THE RAMSAY CENTRE FOR WESTERN CIVILISATION

Ramsay Lectures

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Great Books of the Middle Ages;

and How to Read Them

What is a great book? You would think that I, at least, as a member of the faculty at the University of Chicago, would be able to answer this question. We are, after all, famous as the institution where Mortimer J. Adler did his work editing the *Great Books of the Western World*, the 54-volume set of 443 works by 74 white male authors published to great fanfare in 1952 and hailed by former president and chancellor of the University of Chicago Robert Maynard Hutchins as embodying "the faith of the West." But contrary to common knowledge, Adler's list of books had nothing to do with the Core curriculum of the undergraduate College at Chicago.[1] Nor, as I hope to convince you, was it especially "great"—particularly if our goal is to understand, preserve, and build on what we now call Western civilization, but which I argue ought more properly to be called by its medieval term: "Christendom."

It is true that Adler had offices on campus on the fifth floor of the Social Sciences building where he and a team of 120 staffers burned through half of the project's entire budget compiling an index of the 102 Great Ideas that Adler claimed ran through the 443 works the selection committee had chosen to represent the "Great Conversation of the Western World." But Adler was not a member of the College

[1] For the history of the project, see Alex Beam, *A Great Idea at the Time: The Rise, Fall, and Curious Afterlife of the Great Books* (New York: Public Affairs, 2008).

faculty responsible for teaching in the Core, nor did he intend the *Great Books* to serve as a part of the undergraduate College curriculum. Rather, as Hutchins explained in his introductory essay to the collection, the *Great Books* were envisioned as an antidote to the kind of work that went on at the university, including in the Social Sciences and Humanities.[2]

Then as now, Hutchins insisted (—remember, this was in 1952), American education was in decline thanks to the scholarly overemphasis on specialization, which Hutchins identified as an unfortunate by-product of industrialization and scientific progress. While—he conceded—it might be a good thing for universities to jettison the "meaningless drill" of what had come to pass by the late nineteenth century as education in the Greco-Roman classics, it was a disaster for the study of the liberal arts to devolve into nothing but academic specialities talking only to themselves. As Hutchins put it, specialization itself requires a grounding in the great questions of human existence as articulated and contested over the centuries, which grounding the *Great Books*—spanning as they did some twenty-five centuries of great writing and thinking—promised to provide.

But there was a catch. Even as the *Great Books* promised to rescue liberal education from the specialization of the academy, they did so as a set with a very specific purpose in mind. According to Hutchins, the 443 works in the series were chosen not because they were representative of the various periods in Western history, but rather "in proportion as the great writers of these epochs [Antiquity, the Middle Ages, the Renaissance and modern times] contributed to the deepening,

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[2] "The Great Conversation," written for the first edition of the *Great Books of the Western World* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952); excerpt published with the second edition (2008): http://blogs.britannica.com/wp-content/pdf/The_Great_Conversation.pdf

extension, or enrichment of the tradition of the West." And how had the selection committee defined this tradition? In Hutchins's own words:

> The spirit of Western civilization is the spirit of inquiry. Its dominant element is the *Logos*. Nothing is to remain undiscussed. Everybody is to speak his mind. No proposition is to be left unexamined. The exchange of ideas is held to be the path to the realization of the potentialities of the [human] race.[3]

To be sure, not everything in this tradition of argumentative inquiry was expressed in books. A full appreciation of the tradition would require the study of its art and music. "But," Hutchins opined, "to the extent to which books can present the idea of a civilization, the idea of Western civilization is here presented."

There is nothing particularly novel or, indeed, necessarily pernicious in the desire to make a list of books that everyone who wants to consider him- or herself educated should read. The problem goes back to antiquity, when even the author of Ecclesiastes lamented the number of books, of whose making there was "no end" (Ecclesiastes 12:11-12). It is true, however, as Hutchins contended, that a tradition defines itself by the titles that it includes in such lists, which is why the making of lists matters. Just ask the Council of Trent. Which books do you think belong in the category "holy scriptures"? Such questions are never neutral, as every postmodernist knows.

