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Freedom, Letters, and Leisure—West and East**James Carey**

I am honored to have been asked to speak at your commencement. Permit me to begin by making an observation that you have doubtless heard before, an observation that I and others at St. John's have made on numerous occasions, but one that bears repeating however hackneyed it may be in danger of becoming. Liberal education is education that aims at freedom. It aspires to free us *from* being captivated by unexamined opinions and it aspires to free us *for* rational reflection on the nature of the world we live in and how we should act in it. The opinion that we are most in danger of being captive to is public opinion. Liberal education not only aims at freedom, it presupposes freedom. One might think that in an open, pluralistic, and officially secular society such as ours, public opinion is so fractured that no opinion is sacrosanct and that all opinions undergo public scrutiny. This is not so. Just as political communities that are bound together by adherence to a particular religion cannot approve of a radical calling into question of that religion, so political societies that are bound together by adherence to a secular world view, or "ideology" as it is called, cannot approve of a radical calling into question of that view. This is obviously true in the case of communism and fascism. It is equally true, though less obviously so, in the case liberal democracies. We can publicly call into question the principles of communism and fascism, and also the tenets of particular religions, even whether or not there is a God. But we cannot publicly call into question whether all human beings are essentially equal or whether there is such a thing as fundamental human rights. One raises suspicions even by asking where fundamental rights are thought to come from. We can get by with raising these questions in private, if we raise them among broad-minded human beings who would rather think than reactively emote. And, to be sure, one can probably track down an article somewhere that raises questions about rights and equality, because another principle of liberal democracy is freedom of speech. But this freedom is under increasing assault today, and we cannot take it for granted. Legislation that would prohibit speech considered demeaning or offensive to others could place us in a position where even asking what is meant by the essential equality of all human beings or what is meant by fundamental human rights, instead of merely drawing accusations of elitism, as it often does, could be interpreted as a violation of the law of the land, and punishable. It goes without saying, that such legal restrictions would render the kind of questioning and probing that is essential to liberal education, especially as it is engaged in here at St. John's, impossible.

This problem is not a new one. Every political community is bound together by belief in something it regards as sacred or self-evident. We all know that in democratic Athens, one of the freest regimes that ever existed, Socrates, a loyal and civically conscientious citizen, who had risked his life in military service on behalf of Athens, was put to death for calling into question, not publicly but privately and even then with considerable circumspection, some of the opinions that bound the Athenians together as a people. And yet, as others have pointed out, the Athenians put up with Socrates for a very long time before coming down on him very hard. Still, I know of only one political

community in the ancient world where there was, albeit for only one segment of the population, though a large segment, no external restriction on freedom of speech at all, where there was as much freedom of speech as we have today. And that was ancient India, where the Brahmins, who alone could teach the Vedic religion, could interpret it any way they wished. And so we find both theistic and unabashedly atheistic interpretations among the so called orthodox schools of Indian philosophy. Of course the Brahmins imposed internal restrictions on their speech. They did not call into question, at least not directly, the caste system that afforded them the privilege of free enquiry and the speculative boldness that accompanied it. But then the heterodox schools of Indian philosophy did directly call the caste system into question. And all these schools, orthodox and heterodox, managed to tolerate each other about as well as could be hoped for, because of a common dedication to truth and to civil and rational disputation about the truth. A modicum of freedom for speculation is an indispensable, practical presupposition of liberal education. It cannot be taken for granted even in our apparently free and easy times.

