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Athens, Jerusalem, and Modern Science

An interview with Leon Kass, Amy Apfel Kass, and Francis Oakley

Those who, like Andrew Delbanco, advocate renewed efforts to bridge the gap between the "two cultures" of the sciences and the humanities as part of a larger endeavor to renew liberal education in our time, or those who, like Bruce Kimball, Chuck Foster, and Carol Schneider, note critical points of convergence and affiliation between professional study, liberal education, and religion, need sooner or later to reckon with certain fundamental questions. If we think of liberal education as a kind of quest for wisdom, can we or should we assume that the kind of wisdom sought through liberal learning is compatible with the kind of wisdom sought in the great religious traditions of the world? And what about the relationship between the humanities and the sciences with respect to wisdom? Do we have simply a plurality of ideas and methods, or do we have ways of thinking and living and understanding that are deeply antithetical to one another, leading to an education that would be incoherent at best, destructively corrosive at worst?

Few contemporary thinkers have explored these questions more persistently and more deeply than Professor Leon Kass, the Addie Clark Harding Professor in the College and the Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago. In the introduction to his careful and deeply thoughtful *The Beginning of Wisdom: Reading Genesis* (University of Chicago, 2006), he examines the relationship between the wisdom of Athens and the wisdom of Jerusalem as both of those traditions are related in turn to the project of modern science. Professor Kass earned his Bachelor of Science degree in biology with honors from the University of Chicago in 1958, his MD from the School of Medicine at the University of Chicago in 1962, and his PhD in biochemistry from Harvard University in 1967. After some years of research in molecular biology at the National Institutes of Health, Professor Kass served as Executive Secretary of the Committee on the Life Sciences and Social Policy of the National Research Council/National Academy of Sciences, whose report *Assessing Biomedical Technologies* provided one of the first overviews of the emerging moral and social questions posed by biomedical advance. On the basis of this early work, his extensive publications, and his outstanding teaching, he was named in 2002 as the Chair of the President's Council on Bioethics. I talked with Professor Kass on 26 October 2007. His wife, Amy Apfel Kass who also teaches at the University of Chicago and who has written about both the ancient Greeks and about American higher education, was also part of the conversation.

MS: Let me begin by exploring a question that is near and dear to the hearts of many of those who live and teach at Valparaiso University where we sing in our campus hymn that we have "here on one fair campus Athens and Jerusalem." You have in your writing sharply contrasted the wisdom of Athens and Jerusalem. Are they finally antithetical? Was Tertullian right that Athens and Jerusalem have nothing to say to one another, or are they in some deep sense compatible?

Leon Kass: I think they are ultimately not compatible, if you rightly distinguish the two points of departure: wonder seeking its replacement by knowledge, which makes the perplexities go away, on the side of Athens, versus, on the side of Jerusalem, the fear or reverence for the Lord, which is only the beginning of wisdom but which is never superseded by a kind of full understanding or by comfort in the sufficiency of one's own powers. The spirit of these two points of departure is very different. Moreover, the wisdom of Jerusalem makes extraordinary demands on how you are to live. What begins with the fear and reverence of the Lord soon issues in a long list of commandments about how to live your life. By contrast, the pursuit of wisdom in the manner of Plato and Aristotle, following the model of Socrates, produces no obligations to community or family, and it seems that the highest kind of life is a private life of self-fulfillment through the pursuit of wisdom and reflection. That is a very different view of the good life from the one that is held up by the bible, i.e. the life in community in pursuit of justice, holiness, and love of the neighbor. There are famous examples of people who try to marry their own scriptures with philosophical wisdom (the writings of Thomas Aquinas, for example), but the assimilation goes only so far in those cases. Finally, these two wisdoms are at odds with one another; the demands they make upon us are not easily harmonized.

Amy Apfel Kass: Why would you say that the two are not compatible? Why not say that one leads to or supplements the other, especially given the way you formulate the differences. I have objections to the way you formulate the difference, but why wouldn't you use the language of supplementation?