But the postmodernists in the academy protesting against the "dead white European males" of the idealized twentieth-century *Great Books* series are not, I would argue, the main culprits in the spiritual and intellectual decline of the West that the Ramsay Centre was founded to counteract. From my perspective as a specialist in the history

[3] Hutchins, "Great Conversation," 48-49.

of Christianity, the postmodernists are simply heirs to a decline which began with the Enlightenment's elevation of Reason as against Revelation and with the corollary definition of Truth as something to be discovered through inquiry as opposed to something that exists of itself to be contemplated and absorbed. In other words—or so I hope to convince you in the time I have this afternoon—if we are losing the West, it is not the postmodernists, but the modernists who are at fault, more particularly modernists like Adler and Hutchins. Indeed, quite bluntly, if we are losing the West—as many of us believe we are, otherwise we would not be here today talking about how to study the Western tradition—it is Adler and Hutchins and their program of *Great Books of the Western World* that is at the core of our problem. If we are losing the West, it is because we have accepted as definitive Adler and Hutchins's list of books that we should consider "great," along with their purpose for compiling the list. If we are losing the West, it is because we have substituted the knowledge of the *world* for the knowledge of the *Word*.

Even Hutchins, son as he was of a Presbyterian minister, admitted as much. While he and Adler were often accused of wanting to reinstitute the medieval trivium—grammar, rhetoric, and logic—and quadrivium—arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, and music—as the basis for secondary education, the Middle Ages had—with the notable exceptions of Dante, Chaucer, and Thomas Aquinas—nothing to contribute to the Great Conversation as Hutchins defined it. As Hutchins observed in his overview of the set:

It is worth noting that, though the period from 1500 to 1900 represents less than one-sixth of the total extent of the literary record of the Western tradition, the last four

hundred years is represented in this set by more than one-half the volumes of the *Great Books of the Western World*.[4]

Given that the works of Dante, Chaucer, and Aquinas occupy only four out of the 54 volumes, even adding Augustine of Hippo (one volume) to the count brings the works representing the period from 400 to 1500 to less than one tenth of the set. The remaining seventeen volumes (one third of the whole) come from pagan antiquity. To judge from the selection of works included in the *Great Books of the Western World*, the Western tradition is not only historically modern. It is by definition secular—and by default pagan.

Some may consider this orientation a good thing. Many good people do, including some of our most valiant warriors in the fight for the values of Western civilization.[5] By their account, standard since the Enlightenment, the spirit of inquiry fostered by modernity freed the Western tradition from the evil of believing that religion might be objectively true and its corollary insistence on the unity of truth. It likewise liberated the Western tradition from the belief in sin and the idea that language used improperly might be dangerous. And it realized the value of the individual as against the collective. Already, however, there are cracks in the argument, which should make us wary.

This latter contention—that modernity gave place to the individual who had hitherto been defined only by his or her membership in a group—is precisely contrary to the way in which that great father of classical liberalism John Stuart Mill characterized the Middle Ages. In Mill's view (see volume 43 of the *Great Books*):

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[4] Hutchins, "Great Conversation," 47.

[5] For example: Helen Pluckrose, "The Rise and Whys of Grievance Studies," Ramsay Centre for Civilisation Lecture, 18 June 2019.

In ancient history, in the middle ages, and in a diminishing degree through the long transition from feudality to the present time, the individual was a power in himself; and if he had either great talents or a high social position, he was a considerable power. At present individuals are lost in the crowd.[6]

(Mill, like Burckhardt who gave us the description of the medieval man "conscious of himself only as a member of a race, people, party, family or corporation—only through some general category," was writing in 1859.[7] Makes you think!) Nevertheless, like President Hutchins, many of those who see the Christian Middle Ages as *the* problem that the West needs to overcome (think, the Crusades, the inquisition, the relations between Christians, Muslims, and Jews, and bourgeois ideals of commerce and virtue) would doubtless agree with Mill's claim that disputation is necessary to the advancement of knowledge until such time as the strongest arguments prevail, at which point, according to Mill, the science may be settled and the questions laid to rest. Oh? That is not what you thought Mill was arguing? You thought Mill was all about freedom of speech and resisting the tyranny of the majority lest the eccentric be prevented from making such experiments in living as might enable mankind to improve? This is the real reason that it is so dangerous to encourage students to concentrate on reading the primary sources, particularly those written by dead white European males. Sometimes they say the exact opposite of what we have come to believe that they say. Or, indeed, what we have been instructed to believe they say, whether by the modernists or their postmodernist heirs in the academy, not to mention the mainstream political and entertainment media.