Another practical presupposition of liberal education is letters. There is no guarantee that a great thinker can communicate his deepest thoughts to those with whom he speaks in such a way that they will be able to understand him fully. A distinction that is at the core of what we do here at St. John's is the distinction between knowledge and mere opinion. According to Socrates, it is simply not possible for a teacher to deposit knowledge into the soul of a student. For apart from the fact that the teacher himself may possess only opinions and not knowledge at all, what the student receives can only be an opinion or a question. For knowledge to emerge in the soul of the student, the student has to come to see on his own, by taking active responsibility for his own thinking. But, assuming what is exceedingly rare, namely, that the teacher is a great thinker, the full scope and complexity of his thought can be recognized only by a student who is capable of rising to his level. And such students, if not as rare as the greatest teachers, are still far and few between. Letters enable the great minds to communicate with those uncommon minds that can recognize greatness, but also with those rare minds that are equally great. Socrates did not write. If Plato and Xenophon had not presented his teaching in writing, Socrates would never have taught those who lived centuries, even millennia, after him. Of course, the Socratic dialogues written by Plato and Xenophon are not verbatim reports. They are, in effect, philosophical plays, most artfully written, and there is no way of definitively separating out from them what is specifically Socratic from what is Platonic and what is Xenophonic. But because Plato and Xenophon wrote their dialogues they can speak directly to a Nietzsche or a Heidegger, and to us too, allowance being made for discrepancies here and there in the varying manuscripts. And this direct speech across millennia would be impossible without letters. When we open an old book, attempt to interpret it, and especially when we share our interpretations with others, we are always open to the possibility, remote as it may seem, that we just might catch sight of something that no one but the author has seen before, something essential to discovering and assessing the author's intention.

The intellectual tradition of ancient China is clearly a literate tradition, though "letter" is not exactly the right name for the ideogram. The Chinese ideogram is

something of an exception to Aristotle's definition of the written word as a sign of the spoken word, which in turn is a sign of something in the soul.¹ Chinese ideograms contain elements that are signs, even stylized pictures, not just of sounds but of things. The intellectual tradition of ancient India is also clearly a literate tradition, even though actual letters seemed to have made their first appearance there rather late. Sanskrit letters, even more so than Greek, Latin, or English letters, represent sounds. They represent them with astonishing accuracy. But the Sanskrit literature, if that's what it can be called, emerged in advance of being written down and was preserved only through the most accurate oral transmission. The Indian oral tradition was not a creative one, in which the story teller modifies the story as he heard it and inserts something of his inventiveness into what he passes down. Instead, the Indian oral tradition aimed at the exact transmission of their classics, inscribed not on manuscripts but directly into the souls of those who memorized and recited them. In Japan we find a curious hybrid: characters of Chinese provenance in combination with a syllabary not unlike the Sanskrit Devanāgarī. In all three Eastern intellectual traditions the exactitude with which works could be transmitted across millennia, though different in each case, and each different from what we find in the West, allowed for and continues to allow for an encounter with the original poets and thinkers. It is this possibility that I name "letters." Without letters there cannot be a genuine intellectual tradition, one in which great minds speak to great minds across vast stretches of time and space in a conversation that we, who are engaged in liberal education, get to listen in on and are obliged to make sense of.

It goes without saying that letters, like liberty, are threatened today. It suffices to think of e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, and cell phone texting, where a premium is placed on immediacy and speed of communication and little delight is taken in precision of expression, or even correct spelling, to say nothing of diction. Even what passes today for considered, expository prose is grammatically challenged by a felt need to alter, not just terms, but even rules of grammar, so as to avoid offending anyone who might be looking for an occasion to be offended. We should remember that grammar, one of the seven liberal arts after all, so far from restricting expression allows it to have variability, range, and concentration. The study of classical languages, which used to be undertaken at an early age when learning a language is easiest, is now deemed pointless or, at best, something that can be picked up later on by those few who wish to do so. As a consequence, the highly accomplished classicists of our time rarely have the command of Greek or Latin that was possessed by classicists a century ago, who commenced their studies at an earlier age. Textual criticism, the art of assessing variant manuscript readings of ancient works, used to be called "the queen of the sciences," because it aimed at insuring the most accurate possible transmission of the written sources of our intellectual tradition. It is unlikely that it will flourish in the future. Letters, just like political freedom, are a practical presupposition of liberal education, a presupposition that cannot be taken for granted.

