

Practically Human

College Professors Speak from the Heart
of Humanities Education

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Editors

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New Life from Ancient Texts

David Noe, Classics

Imagine a world in which nearly every rock, tree, and stream possesses a living, breathing power. This power has a face, in some cases two, and a name. It is personal and must be prayed to and placated with gifts and offerings of grain, flowers, or livestock if you want to prosper. If you want to guarantee that your newborn son enters the world safely, then you make your way to a grove of lotuses on the Esquiline Hill and pray to Juno Lucina. “O goddess,” you might say, “who with Jupiter and Minerva directs the affairs of gods and men, see these fine sheaves of grain that I lay on your altar. Notice, mighty queen, the purity of my heart and the strength of my prayers. Grant, I humbly ask, that my son be born soon and his mother live through the labor, that he learn to speak and defend me against my enemies in the market and in court. I pray to you, Lucina, Hestia, Prorsa Postverta, and any other goddesses who might hear and attend my sacrifice.” This is a world suffused and overflowing with divine power that wells from brook and forest glen.

Next picture an urban landscape along whose broad streets march manifold pillars. On the periphery of this sprawling city a breathtaking marvel towers; the trunks of its 127 columns stretch like marble trees 100 feet toward the

sky. They support a broad and massive roof built of aromatic cedar beams. All along its length on the frieze are carved images of the gods at peace and war, beautiful images of creatures that look like men and women but are far larger and more magnificent; every bare muscle and shapely curve is formed and polished perfectly.

Through the bustling market near the temple's foot you can see a small, balding man speaking to a crowd of onlookers. He is proclaiming a God who does not live in a temple built by human hands and who has no need of sacrifices. The man says that though this God is greater in beauty and power than anyone can imagine, he must not be depicted in statues or portraits. Instead, this God has himself become human in the person of his son, a poor and humble peasant from the backwater province of Judea, and that same man was crucified as a criminal but rose again in the flesh three days later.

The crowd of onlookers from all over Asia Minor, speakers of Greek, Lydian, Latin, and so forth, looks at the strange speaker—whose name is Paul—with a mixture of curiosity and contempt.

This quick sketch gives some sense of the sharp contrast that early generations of pagans felt when they first compared the claims of the Christian gospel to their own well-developed and ancient faith. The early Greeks and Romans were avowedly and self-consciously religious. The spark of the divine, or *sensus divinitatis* as later generations called it, smoldered and smoked in their hearts, bursting forth in many bright displays of the finest art, literature, science, and architecture of the time. The magnificent temple of Artemis described above; the epic poems of Homer and Ovid; and the inventions and discoveries of thinkers like Archimedes, who worked out a formula for the volume of

a cone, and Eratosthenes, who without sophisticated tools measured the earth's circumference—these were the fruits of their reverential care for the gods whom they feared and worshiped.

Nowhere is this reverential care more evident than in the Parthenon at Athens. The Athenians built this exquisite temple to honor the goddess who granted them victory over the advancing Persians. Even in its dilapidated state today, the temple is majestic. It is said that, like the human body, the Parthenon contains not one straight line. Instead, every step, pillar, beam, and cornice runs with some gentle slope or curve, cleverly fooling the eye and correcting for various optical flaws in the way we view the world. Most remarkable is that the statues adorning the temple's pediments were finished in the round. In other words, the back portions of these statues were as carefully sculpted as the fronts, though they would never be seen. Indeed, it was not until these statues were removed from the Parthenon by a British noble in the early 1800s, twenty-two hundred years after they were first set in place, that it was discovered that the statues were finished all round.

Why would the Athenians bother to perfect the parts of their statues that they thought no human eye would ever behold? What kind of a culture devotes such incredible time and care to what apparently is inconsequential? The answer lies in the ancient religious perspective: the temple of Athena was made for gods, not for mortals. Those hidden parts of the temple mattered because the gods could see them.

It has been rightly said that there was no true atheism in antiquity. While some groups, like the Epicurean philosophers, taught that the gods were distant and unconcerned with human affairs, too involved in elevated pleasures to

care about us, no one would have dared to say that the gods did not exist. Instead, life was permeated at all levels with religious feeling, and the ancients found it impossible to escape the all-seeing eye of heaven.



The situation has changed since Socrates strolled the streets of Athens. These days the gods are not ritually consulted before war is made. Sacrifices are not offered before ambassadors are sent to foreign nations. Nonreligious, purely human interests are said to motivate the pursuits of science, literature, and art. Religion is thought to be optional. Claims of supernatural experience are dismissed. If our perspective is so different now, why study those ancient times? I will offer two reasons.

First, studying the classics teaches us compassion. The classics invite us to suffer with those who are at once both very much like us and yet also quite different. When the character Aeneas in Vergil's epic arrives on the shores of North Africa after being tossed by the wind, the majority of his fleet lost to a tempest sent by the angered Juno, he wanders into the rising city of Carthage. There, to his astonishment, he beholds paintings on the unfinished temples. These depict people whom he knew and who had fought in the war before Troy's lofty walls. He sees the great Achilles, kingly Priam, and the other heroes who struggled in the ten-year conflict. And then at last he sees himself also displayed, warring on the plain. As he chokes back his weeping, Aeneas comments to his squire that this land, Carthage, is truly civilized, for here "tears are shed for human suffering and mortal woes touch the heart."¹ The proof for Aeneas that he will receive a hospitable welcome in this new land

is that he finds works of art that depict human suffering in a sympathetic way. People cry, they mourn for the hardship of others. With that confidence, Aeneas continues to the center of Carthage.