[6] *On Liberty* (1859): https://www.bartleby.com/130/
[7] Jakob Burckhardt, *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860; trans. S.G.C. Middlemore, 1929), 98.

Have you noticed the full title of the famous Chicago set? *Great Books of the Western World.* However much he might champion the study of the Western tradition of inquiry, Hutchins, like Mill, saw himself as an advocate not of the West, but of the world. Indeed, following his tenure at the University of Chicago, Hutchins spent the last twenty-five years of his life advocating for the idea of world government—"world law, enforced by a world organization, which must be attained through world co-operation and community"—so as to stave off the possibility of nuclear war.[8] Why, then, study the West? Because Hutchins, like Mill, believed that there was, in fact, only one answer to the great question of human flourishing, towards which the Great Conversation was tending, if only education might be properly reformed. Far from being open to the search for truth wheresoever it might lead, both Mill and Hutchins saw universal liberalism as the sole Answer opposing the evils of Civilizational Decline and the Mediocrity of the Middle Class. Both claimed that the practice of disputation was necessary for combatting these evils. And both—whether implicitly (Hutchins) or explicitly (Mill)—opposed the idea that Christianity had anything to do with either the origins of this practice of disputation or the likelihood of discovering the Answer.

Mill was categorical. Christianity might pride itself on its moral code developed in opposition to paganism, but as anyone with "the most ordinary acquaintance with literary history" would know, "a large portion of the noblest and most valuable moral teaching has been the work, not only of men who did not know, but of men who knew and rejected, the Christian faith." Thanks to his philosophical (if not theological) Thomism, Hutchins's rejection of Christianity was subtler and, arguably, therefore the more damning, buttressed as it was by the almost complete absence of the Christian

[8] Hutchins, "Great Conversation," 70. On Hutchins's later career, see Beam, *Great Idea*, 94.

Middle Ages from the *Great Books of the Western World*—almost as if the Great Books of the Middle Ages were not so much irrelevant to the Great Conversation, as too dangerous to even name.

Pop quiz! How many of these authors do you recognize? Ambrose of Milan, Augustine of Hippo, Jerome, Gregory the Great. Okay, maybe that was too easy. How about the Venerable Bede? Fun fact: Bede's commentary on the Gospel of Luke is the reason that we count these four authors as the *egregii doctores ecclesiae* (the "preeminent Fathers of the Church") whom everyone should read. (They were officially recognized as such by Pope Boniface VIII in a decretal of 1295.[9])

Let's try again. How about Origen of Alexandria, Athanasius of Alexandria, Hilary of Poitiers, Basil of Cappadocia, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzen, Theophilus of Alexandria, John of Constantinople, Cyril of Alexandria, Pope Leo the Great, Proculus, Isidore of Seville, Cyprian of Carthage, Orosius, Sedulius, Prudentius, Juvencus, Arator, Rufinus, Dionysius the Areopagite, Eusebius of Caesarea, and Cassiodorus "who wrote quite a useful work in explanation of the Psalms"? A little trickier? You would have known all of these names if you were a novice at the abbey of St. Victor in Paris studying in the mid-twelfth century with Master Hugh and wanted to know which books to read.[10]

Perhaps you would prefer a more secular list. How about Donatus, Cato, Theodulus, Juvenal, Horace, Ovid, Statius, Virgil, Sallust, Cicero, Martial, Petronius, Symmachus, Solinus, Sidonius, Suetonius, Quintus Curtius, Pompeius Trogus, Crisippus, Livy, Seneca, Priscian, Remigius of Auxerre, Boethius, Porphyry,

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[9] Bernice M. Kaczynski, "Bede's Commentaries on Luke and Mark and the Formation of the Patristic Canon," in *Anglo-Latin and its Heritage*, ed. Siân Echard and Gernot R. Wieland (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001): 17-26.
[10] Hugh, *Didascalicon*, 4.14, trans. Jerome Taylor (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), 115.

