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HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE NEW RENAISSANCE
PEDAGOGY

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: Prior to the age of exploration, exploding into life after Columbus's westward journey across the Atlantic in 1492, a different exploration of an unknown world occurred after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. For well over a millennium, the Byzantine empire was the eastern stronghold of Christendom, paralleling the Roman church in the west. The Ottomans with superior military technology breached the walls of the famous imperial capital, simultaneously ending the Medieval assumption that Christendom was unassailable. Byzantine scholars seeking to protect the vast stores of manuscripts housed in Constantinople emigrated to Northern Italy, bringing with them Greek texts long forgotten in the west. These texts fueled an already burgeoning intellectual environment in such cities as Venice, Florence and Milan.

INTRODUCTION

A new form of humanism was gaining traction in the north of Italy, reacting to the calamities of the late Middle Ages. The black plague decimated perhaps a third of Europe's population, exacerbated by poverty and famine. The fracturing of Roman Catholic hegemony through internal warfare, such as the war of the Roses in England or the hundred years war between England and France, brought an end to an economically, politically and religiously unified Europe. Yet a number of institutions carried over from the heights of the Middle Ages into the Renaissance, chief among them the universities. Italian universities such as Bologna, Padua, Rome and Turin shared a history with the universities of Oxford, Cambridge and Paris. The scholasticism that flourished in the medieval universities instigated a tireless

search for classic texts, as scholars sought to reconcile theology and philosophy through dialectical reasoning. Humanism, the study of classical antiquity, offered a new vision by looking to the past. The texts brought to Northern Italy after the fall of Constantinople added fuel, in the form of Greek classical texts, to the fire of the emerging humanism. Works by Aristotle and Plato, long forgotten in the west, arrived in Venice and Florence in the hands of Byzantine scholars. Soon a concerted effort to translate Greek texts into Latin became a project of primary importance. The old universities were a happy home in which the Renaissance humanists could partake in this new project.

Renewing Educational Goals

Renaissance education inherited a ready-made structure developed in the middle ages. The humanist ideal of rebirthing civilization by drawing upon classical antiquity was happily situated within this educational structure. Today, the classical Christian school movement has likewise drawn upon the very same structure. The liberal arts were comprised of the trivium and quadrivium. Let's see how the trivium met the goals of Renaissance educational goals.

Grammar was the initial art of the trivium. Not only were the parts of speech learned, but students would also theorize about the nature of language and how thoughts were shaped through the use of words. The study of Latin and Greek were essential to the Renaissance enterprise, especially since both ancient languages were not spoken in the West. Young scholars would learn these languages in order to interact directly with the rediscovered manuscripts from the East, written predominantly in Greek. Or students would acquire Latin, the language of scholarly pursuit, so that they could read the newly available translations of Aristotle and Plato.

Students learned how to reason carefully by acquiring skills in logic. The dialectical method drew opposing viewpoints together in order to establish the truth of statements. Aristotle reigned supreme, his theory of syllogism providing powerful tools to thinkers of all eras by carefully defining premises and conclusions by way of deduction. Several of Aristotle's works were already known during the Middle Ages, but texts from Constantinople were quickly translated into Latin and formed the new logic (*logica nova*). Professors quickly added numerous commentaries on these Aristotelian texts, which often extended the dialectical method into the realms of philosophy, theology and ethics.

The most revolutionary of the arts in the Renaissance was rhetoric. The scholastic theology of the Middle Ages was mired in dialectic thought that was beholden to rigid dogmas. Even more important than the new logic were the rhetorical texts discovered in the early renaissance: Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, Quintilian's *Institutio*, Cicero's *De Oratore*, and Brutus's *Orator*. The study of rhetoric not only entailed

acquiring skill in expression, but also the study of examples of rhetorical skill, what we might call profane literature. Quintilian in particular focused attention on the rhetorical ideal of the good man speaking well. Notions of the good man coincided with the emerging humanism of the time. In the face of the fall of society, rhetoric provided a set of concepts to call individuals to noble civic duty.

If western society was going to survive the fall of the Christendom of the middle ages, a renewal of educational goals was necessary. This renewal set in motion a reconsideration of human beings as self-directed individuals capable of setting the course of society through their own moral agency. In some ways this was a challenge to the church and to God, yet in other ways it refined conceptions of church, God and theology. Martin Luther, for instance, concluded that Aristotle was the foundation upon which the authoritarian doctrine of the Roman church was based. Only through removing Aristotelian concepts of the soul and ethics does one properly encounter the soul and ethics of scripture. However, in challenging these conceptions, Luther challenged the authority of the church, leading to a break with the Roman church and a broader reformation of Christianity throughout Europe. Francis Bacon would likewise challenge Aristotelian notions of deductive reasoning based on syllogisms, formulating a new scientific method around induction. Beginning with facts observed through sense perception, the scientist derives general truths through the observation of nature. Revolutions in society impacted not only theology and science, but economics, politics among other areas of knowledge. A renewal of education breathed new life into a stultified western society.

An Educational Renaissance Today

Society is due for a rebirth today, and perhaps is observing the sparks of one in an educational renaissance that parallels that of Italy and broader Europe in the 15th century. In her essay "The Lost Tools of Learning," Dorothy Sayers proposes a return to an old form of education as a mean of accomplishing renewal today. She writes:

"If we are to produce a society of educated people, fitted to preserve their intellectual freedom amid the complex pressures of our modern society, we must turn back the wheel of progress some four or five hundred years, to the point at which education began to lose sight of its true object, towards the end of the Middle Ages."

This statement lays out three important ideas. First, the success of a free, democratic society depends upon the quality of education its people receive. Publishing her article in 1947, Sayers would have been all too aware of the dangers of the far-right authoritarianism of Nazi Germany as well as the emerging threat of authoritarian communism in the Soviet Union at the outset of the Cold War. However, the most

significant threat to democracy was not fascism or Marxism in foreign lands, but the loss of the liberal arts tradition within our own lands. This leads to Sayers' second point, that the "wheel of progress" had made certain unfulfilled promises. Progressivist educational theory almost completely took over schools in earnest during the late 1800s, although Sayers is correct that progressive educational thought had been around since Locke and Rousseau. The cultural and moral relativism of the progressive program eroded a sense of truth residing outside the individual. Instead, the internal motivations of the child took on central importance, guided by insights in the fields of psychology and sociology. Education took on more utilitarian aims, forsaking the long-held notion that education imparts the norms and ideals of society. Finally, Sayers' points to the educational model of the Middle Ages, the liberal arts tradition that was part and parcel of Western civilization, which we have seen was foundational to the educational goals of the Renaissance, during which a renewal of society took place.

The claim has been made that Western civilization has fallen. Rod Dreher for instance traces a centuries-long decline of Western society through key revolutions. In his book *The Benedict Option*, he considers how we are seeing a cultural decline today that parallels the decline of Roman culture in the 6th century. Dreher looks to the past in how Benedict formed intentional communities to preserve the heart of Christian culture and to weather the fall of Western society. Similarly, we can look to the past to identify educational theories, methods and practices that will enable us to rebuild and renew Western civilization. Yet for several decades now there has been a growing sense that educational reform is needed and in some sectors already occurring. Add this to the growing literature on neuroscience and educational psychology. We find ourselves at the very same intersection Renaissance intellectuals found themselves: the recovery of that which was long-forgotten in a context of burgeoning intellectual pursuit. We are ready for an educational renaissance.

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