

June 2023

Review of Leisure and Labor: Essays on the Liberal Arts in Catholic Higher Education

Timothy Rothhaar
Timothy.Rothhaar@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe>



Part of the [Catholic Studies Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [Liberal Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Rothhaar, Timothy (2023) "Review of Leisure and Labor: Essays on the Liberal Arts in Catholic Higher Education," *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal*. Vol. 12: No. 1, Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53309/2164-7666.1440>

Available at: <https://epublications.regis.edu/jhe/vol12/iss1/13>

This Resource is brought to you for free and open access by the Scholarly and Peer-Reviewed Journals at ePublications at Regis University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Jesuit Higher Education: A Journal* by an authorized administrator of ePublications at Regis University. For more information, please contact epublications@regis.edu.

**Review of *Leisure and Labor*:
*Essays on the Liberal Arts in Catholic Higher Education***

Timothy W. Rothhaar
Independent Scholar
Timothy.Rothhaar@gmail.com

Anthony P. Coleman, ed. *Leisure and Labor: Essays on the Liberal Arts in Catholic Higher Education*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020. 153 pages. \$95.00 (hardback).

Leisure and Labor is comprised of essays inspired by a spring 2017 conference at St. Gregory's University—a kind of swan song as the university closed its doors after the fall 2017 semester. The book reflects on the state of American Catholic higher education in light of modern American university culture, specifically, the emphasis on work and practical ends rather than the light of the mind and spiritual progress. This book is recommended for all interested in Catholic higher education, leisure, the dignity of work, and teacher roles. Educators unfamiliar with liberal arts education will receive a solid primer in what it is, how it functions, and where its opposition originates. The tone of the book is measured, but urgent, and its target audiences are those in the thick of the liberal arts debates and controversies—namely, teachers and administrators. The main concern of the book is the de-emphasis of the liberal arts curriculum in favor of business and business-like ones.

Leisure is divided into three parts. Part I details background issues embedded in the fabric of Catholic liberal arts education. Part II discusses the concrete problems teachers face in the classroom when teaching students the faith. Part III offers suggestions for the future of Catholic higher education in the current educational scene.

Father James Schall, S.J., sets the tone in chapter one, summarizing the four tenets of Catholic liberal arts education. First, to be educated “means our coming to know and to affirm...reality” (4). Second, to be *liberally* educated means “to see what is there to be seen” including the fact that we cannot know everything (5). Third, liberal arts education helps us cope with the reality of suffering and accept the first principle of natural law—a set of innate rules knowable in virtue of our being human—that “it is never right to do

wrong” (8). Finally, human reason needs leisure, which Schall defines as “something beyond...the things of the practical intellect” in order to grasp the fullness of divine revelation (9). At heart, people need to pursue knowledge for its own sake for the benefit of society.

This notion of moving beyond the practical intellect is a theme throughout the text. There is a sense that any kind of rationalistic thinking leads to freedom as a kind of license to do as one pleases (as compared to doing what one ought to do). The dignity of Catholic education, then, seemingly lies in the love of truth and the discovery of Christian values. Because Catholic education sees more to life than labor, the modern emphasis on labor in education relegates it to little more than instrumental value. Ideally, labor concerns the process of helping one make ends meet, but there is more to life, and until Catholic schools explicitly teach otherwise, students will be none the wiser. Furthermore, curricula and pedagogies are premised on philosophical anthropology with Catholic universities stepping outside the norm of *homo economicus* in favor of *imago Dei*. A real liberal arts education would re-situate the idea of labor to something as part of life rather than life itself.