Aristotle, Apuleius, Quintilian, Euclid, Ptolemy, Johannicius, Hippocrates, Galen, Constantinus the African, Isaac Judeus, Dioscorides, Macer, Alexander of Tralles, Burchard of Worms, Gratian, Ivo of Chartres, Pope Alexander III, and Justinian? Were these names more familiar to you? Were there some names you did not expect to hear in a list of books recommended by a twelfth-century English grammarian—his name was Alexander Neckam—designing a curriculum for students in the liberal arts?[11] (It's true! Medieval scholastics read the Greek and Roman classics! How do you think they learned to speak and write Latin? But they also read law and medicine, as Alexander's list shows.)

Would a more market-tested list suit you better? How many of these titles do you recognize? *Breviarium*, *Horae*, *Doctrinale*, *Missale*, *Ars minor*, *Psalterium*, *Disticha de moribus*, *Biblia*, *Legenda aurea sanctorum*, *Bucolica*, *Manipulus curatorum*, *Rudimenta grammatices*, *Epistolae et evangelia*, *Elegantiolae*, *Georgica*, *Fabulae*, *Comoediae*, *Postilla super epistolas et evangelia*, *Aeneis*, *Mirablia Romae*, *Super arboribus consanguinitatis*, *Modus confitendi*, *Ars moriendi*, *Aesopus moralisatus*, *Institutiones*, *De consolation philosophiae*, *Summulae logicales*, *Imitatio Christi*, *Cordiale quattour novissimorum*, *Confessionale*.[12] I know! I had to look up quite a few of these works myself, but then several were only written in the fifteenth century—appropriately, given that this is a list of the 30 best-selling titles for the first forty-five years of the history of print—and I am more familiar with the works of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries; I don't know as many from the later Middle Ages.

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[11] Charles H. Haskins, "A List of Text-Books form the Close of the Twelfth Century," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 20 (1909): 75-94; trans. Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300-1475* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 531-41.

[12] Michael Milway, "Forgotten Best-sellers from the Dawn of the Reformation," in *Continuity and Change: The Harvest of Late Medieval and Reformation History*, ed. Robert J. Bast and Andrew C. Gow (Leiden: Brill, 2000): 113-42.

Some of these best-selling books were grammars, some the lives of saints, some handbooks for priests, some works of poetry. But all but a handful have been completely forgotten (Aesop's *Fables*, Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*, Thomas of Kempen's *Imitation of Christ*), and only one of the authors (Virgil) made Hutchins's and Adler's list of "great books."

As we say at the University of Chicago, so what? So what if we don't remember the names of authors once so popular that their works were the first to be put into print? Perhaps they deserve to be forgotten—along with the majority of authors whose works never even made it into print, despite their popularity in manuscript. After all, as the preacher said, "of making many books, there is no end, and much study is an affliction of the flesh." Simply because books were important at one time does not mean that they participate in the Great Conversation of Western civilization. Or does it? Notice the sleight of hand. Hutchins would have you believe that the criteria for selection in the *Great Books of the Western World* was philosophically or ideologically neutral—the "spirit of inquiry"—when in fact it was anything but. Even as he inveighed against specialization, Hutchins was engaging in an exercise of selection purposefully calculated to exclude certain types of reading in favor of others. The irony is that by so doing, he—and all those who have looked to the *Great Books* as the Answer to the recovery of the tradition of the West—effectively obliterated the very tradition of reading on which his own commitment to reading was founded: the study of the Word.

