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# Beyond the Liberal Arts

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**Stratford Caldecott**, *Beauty for Truth's Sake: On the Re-enchantment of Education* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2009).

**Stratford Caldecott**, *Beauty in the Word: Rethinking the Foundations of Education* (Tacoma, WA: Angelico Press, 2012).

It is a truth universally acknowledged that we are living in an era of educational crisis. What is less clear is the nature of that crisis. Is it ideological, structural or pedagogical? Is cultural illiteracy, progressivism or relativism the greater problem? The answer to these questions probably depends a great deal on where you are reading this review. On my side of the Atlantic, educational reform has become a fiercely political issue. In France, for example, much of the debate in the aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks has focused on reform of the curriculum, with Latin, German and, most recently, History suffering collateral damage as the state desperately tries to educate its citizens out of extremism. In the UK, the combative former Education Secretary, Michael Gove, also sought to reshape the curriculum, and especially the enacted curriculum (what is actually taught in the classroom as opposed to what appears on the syllabus), by reforming the examination system, while simultaneously beefing up school inspectors' powers to investigate and, where necessary, enforce so-called British values.

Political reform in Britain and France has been complemented by a lively debate among educationalists with Rémi Brague laying out his *éducation rêvée* in *Modérément Moderne* and Daisy Christodoulou setting the cat among the British establishment pigeons with *Seven Myths About Education*, to choose just two examples. It has been a lively debate, but, given the public's antipathy towards politicians and its skepticism about educationalists, the ideas of Brague and Christodoulou have had less of an impact than might have been expected.

Nevertheless, the debate continues, with an added twist in Catholic circles where many believe that at least some of our Catholic schools have lost their way and now march to the drum of the secular world, whether that drum be examination results, inspection regimes, or unchallenged secularist assumptions. And if our schools are not flat-out marching in time with the secular world then there is still the danger that they tone down their Catholicism for fear of offending. The self-description of one British independent Catholic school could well describe the attitude of others: we "warmly welcome children of all faiths into our warm Christian environment, where 2000 years of Catholic tradition have evolved into a gentle Catholicism."

So where do Stratford Caldecott's two books about education—*Beauty for Truth's Sake: On the Re-enchantment of Education* and *Beauty in the Word: Rethinking the Foundations of Education*—fit into this debate?

*Beauty for Truth's Sake* and *Beauty in the Word* are not straightforwardly or narrowly books about school or college education: they examine the Seven Liberal Arts but are also, Caldecott himself tells us, “about the search for beauty in art, science, and the cosmos—in short, the search for Logos” (*Beauty for Truth's Sake*, 16). They are, in other words, typical products of Caldecott's catholic approach, an approach which, as David L. Schindler pointed out, can be surprising and unsettling, though ultimately liberating.[i] If we pick up these books wanting to learn about curriculum reform we are going to be disappointed, not because Caldecott ignores the topic but because he takes on dozens of other issues while doing so. He quotes widely, ranges broadly over time and space, and challenges preconceptions at every turn. If you are trying to work out how to shoehorn his ideas into a lesson, you are going to struggle.

Even the order of the two books is surprising. The first of the two to be written, *Beauty for Truth's Sake*, deals with the Quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music—while the second (and, to my mind, stronger) book, *Beauty in the Word*, addresses the foundational Trivium: grammar, dialectic and rhetoric. The two books clearly belong together but it makes sense to read them in reverse order.

However, it is also true that, despite initial appearances, *Beauty for Truth's Sake* and *Beauty in the Word* are not exclusively books about the Liberal Arts. As Caldecott reminds us on more than one occasion, the Seven Liberal Arts were never meant to be the be-all and end-all of education. They were part of a wider educational and theological project and were acutely responsive to historical conditions, which is why, “if the Seven Liberal Arts model is to become an adequate basis for education today, whether in colleges or in less formal settings, it needs to be broadened and adapted” (*Beauty for Truth's Sake*, 27). However, this perception raises awkward questions in turn. How is the model to be broadened? How adapted?

The significance of these questions is made clear if we look at some of the more surprising institutions to have jumped onto the Liberal Arts bandwagon. The University of Exeter is one of several British universities to have introduced Liberal Arts degrees recently, but what it means by the Liberal Arts is quite different from the manifesto outlined by Stratford Caldecott. “Imagine a degree,” the University of Exeter's promotional video begins, “where one minute you're studying the art of reading and writing through the words of iconic figures like Barack Obama, to the next minute when you're exploring uses of the body in religion, pornography and advertising.”[ii]

Clearly this is not the renovation of the Liberal Arts that Stratford Caldecott was arguing for, but it does illustrate the problem. If we agree with him—and I do—that our schools and colleges are afflicted by the fragmentation of knowledge and the separation of faith and reason then the Liberal Arts model certainly provides one possible solution. However, what no one has yet done is provide a comprehensive analysis of our educational woes *together with* a practical solution to the difficulties we face that could then become the basis for a widely practiced educational renewal. Stratford Caldecott was himself fully aware of this and had begun work on developing his educational vision into teaching materials before his untimely death, but there is still a great deal more to be done.

This is not to say that Caldecott writes only about ideas. Indeed, some of the strongest passages in the books are those where he draws out the teaching implications of his forays into the worlds of theology, philosophy and much else besides. In *Beauty in the Word*, for instance, there is a wonderful section on the importance of memory which anticipates some of the arguments used by Christodoulou in *Seven Myths About Education* but which goes one step further by also making use of the thought of St. Augustine. Later on in the same book there is a fascinating section on how to implement the insight that the communion of the school originates in the Mass. Caldecott was not a schoolteacher but he was

alive to the specific needs of children in their particular situations (though it is also true that “Dreaming a Catholic School” in *Beauty in the Word* is not wholly convincing as a curriculum model, not in the least because it is so brief).

These two books are challenging and invigorating but they are by no means the final educational word, partly because, in casting his net so widely, Caldecott inadvertently makes it tricky for others to develop his thoughts into practical action. As J.R.R.Tolkien, one of his heroes, demonstrated, it is possible to be too successful. Wanting to create a mythology for England, Tolkien was so wildly successful in creating (or re-creating) Middle Earth that what followed was not a revival of English lore but mere fantasy. Similarly, Stratford Caldecott’s vision was so wide that it becomes difficult to know where to begin in implementing it.

Maybe the study of history is the place to begin. While Caldecott draws upon the work of Christopher Dawson, I feel sure that he would also have appreciated the writings of François Hartog, whose analysis of what he calls “regimes of historicity,” a culture’s understanding of the interrelationship between past, present and future, resonates strongly with the thinking of Pope Benedict XVI. Hartog argues that our current regime of historicity is shaped by an omnipresent and often unacknowledged presentism, which we might gloss as an inability to escape the prejudices of our own age.[iii] If our students (and our educational institutions) are working with a philosophy of history that is essentially shaped by presentist thinking, we are never going to be able to implement the ideas developed in Caldecott’s books. However, if we get our relationship with history right, then we can do more than rethink the foundations of education, as Stratford Caldecott did: we can start the rebuilding.

[i] “*In Memoriam: Stratford Caldecott (1953–2014)*,” *Communio* 41 (Summer 2014): 504–506.

[ii] <http://humanities.exeter.ac.uk/liberalarts/bamlibarts/>. Accessed 26 April 2015.

[iii] François Hartog and Saskia Brown, *Regimes of Historicity: Presentism and Experiences of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). See also, François Hartog, *Croire en l’histoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2013).

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