The same is true of leisure. The great intellectual traditions of the East and the West would not have gotten started without it. Some years ago a lovely book was written

¹ *On Interpretation* 16a4.

by the German thinker Joseph Pieper that bore the title, *Leisure—The Basis of Culture*.² It is rather short. I am a slow reader and I read it in one sitting. I highly recommend this book to you. Pieper, who specialized in the study of Medieval Scholasticism, shows that the contemporary tendency to identify leisure with idleness, or sloth, is a perversion of an earlier way of looking at things. Leisure is the free time, *literally* the free time, in which we are not enslaved by practical concerns that keep us from cultivating our higher powers of discernment. Leisure is the condition under which intellectual virtue can be acquired. Sloth, on the other hand, is a vice. It is the vice that abuses leisure by filling up the precious free time we have, the time for freedom, with entertainments and trivialities that make time fly and keep us from reflecting in any kind of sustained fashion on the really important questions human beings can raise. Sloth distracts from the passage of time by making it pass more quickly. Sloth forestalls wonder, which the ancients thought was the beginning of philosophy, and in place of wonder it substitutes curiosity, two more concepts that should be carefully distinguished, but in our times are typically used as synonyms. Wonder and curiosity are similar in that both are states of mind characterized by interest and inquisitiveness. But they differ regarding the character of their objects. Wonder is concerned, Aristotle says, with the first causes of what exists and with such things as the return of the solstices and the incommensurability of the diagonal with the side of its square. Curiosity is about such things as one can read on the magazine covers in check out lines at the grocery store. It is typically curiosity rather than wonder that leads to surfing the internet and television channels. It is sloth that animates the playing of endless computer games. It is wrong to call these activities mindless. The mind is definitely involved, but it is distracted to the point of enslavement, distracted away from considering anything of substance, as the reading of a great book requires one to do. I am not saying that there is no place in life for what is called, rather aptly, "veging out." According to Aristotle, the human soul has both a vegetable and an animal side to it, as well as a rational side. But only the latter is specifically human. One must, of course, relax from time to time something of the tension that accompanies serious thinking. Play and other forms of recreation are conducive to this relaxation, and thereby conducive to returning to more serious matters refreshed. But it must be realized that reading and reflection, even proving theorems and solving problems in mathematics, are themselves leisurely activities. They are not forms of labor. We should not forget that the Greek word for leisure is *scholē*, from which we get our words, "scholar" and "school."

I hasten to add at this point that it is a fallacy to think that the life of the mind can be lived well only by a teacher, or by a tutor at St. John's. In contradistinction to the prevailing myth that one defines oneself in a career, in the employment whereby we are able to provide ourselves with food and shelter, we really define ourselves by the way we occupy our own time, which really should not be called "down time" but "up time." Spinoza was a lens grinder, Leibniz a librarian, Wallace Stevens an insurance executive, T. S. Eliot a banker. Virtually any line of work you can go into will allow you several hours a day to read and think, which amounts to significant leisure for engagement in intellectual activity. Do the math. There are 168 hours in a week. Take away 40 hours for work, another 56 for sleep, and, say, 30 hours for tasks and commitments of various kinds. That leaves up to 42 hours a week, more than 2,000 hours a year, in which to

² New York: The New American Library, 1963.

continue the liberal education you have been engaged in here, only now at your own pace and in line with your own interests. What St. John's has helped you do is survey unfamiliar regions. You decide where to build your house. To be sure, there are other productive ways of occupying your free time. Service to others comes immediately to mind. But you should not underestimate the attractions of the track many find themselves on, and barely realize they are on, in which way more than 2000 hours a year are given over to being merely entertained, not to say stupefied. Never before have so many people lived with so much time off from labor, and with such a variety of ways of distracting themselves. The scale and scope of this development means that the private decision of how to occupy one's free time has massive public consequences, the most obvious but not the only one being a sweeping devolution of culture. I don't see how this devolution can be resisted on a large scale. The best one can hope for is that liberal education, for those relatively few individuals who, like you, have experienced it, will inculcate habits of mind and taste that are resistant to the siren calls of distraction.