It's true! It is right there in Hutchins's justification for reading the *Great Books* in the first place. Do you find "great books" harder to read than "detective stories, pulp magazines, and text-books"? Good! "Great books," as Hutchins himself put it, are books that challenge you as a reader, demand attention and keep your intelligence

"on the stretch." For all that, they are books that were originally "written for, and addressed to, ordinary people." Even better, again in Hutchins's words: "Great books are great teachers; they are showing us every day what ordinary people are capable of." If we find them "unreadable and unintelligible," Hutchins contends, "it may be because we have not for a long time learned to read by reading them." Even more to the point: "Great books teach people not only how to read them, but also how to read all other books." They are "infinitely readable" precisely because they are at once ordinary and difficult, at once "the first announcements of success in learning" and "always over the head of the reader," never to be fully comprehended.[13]

What kind of a book teaches you to read all other books? What kind of a book may seem "unreadable and unintelligible to the most learned as well as to the dullest" only to yield great sweetness when one learns how to unlock its secrets? What kind of a book would you describe as "written for, and addressed to, ordinary people," yet demanding "the attention of the reader and [keeping] his intelligence on the stretch"? Hugh of St. Victor knew, as did every reader of Augustine throughout the Middle Ages. As the son of a Presbyterian minister, Hutchins himself almost certainly knew, as would every reader of Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*—albeit added to the *Great Books* in its 1990 edition, somewhat tellingly excluded from the original 1952 set. Likewise, every postmodernist worth his or her commitment to polysemy would know—if, that is, modernists like Hutchins had not worked so hard to obscure the debt that the West owes to the great books of the Middle Ages and the purpose for which they were read.

[13] Hutchins, "Great Conversation," 66.

Look again at our lists of Great Books of the Middle Ages, particularly Alexander's and Hugh's. Like the list of *Great Books of the Western World*, both Alexander's and Hugh's lists of "great books" were intended to serve as a guide for a comprehensive educational program grounding students in the theoretical, practical, moral, and liberal arts. If Hutchins was worried about the specialization of the university faculties of the early twentieth century, Alexander and Hugh were similarly worried about the specialization of the teaching faculty of the nascent university of Paris in the twelfth. Like Hutchins, both twelfth-century list-makers were to a certain extent backward-looking, even as they proposed cutting-edge pedagogical reforms. Like Hutchins, they believed in forming the individual (although they would call it a soul) through the practice of inquiry. Like Hutchins, they considered training in argument essential to the formation of knowledge. Like Hutchins, they looked to the classics—they called them philosophers—for grounding in the disciplines of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Like Hutchins, they were convinced that reading was necessary to the development of understanding. Like Hutchins, they hoped through their lists to give students a guide to both what and how to read. Like Hutchins, they were confident that books had the capacity to teach students how to read them, if only (in Hugh's words) they had the humility to submit to their instruction. Like Hutchins, they encouraged students not to be put off by the apparent dryness of books they found difficult or boring. Like Hutchins, they insisted that the books most worth reading often concealed their treasures under a guise of ordinary language. Like Hutchins, they considered *Logos* the basis of human excellence. Like Hutchins, they looked to the salvation of humankind through the exercise of reason. Like Hutchins, they believed in the power of the written word to transform the world.

Except, unlike Hutchins, neither Alexander nor Hugh attributed that power to humanity, prone as human beings are to error. Nor, unlike Hutchins, did they expect the exercise of human intelligence to bring justice, peace, freedom, and order to the government of the world. Unlike Hutchins, Alexander and Hugh had no illusions about the propensity of human beings to desire dominance over their fellow creatures. However much they defined philosophy as a pursuit common to all rational human beings, they would have been horrified at the prospect of a "world government" held up by a "world republic of learning."[14] Whereas Hutchins looked to universal education as a path to the earthly utopia of tomorrow, Alexander and Hugh knew better than to place their hopes in the perfectibility of human justice and law. Their ambitions were at once humbler and more transcendent because, unlike Hutchins (not to mention John Stuart Mill), Alexander and Hugh believed in sin. They also believed in wisdom—and truth.

Why read the great books of the philosophers? According to Hugh, because the great philosophers like Plato, Socrates, Pythagoras, Democritus, Xenocrates, Zeno, and Parmenides had humbled themselves and grown old in their pursuit of wisdom, preferring knowledge of the truth over mastery of the world. Likewise, the poets like Homer, Hesiod, Simonides, Tersichorus, Sophocles, and Cato the Censor, who "neither blushed nor despaired to learn Greek when he was already an old man": as Hugh told it, all longed rather for wisdom than riches, never mind power over others, even those who like David and Solomon were kings.[15] Which was not to say that it was wrong to pursue studies for the sake of practical knowledge: Hugh included in his curriculum of studies not only the theoretical arts of theology, mathematics (a.k.a.

