally educated human beings, these men and women live as their community's standards of excellence and their civilization's conservators (Kirk 3).

Christian Education

"If ever the struggle between good and evil, truth and error, Jerusalem and Babylon, heaven and hell, the Church and the Revolution, has been made clear, it is certainly today" (d'Alzon 36). This is Fr.

Emmanuel d'Alzon's diagnosis of modernity. The revolution of modernity, in d'Alzon's telling, replaced Christian mores with non-Christian principles. These principles, which range from "Voltaire's sarcasm" and "the press and its obscenities" to "impatience with the weight of God and any other kind of burden" and "the need to believe in nothing in order to affirm the right to do anything," are the foundation of what would be assumed to be new civilization (d'Alzon 49). The revolution, however, is exclusively destructive and, therefore, is animated only by the prospect of destroying the present civilization, Western civilization. Proceeding by hate and lying, modern man is deficient in love and truth (d'Alzon 5, 49-50). In this confused and hurting world, d'Alzon saw the Catholic Church, guided by love and truth, remaining "stable upon its rock" (d'Alzon 40). There alone, d'Alzon saw hope for the Western world and the Western men living therein. As with his diagnosis of the world, the treatment d'Alzon prescribed was the genuine education of Christian education.

According to d'Alzon, "the formation of Jesus Christ in souls" is both the meaning and the purpose of Christian education (d'Alzon 40, 82).

Reflecting on his dream of founding a Catholic university, d'Alzon wrote that this would be its guiding principle (d'Alzon 40). The forming of Jesus in a man's soul, he explained, was synonymous with making the man Christian (d'Alzon 89). Christian education, he continued, was a form of the sacrament of baptism, "a genuine purification by which we bring about the birth of Jesus Christ in our students" (d'Alzon 128). In this view, education is and ought to be conversion to Christianity.

"In view of the fact that Jesus Christ reached perfect manhood," an education that provides "the means of approaching the perfections of the God-man" affords man "a practical training for every moment of every day" (d'Alzon 82, 83). Through this side effect of the purpose of Christian education, man eliminates the obstacles to his learning as he admits the virtues necessary for it (d'Alzon 22). How does this acquisition and forfeiture occur? Through the transmission of knowledge of God, d'Alzon answered (d'Alzon 82). As man's awareness of the truth of God increases, so also does his attraction to God's truth (d'Alzon 91-92). He recognizes in divine truth a means of liberation for, once man pursues and loves the truth, it erupts from him (d'Alzon 93). The transformation experienced by man is also one of ennoblement.

By learning the truth of God's love for man and God's command to men to do likewise, man learns how to lead a good life. This moral formation, based on firm principles, is genuine because the underlying principles are grounded in religious truth (d'Alzon 100). d'Alzon, however, did not envision these side effects as being beneficial exclusively to the individual. Rather, he maintained, by transforming the citizen of a regime, Christian education also transformed the regime of a citizen. The democratic regime – which d'Alzon characterized as barbarous – would become civilized by free and virtuous democrats in whom Jesus Christ was formed (d'Alzon 41, 42).

The Seeming Tension between Christian & Liberal Education

By the time of d'Alzon's life, liberal education undergoes a transformation of its own, modernized at the hands of Renaissance humanists and Enlightenment rationalists. In the wake of its transformation, Western education is left state-run and non-Christian.

The education, d'Alzon lamented, is obscured by "calumnies against the truth" (d'Alzon 29). Specifically, modern education removes the thought of God from the classroom. While all academic disciplines but the natural sciences experience demotion, theology – the recognized sovereign of the disciplines – "has fallen drastically" (d'Alzon 76, 103). As a consequence of its fall, the universal principle from which "all knowledge must draw light, power, and fruitfulness" – divine truth – has disappeared from education (d'Alzon 106). Absent this center, nothing is genuinely affirmed or explained (d'Alzon 106).

d'Alzon illustrated his position with a question,

[I]s it not true that those who try to judge all things from the point of view of the divine and the providential run better chances of understanding reality than those who, in an effort to eliminate the miraculous from the world, see no further than the material and, consequently, no further than the futile activity of people whose only goal is the satisfaction of vain and selfish interests? (d'Alzon 63)

Without divine truth, what had once integrated and ordered no longer genuinely did.

The way the education teaches Greco-Roman literature, for example, absent a Christian presentation, leaves students as likely to learn to be vicious as to be virtuous. The classics, d'Alzon maintained, must be enlightened by Christianity (d'Alzon 55). Another example is state schools. Once the settings of education, these schools no longer possess a genuine principle of education because they no longer have a divine principal. It is urgent, d'Alzon wrote, that "the State not teach by itself" (d'Alzon 103).

d'Alzon's rejection of modern education, however, is not a rejection of liberal education. Rather, it is a call for a return to the liberal education informed by the transcendent in general and the divine in particular. He explained:

If God is the first of beings, the origin of all others; if truth is the affirmation of being; if the first truth is the affirmation of God—then nothing should be affirmed that does not go back to God or draw its reason for being from Him, and nothing should be explained apart from the notion of God" (d'Alzon 105-106).

Despite the revolution of modernity, he continued, “the right is unchanging” (d’Alzon 103). The resurrection of liberal education rests upon its submission to “divine learning, acquired by revelation”

(d’Alzon 103). The submission, however, must be characterized by freedom and spontaneity because it is this kind of submission alone that leads man to obey God (d’Alzon 123). Only through obedience to God does man become “free, constant and conscientious, with [his] intellect voluntarily ordered and freely submissive” (d’Alzon 123). It is only then that man is liberated “from both ignorance and sin”

(d’Alzon 136). Therefore, liberal education submitted to divine truth is compatible with Christian education.

The two educations, however, are not necessarily harmonious. The divine truth is not available to all rational people. Accessibility to the whole of the divine truth is restricted to those who profess the Christian faith. The tradition of liberal education extends beyond the Christian faith. Within this tradition, characters before the life of Jesus, like Socrates, possessed a conception of the divine. Clearly, this conception was not Christian. After Jesus’ death and resurrection, characters within the tradition remain unconverted.

(Many of these characters were subjects of the Second French Empire.) Liberal education, like Christian education, seeks the conversion of its students to lives lived in awareness, attraction, pursuit, and love of the truth. The Christian recognizes God as the truth. His recognition may afford him a more complete understanding of the whole of truth, but the liberally educated need not believe in the Christian God in order to live the life of truth that their education demands.

Conclusion

While d’Alzon never saw his dream of a Catholic university become a reality, he did found a Catholic secondary school. The remarkableness of the absence of liberal education in d’Alzon’s theory of education is matched by its presence in his limited practice in education. He theorized about inscribing “May they know you, the one true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent”

on the façade of his envisioned university and yet, at his secondary school, attendance at chapel was strong encouraged, but not compulsory (d'Alzon 40). He refused to allocate time for the non-Christian literature in the theoretical curriculum of his university and yet, in addresses to the faculty at his secondary school, evoked pagans, like Socrates, as examples of men of faith and conviction (d'Alzon 131). The students of d'Alzon's secondary school undoubtedly received the Christian education about which he theorized. The liberal elements of that education which seem at cross-purposes with his theoretical education, however, illustrate that, while compatible, his understanding of Christian education and the Western understanding of liberal education are not necessarily harmonious.

Work Cited

Emmanuel d'Alzon, Emmanuel d'Alzon to Educators at Assumption

Christopher Flannery, "Liberal Arts and Liberal Education"

Russell Kirk, "The Conservative Purpose of a Liberal Education"

Michael Oakeshott, "Learning and Teaching"