LK: The statement "The unexamined life is not worth living" (the Socratic model, if you will) is very different from "it has been shown to you, o man, what the Lord doth require of you." Take another passage in the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics* where Aristotle dialectically approaches the question of what actually is the end for human life. He makes a plausible case that it is a real question, because there are lots of different ways in which people live their lives, and all of them aim at some good. What then might be *the* good for human beings? He poses the questions of what this good is and *of which of the sciences it is the object*. Now we comfortable, liberally educated, basically rationalist people said "that's right," but from a biblical point of view the answer to the question of what is the human good is not an object of one of the human sciences, to be found by our own lights. In fact the bible in part begins by holding up a mirror in which we see the insufficiency of our intellect and the muteness of that upon which we exercise our mind (mainly the natural world and the world of our experience) for giving the proper instruction with respect to the human good. For years and years and years, I read that passage in Aristotle and used to say, "of course, it's an object of inquiry," but the way of the bible does not say that how to live your life is an object of inquiry. It's true that you could deepen your understanding of what it is you were taught. Aristotle argues that once people have been well brought up, they can come to understand more deeply what virtue means. By analogy, people reared in a biblical way can come to understand what they've been taught much more deeply through the use of reason. Even so, there is something radically different between a view of life in which nothing is immune to critical examination and a view of life that makes demands in both truth and practice, which you don't regard as the fruits of an inquiry.

MS: I'm with Amy on this one. Let me just try to suggest some reasons why I think your account here needs some further thought. For one thing, sometimes when you speak of Athens you speak of a certain spirit or manner of inquiry. Sometimes you act as though there is a single teaching. You just quoted "the unexamined life is not worth living." When you treat Jerusalem you are perfectly willing to say that when we look at these texts there are a variety of teachings. How, for example, do we harmonize the first two creation narratives in *Genesis*? What do we make of the fact that the Noahic permission to eat meat departs from the vegetarian diet God prescribes in *Genesis* 1? I am inviting you to reflect upon the fact that just as sacred scriptures have a variety of teachings, so what we are calling the tradition of Athens has quite a range of teachings about how we are to live and who we are. There is no single motto or teaching within the tradition of Athens; moreover, there have been quarrels among the orators and the philosophers and many others from the beginning. Therefore, one can't compare Athens and Jerusalem by suggesting that either one of the two traditions has one central teaching about these matters, as you've just done. That's the first observation.

The second one is that I don't know whether, for Athens, the removal of all perplexities is really the aim of inquiry. You are careful to say in your "Aims of Education" lecture that, unlike the technical disciplines that work on problems and want to solve them, those who are friends of liberal education see that they might be led through inquiry to a deeper appreciation for certain ambiguities and contradictions and learn to live with them rather than remove them. So in a sense I think that both Athens and Jerusalem arrive at and sometimes bow before ineffability or mystery and leave them there with some deeper sense of the mystery, or the ineffability, or the perplexity to be sure.

Finally, I think your contrast is a little too sharply drawn in this whole matter of a way of life. Pierre Hadot's work on *Philosophy as a Way of Life* suggests that many ancient philosophers lived together in community and were very concerned about living out a certain way of life that had to do very much with a certain righteousness or a certain virtue.

LK: That is all welcome. You are right in pointing out that there is not a single philosophical teaching that I would call Athens. I would have to say that when I am thinking about Athens, I am really thinking about Greek philosophy at its peak, not Homer or Sophocles, for example, where certain greater kinships might be found to biblical traditions. And I am not thinking of the Greek atomists. I am trying to think of those Greek philosophers in which some notions of God and good play a role and in which human life has teleological purpose, so one can at least put these two things in greater alignment with the biblical tradition. When I am thinking of Athens, I am mostly thinking of Plato and Aristotle. Even there, I am not sure I would say what is important about them is a finished teaching. I do not think either of them are systematic philosophers in a way in which Kant and Hegel are systematic philosophers. Philosophy seems to be a pursuit, a particular way of life, but a way of life that is also suggested as the best life that a human being can live. Insofar as human beings are capable of being happy, it is somehow in pursuit of wisdom as exemplified by Plato in the dialogues and explicitly argued for by Aristotle in the *Ethics*. So in addition to the substantive differences (and the differences are considerable), it does seem to me that the spirit of the pursuits are different from the spirit of those pursuits undertaken under the biblical dispensation. I am not suggesting that believing Christians and Jews have to have a lobotomy to think like this. That's absurd.

AK: Why is it absurd given what you're saying?

LK: Let me finish the thought then get back to your question. Take for example in Aristotle's *Ethics* the treatment of the ethical virtues of courage and moderation in Book III, justice in Book V, and, in Book IV, the virtues of nobility beginning in liberality, finishing in wit. Then Aristotle has a wonderful little chapter on *aidos*. We can call it shame or awe. And Aristotle says that *aidos* is not a virtue; it is a useful passion, but no grown man should ever feel it, because he should never do anything to be ashamed of. When Aristotle says *aidos* is not a virtue, he is basically saying that piety is not a virtue, that there aren't things before which we should stand in awe. That's a very deep difference, though it is true that for Plato and Aristotle there is some kind of power in the world not of human making toward which we are oriented, which draws us away as the lover draws the lover to imitate and come fully into being. But that highest thing in the world says not a peep about how you are supposed to live your life. The compatibility would be something like this: produce sound Christians and Jews and then let them adorn their lives with liberal education, but don't somehow expect liberal education and the spirit of Socrates or of Aristotle to somehow get us to what it is we get by being informed by biblical teachings.