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[14] Hutchins, "Great Conversation," 73.
[15] Hugh, *Didascalicon* 3.14, trans. Taylor, 97-99.

the quadrivium), and physics, but also the mechanical arts of fabric making, armament, commerce, agriculture, hunting, medicine, and theatrics, as well as the logical arts of grammar, rhetoric, and dialectic (a.k.a. the trivium)—all of which might easily find a place in a modern university curriculum. Hugh likewise included what he called the practical or moral arts having to do with ethical actions both public (politics and economics) and private (the household, the soul). Alexander, too, included practical wisdom in his curriculum of study. His reading list covers not only the trivium and quadrivium, but also medicine and law.

And yet, in Hugh's words, all of this worldly learning was but as "a whitewashed wall of clay [boasting] an attractive surface all shining with eloquence" while concealing "the clay of error" as compared with the most reliable source of truth: the greatest books of all or, as Alexander and Hugh would put it, the writings (*scriptura*) of the sacred page. As Hugh put it:

The Sacred Scriptures are most fittingly likened to a honeycomb, for while in the simplicity of their language they seem dry, within they are filled with sweetness. And thus it is that they have deservedly come by the name sacred, for they alone are found so free from the infection of falsehood that they are proved to contain nothing contrary to truth. [16]

How does one read such a text? Here, for most modern readers, is where things get complicated. You can't—unless you are willing to have the text work back on you. As Hugh and his contemporaries understood it, the Scriptures were unlike all other texts because they were the basis for understanding all other texts; whereas other texts—

[16] Hugh, *Didascalicon* 4.1, trans. Taylor, 102.

like the works of Plato and Aristotle—might contain truths, these truths could only be discovered in light of the Truth contained in the Scriptures. And yet, for all that they were filled with Truth, the Scriptures themselves were not transparent of meaning. Rather, like the Holy of Holies in the Temple, they were screened off from the created world by a multi-colored veil, through which it was necessary to pass in order to access the mysteries concealed within.

Modern critics have caricatured this understanding of Scripture as eisegesis, reading into the text one's own preoccupations and biases, in much the same way that certain postmodernist critics have insisted that there is no meaning in the text other than that which the reader provides. Medieval commentators were considerably humbler. Just as Hugh described the philosophers as humbling themselves in their quest for wisdom, so readers of Scripture must humble themselves in order to access its sweetness, first and foremost by humbling themselves to the discipline of the arts: grammar, so that they would know the meaning of words; rhetoric, so that they would understand metaphors and other figures of speech; and logic, so that they would be able to follow the argument of the text. Next, they would need to learn the letter of the text, that is, the narrative or history recounted on the surface, what we would call the literal meaning of the text. Only then could they proceed to the unlocking of the spiritual meaning of the text concealed behind the veil of persons and things.

And what were those spiritual mysteries concealed behind the letter of the Scriptures? Not, as both the modernists and postmodernists have contended, whatever the reader wanted to find, but rather the truth of the faith, tested and expounded over the centuries by the Fathers in their study of the Word. (Hugh's list of great books was of commentators on Scripture.) To read such a text was, to coin

a phrase, to enter into a great conversation not just with other human authors, but with God, who, in order to speak to his creatures, had emptied himself and become incarnate as the *Logos*, the Word. Such an engagement was not meant to be easy—anymore than Jacob had found it easy wrestling with the angel of the Lord—but neither was it meant to be wearisome. Hugh cautioned his students specifically against studying Scripture as an affliction rather than a delight. In his words: "For the Christian philosopher, reading ought to be a source of encouragement, not a preoccupation, and to feed good desires, not to kill them."[17] Its ultimate purpose was twofold (as it were, polysemous): at once to delight the mind with the knowledge of salvation and to equip it with instruction in morals. The proper end of reading, in other words, was not only the acquisition of knowledge, but also—and even more importantly—training in virtue. Its purpose was not to coerce or to blind, as the modern caricature of the medieval tradition of reading would have it, but rather to transform the soul through engagement with the text. Reading Scripture, as Hugh and his contemporaries understood it, was at once a challenge to the understanding and a refreshment for the soul.