Today we might not think of simple weeping as a leading indicator of humanity and civilization. We might rather expect a well-developed culture to be marked by a working legal system or the pursuit of scientific knowledge. But for Vergil a city that knew how to express compassion was a healthy and hospitable city. We would do well to learn this lesson from the classical world. It is compassion that breaks down the barriers of skin color, language, and past conflict. It is compassion that prepares the way for peace and provides the basis of a true humanism.

The humanism of the Greeks and Romans recognized the innate connectedness of all people and diagnosed the state of the human condition as one of perpetual sorrow and brokenness. Both themes were developed in classical literature. For instance, the Roman playwright Terence once described the connectedness: “I am a human being, and thus I count nothing human as foreign to me.”² And more than a century later the Roman poet Ovid, a great student of human nature, wrote, “I see and commend my better impulses, but the worse ones are what I follow.”³ These two facts of human existence—our connectedness through common experiences and our pitiful brokenness—are what make compassion both possible and necessary. This, then, is the first lesson to learn from the classics, the lesson of compassion.

The second reason for studying the ancient world is to prevent cultural memory loss. We should never forget that it is possible for a civilization to flourish under the assumption that the human world intersects with the divine. It is

important to remember that religious sensibilities need not be aberrations. These days it is all too easy to become overly content, dangerously preoccupied, and proudly smug because of our modern achievements. Our vision can become shortsighted. The late Hugh Lloyd-Jones puts the matter succinctly like this:

One of the best reasons for studying the past is to protect oneself against that insularity in time which restricts the uneducated and those who write to please them. The ordinary man feels superior to the men of past ages, whose technology was inferior to what he is used to and whose ethical and political beliefs were not those which he has been taught to consider as the only right ones.⁴

Our insularity in time can close us off to supernatural possibilities. Today's world encourages us to purge from our minds any backward notions of divine intervention and providence. But it would be a mistake to think we have transcended the moral and spiritual limitations that our forebears felt so keenly. Our modern knowledge is powerful, but it is not *that* powerful.



I have offered two important reasons for reading classical literature: developing compassion and avoiding cynicism in matters divine. There are other benefits, of course, like being able to think more clearly, write more expressively, and appreciate more deeply 2,000 years of art, architecture, and poetry that are built upon the classics. This sort of education enrolls you in a republic of letters, where you can talk and argue with some of the world's brightest (and most

anguished) souls, men and women like Sappho, Plato, Marcus Aurelius, and St. Ambrose.

But where does the Apostle Paul fit in that conversation? As you will recall, we left him standing at the base of the great temple of Artemis in Ephesus, preaching to a hostile crowd. That angry mob laid hold of Paul's companions Gaius and Aristarchus and rushed toward the theater. There, for more than two hours, in an amazing display of true religious fervor, they chanted, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!" (Acts 19:29–34).

The chanting pagans were quite surprised by the claims made by Christ's followers. The reason for this, however, was not what you might expect. They did not think it unusual that a god would walk among men. When Paul and Barnabas, for example, came through the region of Lystra, their wonder-working and teaching so astonished the locals that they designated Paul Hermes and Barnabas Zeus. Nor did they think it strange that blood must be shed for the remission of sins. All their rituals included sacrifice of some sort. What surprised them most about the Christian gospel was the message of divine humility and of a bodily resurrection. The message that Paul and others brought was foolishness to the Greeks: God took on human form and walked among us, died, and rose again. He had not come down among mortals to sleep around or punish his enemies, but to fulfill the law and pray for those who persecuted him. Immortality had clothed itself with mortality, and the proof of his divine Godhead was that his body did not see decay.

The deeply religious people of the ancient world were stunned by this unexpected display of power in humility. Their philosophers and poets had carefully cultivated a true humanism for many centuries before Christ's incarnation. Each one took the inheritance he had received and worked

to improve upon it, developing and ornamenting the basic themes of courage, moderation, wisdom, and justice. But while authors like Sophocles and Aristophanes knew something was rotten at the core of human nature, they were unable to imagine a God who becomes human in order to purify what is rotten and who is brutalized by his enemies for love of his people. There are no true parallels to the incarnation or resurrection in classical literature. The God-man changed things forever.

Nevertheless, Paul knew his audiences shared his belief that all men and women are inherently religious. For their part, Christians have held onto this belief, sometimes stating it this way: each of us has an impulse to praise and glorify our Creator. Expressions of this idea can be found in some of the Reformation's foundational documents, like the *Belgic Confession*, which states that we all know God because the "universe is before our eyes like a beautiful book in which all creatures, great and small, are as letters to make us ponder the invisible things of God." Such are the Christian echoes of Paul's assertion that we know God "from what has been made" (Romans 1:20).

But as we noted previously, times have changed. In our age there are many who say they have no sense of the divine and no understanding of religious talk. To connect with such people Christians will have to redouble their efforts to speak to the human condition, the nature of suffering, and the inescapable need for comfort. Perhaps through such efforts they will begin to pry open the modern religious imagination, so that a new but ancient light can shine in. This aspiration was expressed in the twentieth century with these words:

How would it be if human nature could be founded upon some secure rock, in order that then the architect might start to build once more, and build, this time, with a conscience void of offense? Such is the Christian ideal, the ideal of a loftier humanism—a humanism as rich and as joyful as the humanism of Greece, but a humanism founded upon the grace of God.⁵

Notes

1. Vergil, *The Aeneid*, I.462. All translations are my own.
2. Terence, *The Self-Punisher*, line 77.
3. Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, book 7, line 20.
4. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1983), 156.
5. J. Gresham Machen, *The Origin of Paul's Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1921), 224.