

THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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148

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THE MAN WHO PUSHED THE GREAT BOOKS *

by Jay Copp

Devoted to the thought of St. Thomas Aquinas, the late Mortimer Adler inspired the establishment of classical curricula at several US colleges

The enduring image of Mortimer Adler will be that of the highly educated philosopher who tirelessly promoted the Great Books to the American public. But he also made a deep and lasting impact on educators, especially those at Catholic universities.

Adler, a devotee of St. Thomas Aquinas, championed universal values, a stance that often put him at intellectual odds with his peers, as it did in 1939 at a meeting of the American Philosophical Association.

"He raised a storm. He accused them of not considering the greatest question of them all—the existence of God," recalled Otto Bird, a professor emeritus at the University of Notre Dame who worked alongside Adler for decades.

"He had his greatest influence in the academic world in Catholic universities and colleges," Bird told Our Sunday Visitor. "The seculars paid no attention to him."

Adler died June 28 at the age of 98 at his home in San Mateo, Calif. His renown dates from the 1930s, when he and Robert Hutchins, president of the University of Chicago, transformed the school curriculum to include courses based on the works of Plato, Aristotle, Locke, Freud and other great thinkers of Western civilization.

Adler took it upon himself to bring the seminal ideas and ideals of Western civilization to the public. He believed that philosophy and profound ideas were the province of all. Some other academics of his time held the same view, but Adler stood above the rest in his zeal and initiative in reaching out to wider audiences.

"He didn't address himself to academics only," said Harvey Flaumenhaft, dean of the Annapolis, Md, campus of St. John's College. "He was kind of a missionary. He brought a great deal of energy and vigor [to the Great Books]. He was a real go-getter."

St. John's College, not affiliated with any religion, began basing its curriculum on the Great Books in 1937. Its first dean under the new program was an associate of Adler's, and Adler visited the college to assist in the transformation.

Classical education

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Adler designed the liberal-studies program at the University of Notre Dame.

Notre Dame began its Great Books program 50 years ago. The president of Notre Dame asked Adler to design an ideal college curriculum, and the university's liberal studies program was born. Bird, who had attended the University of Chicago in the mid-1930s specifically to study under Adler, was the program's first director. He later worked with Adler at Encyclopedia Britannica and at the institute for Philosophical Research.

About a dozen Catholic universities today offer a Great Books program, and many other universities, secular and religious, require freshmen or sophomores to take a course based on the Great Books.

Proponents of Great Books say studying the classic texts produces a first-rate education. "The admissions officer at Harvard once told me these [liberal-arts program students] were the best students from Notre Dame," said Fred Crosson, a Notre Dame professor emeritus who formerly chaired its liberal-studies program. "I was not surprised that was the case. When you read text and have to interpret it, you develop the kind of general skills needed for lawyers, managers and researchers."

Carol Gaul, who teaches public school students in a low-income Chicago neighborhood, told Our Sunday

Visitor the Paideia method engages students' minds. "Too often students are asked about how, what, when and where. Paideia asks them why," said Gaul, a doctoral student at Loyola University.

Gaul's students read "MacBeth," "Antigone" and other texts thought by some to be either irrelevant or too challenging for disadvantaged students. "I'll never forget when I asked the students if they got it ["Antigone"]. One boy said, 'If my grandpa says something I need to listen. The people wouldn't be dead if they had listened to their family.' He got the whole idea of the play and applied it to his life."

Adler was old school in his tough, uncompromising standards. Gaul was once part of a workshop presented by Adler, who reproved a teacher for not reading a text carefully enough. Another time he visited her classroom and questioned a girl harshly until she almost began crying. "He said, 'Oh, I'm sorry.' He realized he had come on too strong," said Gaul.

A Thomist at heart

Adler succeeded in promoting the Great Books despite swimming against the tide. He operated in an academic world in which relativism and multiculturalism abounded. Often, what was new, trendy or controversial attracted attention. Adler looked back across the centuries for inspiration, to Aristotle and Aquinas. Early on in his career, he studied Aquinas at a Dominican priory near Chicago.

"He was very much identified with Thomism. He borrowed many of his categories and principles from Aquinas," said Flaumenhaft. "[Like Aquinas], he believed there is such a thing as truth. Truth is not something that comes into being and passes away."

Added Crosson: "The philosophy of Dewey and James was if it works, its true. Aquinas said whether it

works or not, it's true"

In recent years, curricula such as Adler's that focused on the Great Books have been attacked for venerating "dead white men" and ignoring the values and ideas of various minority cultures. But proponents of the Great Books disagree with those who say the Great Books narrow ones perspective.

"It's exactly the opposite," said Crosson. "In every society people are acculturated to be brought up to think in a certain way to allow them to function in society. A liberal education doesn't throw these things away but sets them aside for the moment to ask why we hold these things to be true. We have a conversation with our acculturation."

A late convert

Mortimer Adler wrote 49 books, many of which advance education as necessary for good citizenship. His writings contain a strong moral component. "He believed that education helps you to understand the principles of conduct better and be thoughtful in applying those principles," said Harvey Flaumenhaft, a dean at St. John's College in Annapolis, Md.

A Jew by birth, Adler was attracted to Catholicism early on as a philosopher, but did not embrace it because he realized he would have to change the way he lived, said Otto Bird, a former associate of Adler's.

When he was elderly and in the hospital, he was baptized as an Episcopalian. Two or three years before he died, he became a Catholic.

Throughout his life, Adler associated with Catholics and felt at home with its scholarly community. That was evident when the Aspen Institute honored him. a while ago. "One of the non-Catholics complained that all the speakers were Catholics," recalled Bird.

* From the Education section of Our Sunday Visitor, Catholic News Service - www.catholicnews.com

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Ethics Updates is now hosting a new series, "Philosophers Speak Out..."

The first of these is on "War, Terrorism, and Peace" at: <http://ethics.acusd.edu/Resources/PhilForum/Terrorism/index.html>

If you have pieces that you have written, especially pieces in response to the recent terrorist attack, we are happy to publish them on Ethics Updates. This will serve as a clearing house where philosophers, especially those in ethics and political and social philosophy, can share their work very quickly and easily. Authors retain all copyright and material can be removed at any time. We will make every attempt to post within twenty-four hours of receiving your submission. You may send either articles or papers (preferably in Word or rtf format) for us to post, links to pieces that already are on the web, or simply bibliographical information on pieces which are not available on the web.

This page already contains a link to a set of resources on just war theory and a number of contributions from philosophers around the world.

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