Look again at our list of late fifteenth-century best-sellers. Notice the titles at the top: number one, the Breviary for saying the Divine Office; number two, books of Hours; number four, the Missal for saying the Mass; number six, the psalter; number eight, the Bible. And at number three and five? Grammars, books for learning to read. Number seven was the *Distichs* of Cato, a book of proverbs used in the classroom for early lessons in grammar; number nine was stories of the saints. And ten was the *Bucolics* of Virgil, another standard classroom text. For over 1000 years of the Western tradition, up to the dawn of printing, reading great books meant training for

[17] Hugh, *Didascalicon* 5.7, trans. Taylor, 129.

reading the Scriptures, not because the clergy did not want people thinking for themselves (—remember, we are also told that the clergy didn't want the laity even reading the Scriptures, which raises the interesting question of who was buying all those books—) but rather because they wanted people to grow in virtue and wisdom through engagement with the living Word.

If, according to Hutchins, the Great Conversation of the past 500 years of the Western tradition has been about transforming the world through the spirit of inquiry, for the thousand years of the Middle Ages it was about transforming the soul through the spirit of wisdom. One promised humanity the reward of remaking the world in its own image. The other promised humanity the reward of being remade in the image and likeness of God. One looked to the ideal of humanity united under a single world government. The other looked to the kingdom that is not of this world. One claimed education and reading as necessary to the formation of citizens of the world. The other claimed education and reading as necessary to the formation of citizens of the heavenly City of God. One promised justice, peace, freedom, and order through the exercise of human reason. The other promised wisdom through the exercise of humility. On the one hand is the promise of power. On the other is the promise of joy.

I have been on the faculty at the University of Chicago for some twenty-five years. It is, as academia goes, a wonderful place to teach. The students are outstanding, always willing to rise to a challenge. And the culture at Chicago, despite the best efforts of some of my colleagues, remains as committed to academic freedom and the pursuit of knowledge as it was when Hutchins was President and the faculty bridled under his efforts at reform. Although we do not teach the *Great Books*, our undergraduate curriculum is still committed to having the students read the primary sources. Our Core courses are still taught, for the most part, as small discussion

sections of nineteen students or fewer. I would be happy to talk about how we design and teach such courses and how they contribute to our project of general education in the social sciences and humanities.

And yet. There is a sorrow in my teaching. Something is missing. When I stand before my students and encourage them to engage with the texts, there is always a barrier. We call it "objectivity," as if that will get us closer to the truth. But what it actually is—I would argue—is a fear of being affected by the texts that we read. It is a fear of what might happen if, as Hutchins himself suggested we should, we let the great books that we read work on us, particularly when those books purport to speak on behalf of not just of truth, but of Truth—of the Word revealed through the Incarnation of the Son of God as recounted in the Scriptures. The postmodernists in our institutions might claim that such texts are dangerous precisely for their capacity to act upon us—but at least in so doing they credit the texts with that power. How is it that those of us who purport to believe in the study of these same texts do not do the same?

The selection committee for the *Great Books of the Western World* ultimately decided against including the Bible on the argument that it would make it more difficult to sell the set of books to households "where a Protestant is married to a Catholic" or when buyers might want to exchange one version of the Bible for another.[18] And besides, the committee reasoned, the Bible was the one book that every American household could be guaranteed already to own. It was arguably also the one book that, in 1952, every American would already be expected to be able to read—or, perhaps more accurately, be expected to be able to read without further

[18] Beam, *Great Idea*, 85.

instruction, unlike the other “great books” Adler’s team included in the set. Medieval schoolmasters like Hugh of St. Victor and Alexander Neckam would have been dumbfounded. Not, we have already noted, because they believed that laymen and women had no business reading the Bible. Rather because they believed that reading the Bible was the whole purpose of education, including the training in the theoretical, practical, mechanical, and logical arts. Why learn to read if you did not want to read and be transformed by the Word of God?