I have spoken of the conditions that have allowed for the emergence of liberal education in the West and, I think, in the East as well, though I am aware of the prevailing view, which I do not share, that liberal education is originally a uniquely Western, and originally Greek, phenomenon. But one source of the Western tradition—a source with which most of you are familiar, and some of you quite familiar—was unaware of, or indifferent to, or hostile to, liberal education. That source is the Bible. In ancient India it was the Vedic religion itself that permitted, and even encouraged a properly philosophical, in some cases frankly atheistic, appropriation. Religious devotion and extraordinarily bold speculation were able to coexist peacefully side by side. Something similar happened—I suspect, though I am not as sure—in ancient China. As for ancient Greece, it was noted by the classicist Erich Frank that "the Greeks differed from all other peoples in that their leading religious prophets were poets."³ It is not surprising that a recognition of this fact would have led a few individuals here and there, the first Greek philosophers, to challenge the authority and competence of poets to pronounce definitively on the principles that originate the world or hold it together. When the Greek philosophers became aware of Biblical religion, and when Jews and Christians became aware of Greek philosophy, each became aware of a challenge that called into question not just a view of things that had been previously taken for granted but one that had been reflected on and intensely scrutinized for centuries, though never so intensely, or so urgently, as when each of these two views had to account for the other. As others have noted, it was the political philosopher Leo Strauss who made the perceptive observation that the unresolved and arguably irresolvable tension between these two sources of the Western tradition, Greek philosophy and the Bible, is the source of the West's vitality.⁴ Western thought is energized by the interaction and tension, even conflict, between these two sources of its intellectual heritage.

³ "The Religious Origin of Greek Philosophy," in *Knowledge, Will, and Belief* (Chicago: H. Regnery Co., 1955), 71.

⁴ "Progress and Return," in *The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism* (edited by Thomas Pangle, Chicago: University of Chicago Press: 1989), 270.

As we noted earlier, one of the practical presuppositions of liberal education is a political community with sufficient freedom of expression to permit the calling into question of inherited or prevailing opinions. In the Bible we don't find questioning of the kind that we practice here at St. John's. I hazard the controversial view that Biblical religion—and I am thinking first of all of Judaism but of Christianity too—did not present, even in its particulars, the same kind of affront to reason that we see elsewhere in religions, including ancient Greece. That is, the Biblical account of the world and its source, and of what a human life should be, made good sense. Only when presented with the alternative of Greek philosophy did Jews and Christians encounter a way of looking at things that challenged even the common ground on which they disputed with each other.

Greek philosophy contributed something unknown to the Bible, namely, the concept of nature, construed not just as regularity of phenomena—this regularity does not go unnoticed in the Bible—but as the immanent, self-sufficient, and rationally accessible principle of governance in the world and of the world, not above it. The Bible contributed not simply the idea of the transcendent God and creator of the world, but also history—history as the course of the transcendent God's loving, non-necessitated, but fully free and therefore unanticipatable dealings with his creation, especially his dealings with the creature he freely made in his own image. History was not unknown among the Greeks, of course. But for them it consisted mainly of inquiries into how the persisting nature of man exhibits itself in changing but largely recurring circumstances. It did not have for them the character of a progressive revelation of truth, with an absolute beginning and an end, a fulfillment, an *eschaton*. From the perspective of Greek philosophy, no particular event could reveal anything of absolutely crucial importance that the human mind could not have come up with on its own before the event. As alternatives, it suffices to consider the Biblical account of the Covenant or the Incarnation, of creation *ex nihilo* or the last judgment, as instances of the transcendent God's omnipotent freedom relative to the world, even to time itself. Needless to say, if these things we read about in the Bible are real, and not merely imagined, then the philosophical view that nature exists as a permanent and self-contained order of things, accessible at any time to philosophical consideration, and perhaps even to philosophical comprehension, is an error. And if nature so conceived is not an error, then the Biblical view of historical revelation is an error. Both views cannot be true.