MS: Do you think that there is within Jerusalem (as you appropriate that tradition) a kind of argumentative spirit akin to the Athenian with respect to its own sacred texts.

LK: If you look really deeply into some of the sources, there is virtually no limit as to what can be raised for discussion, including various stories in which in one famous tale God says exultantly, "my people have defeated me." God is, in other words, taking pleasure not in rebellion but in the growth of human understanding. So there is that kind of spirit. I should say that I haven't by any means jumped ship on the subject of liberal education. Certainly in a secular university, given the purely utilitarian, vocationalist tendencies even in the universities that claim to be interested in liberal education, bringing people to awareness of their ignorance and letting them see the deeper issues beneath opinions that they complacently hold and turning the soul around with good questions are marvelous aspirations in collegiate education. My reservations have to do with whether or not that kind of activity *by itself* can produce guidance for a good life. How does it contribute to good character, good citizenship? As a father who has sent daughters to college, I have acquired growing sympathy with Anytus in

Plato's *Meno* who speaks in the name of something like the Athenian equivalent of the American Legion. He rightly worries over what people like the Sophists are doing to the younger generation. There is considerable difference between Socrates' kind of inquiry and the merely antinomian corrosiveness of the Sophists. Nevertheless, from the point of view of those ruling opinions without which no society is possible, both forms of inquiry are equally dangerous. In that sense, there is a certain subversive element in allowing the mind to ask questions about everything.

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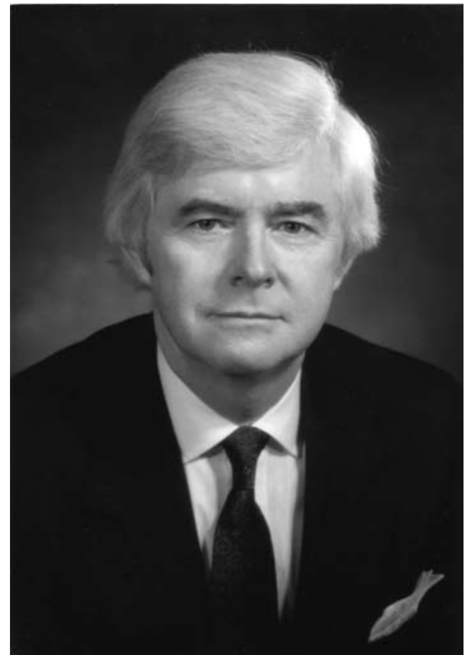
After elaborating the differences between Athens and Jerusalem in *The Beginnings of Wisdom*, Professor Kass proceeded to suggest that though these differences were substantial, even irreconcilable, they were not as substantial as the differences between both of those traditions and the tradition of modern science since the seventeenth century. In September 2007, I asked Professor Frank Oakley, the Edward Dorr Griffin Professor of the History of Ideas Emeritus at Williams College and the President Emeritus of Williams College, to explore these same matters from his vantage point as a historian of the late Middle Ages. Professor Oakley is one of the few educators in America who has both exemplified the practice of the liberal arts in his chosen field of study and written about liberal education based upon his learning as an historian and his experience as a leader of one of our very best liberal arts colleges. While serving as President of Williams College, Oakley completed a book on liberal education and the liberal arts college in this country, *Community of Learning: The American College and the Liberal Arts Tradition* (Oxford University, 1992).



MS: Let me start by inviting you to reflect on a very broad subject that you've written about quite extensively both in your work as a historian and then a bit in your book on liberal education, namely the whole place of science in the liberal arts. As you may know, Leon Kass has written a book called *The Beginnings of Wisdom* in which he argues that really the Athens/Jerusalem tension/relationship has, in a way, been superseded since the seventeenth century by a three-cornered conversation (that is, Athens, Jerusalem, modern science). He also draws rather sharp contrasts between science as understood not only in Greece but also for most of the Middle Ages, and science as it developed in the wake of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century. By contrast, your work, as I read it, goes to some lengths to show that there was a four-centuries-long period of preparation and incubation prior to 1700, so that there is not quite as radical a disruption when we come to the seventeenth century as other scholars think. Professor Kass has in mind, for instance, that after the seventeenth century, the thought that science is inquiring into the nature of things, or into the essences of things, or is able to give an account out of its own resources of the meaning of the cosmos drops out. This may help to explain why it seems progressively harder to bring together scientific inquiry and the humanities. I think many institutions have had experiences that would, in some loose kind of way, bear him out. Thus, though we speak of liberal education as including scientific learning, that has been harder to maintain since the modern period. I'm just wondering what your thoughts are both on the broader question of this notion of a three-cornered conversation and on the narrower one of its implications for liberal education.