Wilfred McClay begins chapter five by elaborating on the importance of Catholic faculty with his “three precepts on teaching” (49). Catholic teachers are embodiments of virtuous living, which happens in the following ways: First, like the prisoners freed from Plato's Cave, teachers must “be liberated from the sirens of propaganda” and cultural indoctrination (55). Second, citing St. Paul's *Letter to the Philippians*, McClay recommends teachers guide students by the classic trivium of the true, the good, and the beautiful in all their dealings of life. Third, one “should resolve always to do these things in such a way as to confirm the

proposition that there is no substitute for the classroom teacher” (57). He writes the current number-one issue in higher education is the high cost of tuition mixed with technology replacing classroom interaction.

The idea that teachers shape the meaning of Catholic education is not a new one. Pope St. John Paul II wrote of such a thing in his apostolic constitution *Ex corde Ecclesiae*. Teachers are masters of their fields and exemplars of virtue, teaching students both how to study and how to live. It is these kinds of teachers who can get Catholic schools back to what separates Catholic universities from secular ones within a liberal arts-minded curriculum: proper theological formation. Because Catholic theology, which Catholic universities reflect, teaches that the goal of human life is getting to Heaven, teachers ought not need permission from administrations to make such a goal at least implicit in their courses. This idea is implicit throughout the entire text.

In the final chapter, Angela Franks contributes a comparison of Karl Marx and Karol Wojtyla on labor. They have overlapping views, except that Wojtyla makes labor about interiority and personhood. For him, in labor “the body expresses visibly and materially the spiritual reality that is the person,” whereas for Marx all that exists is bodily labor for bodily need (133). This latter position inherently opposes the notion that Catholic universities teach students that the fruit of their labor is service of God and neighbor.

More to the point, such a position lacks dignity, another theme throughout the book. As there is order to the universe, there is a hierarchy of goods that Catholic universities cannot teach without proper liberal arts curricula. Sole pursuit of material goods is beneath our dignity as God’s children, and so looking to immaterial things beyond our immediate survival is something Catholic schools need to emphasize. Students are also restless about labor itself mostly due to things like student debt (which the volume does not touch on). With a proper liberal arts education, however, Catholic schools can restore leisure to students’ lives to prepare for a life beyond one’s immediate desires no matter one’s situation.

Overall, *Leisure and Labor* is a welcome volume to the liberal arts literature, suggesting various ways of living and teaching a virtuous, scholarly life. There is, however, a consistent tone of “labor bashing.” Because the volume is, on some level, responding to Western culture’s preoccupation with outcome-based assessment, it is understandable that the text stands as a kind of “one man army.” Still, I find it hard within myself to truly be upset with students who want to pursue careers in business, engineering, or medical science for reasons of finding work or improving their economic prospects. In this way, the book feels like a desperate call to hearken us back to a time when parents could afford to hire private tutors to teach their children about subjects aiding development of positive social relations, such as being of good company.

This consistent rehashing of the same themes in liberal arts education can be tiresome. For example, some liberal arts purists argue that university administrations care more about money than students’ interior development. That is a defensible position, but a book of essays will hardly swing the pendulum in the opposite direction. For example, one overarching problem is pretending that the individual student is somehow knowledgeable of the goodness of liberal arts degrees/programs/courses from a Catholic university. Anecdotally, they think, “why pursue the liberal arts and struggle to survive when I can do something else and ‘develop myself’ later?” Even when arguments are presented for pursuing the liberal arts—such as the ones in this book—the practicality question looms heavily, bringing us back to the beginning asking, “why liberal arts?” Thoughts like these make the traditional arguments for liberal arts curriculum not obsolete, but at minimum needing to be re-imagined.

All that said, the text merits praise for tackling hard issues Catholic education faces today. The theory worked out in these essays is of utmost importance in attempting to broach the said re-imagination as colleges gather all the major components—pedagogy, formation, and freedom—into a coherent whole. Rather than be shy about the criticisms of liberal arts education, the authors dive headfirst into the controversy, offering heartfelt and intellectual arguments in

support of said components. Hence, the text's overarching message is a call to return to our humanity as God intended, a way of being that only lifelong learning can embody: patience, peace, and promise. In essence, leisure. HJE