Both views can, however, be given a hearing. According to Aristotle, nature is what happens always or for the most part. In medieval thought, to the extent that it was theological thought, nature is only what happens *for the most part*. For the medieval thinkers—and I speak generally here; there were exceptions—nature is ruled by God, and God can disrupt the "for the most part" regularity of the world. He can even irrupt into the world. Nature is *not* what happens *always*. In medieval thought we find a kind of uneasy coexistence of Biblical belief in historical revelation and Greek philosophy. Aristotle was, as you undoubtedly know, read and commented on with great interest by Jewish, Islamic, and Christian theologians and philosophers. But when the philosophy of Aristotle could not be reconciled with the claims of revelation, the latter was held to be

authoritative. The coexistence of these two authorities was not one of parties with equal rights.

In modern thought—and by "modern" I mean post-medieval—we get not a coexistence of philosophy and revelation, but rather a strange fusion of the two. To be sure, modern thought constitutes itself in large measure by reacting against the Bible and Biblical theology. But it retains in a secularized form the notion that historical events can reveal fundamental truths that were not accessible to reason prior to those events. At the popular level, the retention of the view that history is an actual principle of development and disclosure, distinct from nature, takes the form of a belief in progress, a belief that is supported by our increasing knowledge of the world, though much less so by our arguably decreasing knowledge of what it is to be human. At a deeper level we find thinkers such as Hegel and Heidegger who, in quite different ways, give history a primacy in the disclosing of fundamental truth, a primacy that Aristotle would have found virtually unthinkable. The assigning of such primacy to history is one of the chief influences of Biblical religion on modern secular thought.

History was taken seriously in the East as well as in the West, particularly in China. But the historical interest seems to have consisted largely in the compilation of chronicles, though the Chinese historians, like their Greek counterparts, are also interested in bringing to the fore what is permanently human. History seems not to have had a decisive revelatory function in ancient China, any more than it had in ancient Greece. As for ancient India, one finds there hardly any interest in history at all, not even as record keeping, the result being that we do not have an clear idea of just when the great works of the Indian intellectual tradition were composed. In its disdain for history, India seems more Greek than Greece, if not more philosophical than Greece.

And yet something *like* history was taken seriously by the ancient Indians. As in the West, the various speculative schools defined themselves in large measure by orienting themselves toward a founder or set of classical texts, and by ongoing fruitful disputation with each other.

At this point we come upon a concept of history that is tied neither to faith in divine revelation nor to faith in human progress. It is a concept that animates the kind of learning you have been engaged in here at St. John's and, as we hope, you will continue to be engaged in after you leave. It is a concept of history that is inseparable from liberal education. We could call it "the history of ideas," if this expression had not been preempted by others who do not think of education the way we do. Those who teach courses in what they call "the history of ideas" tend to see different theories and outlooks as reflex expressions of the various prejudices that are widely shared in a given epoch or period. They tend to see great thinkers as, essentially, "children of their times." In this way "the history of ideas" is primarily an antiquarian study, a survey of the monuments and ruins of the past from the ostensibly superior vantage point of the present. Needless to say, St. John's does not approach the classic works of the East or of the West solely to find out what they teach, but fully open to the possibility that what they teach may be closer to the truth than the opinions that prevail in our own times. We are open to the

possibility that what "we now know," as we like to put it, may consist more of quantity than of quality when compared to what was known in the past. We are also open to the possibility that in order for us moderns to learn some of the things "we now know" we had to forget other things that the pre-moderns knew. But all this does not mean that St. John's takes the position that the thought of the present is inferior to that of the past. Our methodological conviction—if I may put it that way—is only that the thought of the past is worth taking seriously in its own terms. This is really quite a modest principle, even if adopting it has stamped us as revolutionaries, or maybe reactionaries, on the contemporary educational scene. That human thinking has a history does not mean that it is either progressive or regressive, only that a serious thinker is animated by the obligation to come to terms with what other serious thinkers have thought. When great thinkers record in letters their encounters with earlier thinkers, we who are engaged in the lifelong endeavor to become liberally educated are afforded access not just to a collection of ideas but to a living history, a history with recurrent themes and problems, and with unexpected turns in their resolution. It is the history of the human mind's attempt to liberate itself from prejudice. We get to relive and thereby comprehend this extraordinary history, though—and here I conclude with a barely concealed exhortation—*only if we liberate ourselves from distraction and do not lose sight of what leisure really is.*