Frank Oakley: Well, regarding the first part of your question, I'd want to link Jerusalem with modern science instead of placing them in opposition to one another. I do agree that after Newton the claims being made for science, using the term now in the modern way, were much more limited than they would have been earlier on. The link I see is with one tradition in the Middle Ages (one philosophical tradition), which also was much more limited in its reach and more empiri-

cally driven. The connection I see there is between the rise of a particular tradition in scholastic philosophy, nominalism, and the theology emphasizing divine omnipotence, and the logical interconnection between the two. If you drop out that connection (because it was dropped out later) then what you are left with is a science that is beginning to stand on its results and to gain its credibility from predictive power in an empirical way.

But I am not really a historian of science. I got into these issues through a preoccupation with scholastic thinkers in general and with William of Ockham and his followers in particular and through a rather naïve, stunned realization as a graduate student when I read Perry Miller. I thought, "My golly, these puritans really are carrying forward part of that late medieval tradition," which seems obvious now, but it was all news to me. And then, following that, the person among the scientists whom I spent the most time on was Robert Boyle, the chemist, because his natural theology is very clear and all embracing. I'm so pleased to find that that view of things is catching on a bit among historians of science. I found when I first wrote about it (which was in 1961) that it was viewed as being slightly suspect or something. I had great difficulty placing an article on the topic. It ended up in *Church History*, which was not the best location for it. The article has been anthologized since and is still alive, basically. I think the field (or at least a part of the field) has come closer to where I was. So I see a complex balance between the Greek philosophical tradition concerned with essences and all the rest of it and what came later. The impact of the biblical intuition (I don't know quite what else to call the impact of biblical views in reshaping the philosophical tradition) was really quite profound. So much of the attention in the past was placed on the impact of Greek philosophical modes of thought on the shaping of Christian thinking/theology. But I am more interested in the other story, the impact of fundamentally biblical conceptions on the tradition that came from the Greeks. It works out very slowly across time.

The other issue I'm less clear about. I don't have anything very profound to say. When I talk about liberal arts, I mean arts and sciences. I don't like the distinctions. I prize the habits of mind that are tightly shaped to tease out empirically based results, though it is sometimes hard for people who spend all of their time doing that to reach out and hold hands with those with humanistic dispositions. I don't think there's anything necessary about that separation. I think it is just that life is short and we learn what we are good at, and we pursue it, and that shapes our patterns of thinking. I was looking recently at that essay by Bruce Kimball, the piece on pragmatism, and he was quoting Dewey's sense that at all levels of education there is something similar going on. That appeals to me. That's not a very satisfactory take on the second part of your question. That's probably the best I can do.

MS: Another thing, I think, that convinces Professor Kass that the scientific revolution really complicates ideas of liberal learning and liberal education has to do with a move toward a purely instrumental rationality. According to Bacon, for example, one inquires for the sake of the relief of man's estate, thereby linking scientific knowledge to something beyond itself, which is more practical, instrumental, etc. This teaching about science, once unleashed, soon alters the discourse of liberal learning. Instead of knowledge for its own sake or inquiry that seeks simply a deeper understanding of nature, liberal learning (or at least the scientific part of it) threatens to be instead a project of mastery for ends extrinsic to the inquiry. If you slice all of this through Bacon and instrumental rationality, you can see Kass's point made in a different way.

FO: That helps me understand. I think that that account diminishes the contribution of science, which is broader and richer. But if you're pursuing the line that's pointed to the direction of the development (and very refined development) of instrumental, functional, means/ends rationality, then clearly there is a tension with humanistic concerns. That I see. I suppose it would make sense to go back to Bacon for that. I think, however, if you looked at the sixteenth/seventeenth century, and the Baconian bit was all that you had, then there wouldn't have been a scientific revolution.

