



Twelve Great Books that Changed the University: And Why Christians Should Care

Wilkens, Steve; and Thorsen, Don, eds.
Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2014

Book Review

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Amid the fragmentation of both academic and civil discourse, this book audaciously seeks unity through the Christian liberal arts, or at least through Christian assessment of what was considered “liberal arts.” Wilkens, Thorsen, and their contributors -- all of whom teach at Azusa Pacific University -- offer Christian readings of classic texts that have exerted wide-ranging influence over the Western canon. The texts include those written by Plato, Augustine, Bacon, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Smith, Freud, Dewey, and, yes, even Darwin. While at first glance perhaps too traditional, this book provides several avenues for both spiritual and professional reflection. Tertullian aside, this book demonstrates that Athens and Jerusalem do share common ground.

Wilkens acknowledges that things are not what they were. His introductory chapter addresses the book’s intellectual foundations. The university itself emerges from the twin springs of Christian theology and Greco-Roman philosophy. Therefore the book’s Christian interpretation flows from the original nature of academic life itself. However, Wilkens notes, “while the unity of knowledge was assumed throughout most of Western history, knowledge has now become fragmented and siloed” (11). Curricular fragmentation makes the unifying task of education all the more difficult. Pressure to shape students in marketable disciplines compounds the intellectual disintegration. Educating students to become good employees further subverts more traditional goals of pursuing the good and gaining an intellectual appreciation of the Christian tradition. Academic success no longer recognizes Christian religious maturity as a measurable or desirable outcome. That exclusion has not eliminated the human need (not merely desire) to learn and know both skills and meaning (1). Education cannot be limited to merely technical endeavors. These struggles in part explain why the contributors made their

particular choices. The “great books” admittedly were written by white males but those, Wilkens argues, have exerted the greatest, if not the most recent, influence on the university (13). Christian scholars remain free to negotiate this legacy in their respective disciplines.

Theology receives its due from Thorsen’s own chapter on Augustine’s *Confessions* (36-49). After a content review, Thorsen ably addresses Augustine’s autobiography. It remains one of the few Christian texts still read across disciplinary lines. Perhaps the only thing missing here is a justification for not including *The City of God*. Others offer similarly talented studies, such as Joshua Morris’ reading of Darwin (137-53) and Theresa Clement Tisdale’s assessment of Freud (154-73).

The typical scholarly response might tilt toward dismissiveness. After all, fragmentation is indeed part of academic reality. Wilkens acknowledges this, suggesting that the book could be read chronologically (Plato to Dewey) or by individual chapters to gauge a text’s particular impact (16). No companion course exists where these texts comprise the curriculum, so readers are free to integrate or “silo” as they see fit. Given Azusa Pacific’s confessional identity (evangelical Christian), a parallel volume by Catholic scholars on the same sources might make an interesting follow-up. In an age dominated by assessment rubrics, *Twelve Great Books* reasserts in quick and clean fashion the older, more radical, identity of academic endeavor.

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