MS: Let me ask you about some of your own bedrock convictions. It's interesting the way you end the book, *Community of Learning*, by noting that Alfred North Whitehead had shown, for reasons that are quite compelling, a certain suspicion of some of the more ornate schemes that have been proposed to unify all of human knowledge. You nonetheless approve of Whitehead's saying that we may hope for a deeper harmonics between the world and the knower, that there's a sense in which the universe may well be congenial to powers that we possess. There is also some suggestion at the very end of your book that there may be some kind of deeper harmonics among the various domains of learning and the things that are the subjects of those inquiries. Is that a kind of Johannine "in the beginning was the Word" kind of conviction, or did

it come from others among the Christian thinkers that you take up who had that kind of sense about the universe? What are the sources of that hope?

FO: Lord, I'm not sure I can answer the question. It reflects a sort of a hunger for that kind of coherence. That hunger is somewhat Catholic in its roots, and that means, in my case, that it stems probably from high school. By the time I went to the Pontifical Institute, I was a graduate student interested in the history of philosophy and in learning paleography and that sort of thing. By then, I probably had been formed in some sort of way. I feel very indebted to the Jesuits, even though they beat the Hell out of us at school. But there was a breadth in their teaching. We were all working for state examinations, which imposed certain limits, but the teaching went beyond that into a greater and more philosophical informing of history, a reaching out to more universal history, not confined to national synthesis. I read modern history at Oxford. It was very confining. It provided probably a terrific discipline, very empirically based. I had cold water poured on me for three years and that was probably very healthy, but I had been taught more generously at my school days to think more broadly and synthetically, and my mind tends to go that way. But I can't give you a theoretical reason for that. Although I think now you can combine history and philosophy at Oxford in some kind of joint degree, you couldn't then. I really wanted to be doing philosophy as well as history, so I was reading a lot on the side. Basically, I realized I wouldn't have been any good at philosophy in itself. It was the history of ideas that really got my juices flowing. This is all retrospective. You know Isaiah Berlin was at Oxford, but I never had any contact with him. But I think I began to realize that there's a sort of ecology to human thinking, leading not just to affinities among various ideas in different domains but sometimes to logical interconnections among them. Thus, the positions one adopts on natural theology will have consequences for one's theory of knowledge, which will have consequences for one's ethics, which will in turn have consequences for one's political philosophy. And I have scratched that intellectual itch probably ever since.

And Whitehead certainly had that itch. I don't understand his system. I've never really attempted to come to terms with it. But he wrote wonderful essays that are really intellectual history at the very abstract end of the field. Reading them left me with a real admiration for him. He's one of the people who influenced me. The other was a fellow—Michael Foster—who was teaching at Oxford when I was there and who did mainly Plato stuff, but unlike most of the English crowd, had also studied in Germany, so he had a big dose of Hegel in him. And I found his writings fantastic. I owe a lot just to reading him about the impact of biblical stuff, notions of creation, again involving those complex interconnections among different realms of human thought. I get very excited when I see these interconnections. That disposition I clearly owe to my school. But I developed it and stuck with it, even beyond the time in the 1970s when that sort of history of ideas really went out of fashion. That, I'm afraid, is a long and rambling response to your question.

MS: I think it's basically to say that the hope for deeper harmonics among the various domains of learning is more an autobiographically grounded hope than a deep theological or philosophical conviction that you'd wish to defend. Really a matter of formation and temperament.

FO: Yes, I had and still have the disposition to look for that sort of thing, for whatever reason. But those connections really do exist, too. On the other hand, they are profoundly mysterious. And, as I get older, I really have an intense consciousness of understanding less and less!

MS: Just to say something about my own background and my own take on this thorny matter, I find the whole vocabulary of seeking the truth or of discovering the truth much more credible within a framework where one believes there is truth really there to be found, rather than what some colleagues in some of our more notorious departments prefer to speak of as pure constructivism (a pure making of truth). I find my intellectual energy increases the more convicted I am at some level of faith or hope that there really is a truth to be found rather than only a truth to be made.

FO: I fully agree that that is almost certainly religiously based. I am very conscious of that. I decided sometime in the 1970s that I had to try to come to terms with post-structuralism, so I started reading up on it. I was singularly unimpressed by much of it. As in any position, there's an element of truth in the constructivist position. But when pushed too far, it becomes absurd. Being in administration stiffened my resolve to challenge some of the more extremely deconstructive claims that were being made a few years ago. Even the most deconstructed members of the English department read

their salary letters very much in terms of authorial intent. I've often wondered, every time I fly, what would happen to us all if airline mechanics who have these huge technical manuals were to start talking about them in terms of reader-reception theory or something. I love academe, but I hate the impact of fashion on people. ⚜

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