

Educating for Piety

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What is Piety?

Let me begin my remarks in Socratic fashion with a question: “What is piety”? Socrates raised this question to Euthyphro in Plato’s dialogue *Euthyphro*. Their conversation fails to lead to a satisfactory answer, but we at Anthem ought to know what piety means. After all, it’s in our mission statement (which I won’t quiz you on now):

We “exist to cultivate Christ-like leaders who know truth, practice goodness, and recognize beauty. We pursue excellence in character, scholarship, and service out of reverence for God and His glory.”

That word “reverence” is our word for piety. The related, similar-sounding word “venerate” would also be appropriate. (Those of you who know Latin probably tell us about their etymology). In their book *The Liberal Arts Tradition* Kevin Clark and Ravi Jain write that piety “signifies duty, love, and respect owed to God, parents, and communal authorities past and present” (p. 15). You could add other words like worship, honor, or awe to capture the essence of piety.

Classical Education is Education for Piety

Piety is important for us because therein lies one of the hallmarks of Anthem’s mission. Many schools exist to be *against* something. Here, we are *for* something. Our pedagogy is one *for* piety. We are here to shape affections, to be formed to love and dislike the right things, as Plato wrote in *The Republic*. For the Greeks, you might say that the ultimate objects worth our love are truth, goodness, and beauty. Add Christianity to the mix and we then get the added revelation that truth, goodness, and beauty aren’t just abstract concepts but are rooted in a person – A triune God who was made incarnate, invites us to know Him and be known by Him, and calls us to be conformed to His image. God is where we direct our piety.

Educating for Piety: Example from Science

How does classical education educate for piety? Let me give you an example from science instruction.

If you have ever read Charles Dickens’s book *Hard Times*, you might be familiar with the opening scene in which Mr. Gradgrind, a harsh city superintendent visits a classroom emphasizing the importance of “facts.” He calls on Cecilia “Sissy” Jupe and learns that her father takes care of horses for a living. He then asks her to define the word “horse.” Sissy, of

course, is baffled at this question. She intimately knows what a horse is because she is growing up around them. Disturbed that Sissy is unable to define horse, Mr. Gragrind calls upon another student, Bitzer, who replies:

Quadruped. Graminivorous. Forty teeth, namely twenty-four grinders, four eye-teeth, and twelve incisive. Sheds coat in the spring; in marshy countries, sheds hoofs, too. Hoofs hard, but requiring to be shod with iron. Age known by marks in mouth.

Mr. Gradgrind is pleased. But should *we* be? Is that the purpose of science education? To classify? To reduce? To take apart? To define technical terms so that we have precision of language? More than that, who can be said to truly know a horse – Bitzer or Sissy?

Modern science requires the rational, formal system that Bitzer demonstrated because the goal is to know how to manipulate nature. Modern scientists need to understand how isolated component part work so that they can, in turn, understand the chains of cause and effect to derive formulas to get us from point A to point B. But before you think I'm rejecting science wholesale, let me say that I am not—in fact, I do social science for a living. Modern science is a way to understand the world and, in fact, science has given us tools to manipulate nature. The key issue is whether piety comes into play.

If piety *does not* come into play, then all of creation is raw material for us to consume according to our unbridled desires, not to steward as a gift from our Creator. In the most extreme case, if piety doesn't come into play, science gives us the technological power to manipulate nature so that we can get whatever we want without regard to any constraining moral demands.

As C.S. Lewis observed in *The Abolition of Man*, "When all that says 'It is good' has been debunked, what says 'I want' remains." Without piety, we give into the original temptation encountered in the garden: "you will be like God." We rebel. Without piety, science and resulting technologies become a legitimate means for us to satisfy our lust to be God and make the world into our own image. We tread upon nature and ultimately upon other people made in God's image.

But God has not left us alone. Science and science education are not beyond redemption. As Gerard Manly Hopkins observed:

Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;
And wears man's smudge and shares man's smell: the soil
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.

And for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs —

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent

World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

What does this look like in classical education? You could use the term natural philosophy, which is what science used to be before the Enlightenment influence. Natural philosophy wasn't merely about understanding the laws of nature so that we could wield its power. It was also about personally knowing the Creator behind creation. If philosophy is the "love of wisdom," then natural philosophy has to do with finding God's wisdom in nature.

And doing so is liberating and life-giving. Consider the difference between, on one hand, (a) thinking that a wood duck is, in the Bitzer-esque words of Wikipedia:

a medium-sized [male] perching duck. A typical adult is from 47 to 54 cm (19 to 21 in) (or 1.5 feet max) in length with a wingspan of between 66 to 73 cm (26 to 29 in). The wood duck's weight ranges from 454-862 g (16.0-30.4 oz). This is about three-quarters of the length of an adult mallard. It shares its genus with the Asian Mandarin duck.

And, on the other hand, (b) encountering in your soul the reality of God's grace through the wood duck, as Wendall Berry beautifully wrote:

When despair for the world grows in me
and I wake in the night at the least sound
in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be,
I go and lie down where the wood duck
rests in his beauty on the water, and the great heron feeds.
I come into the peace of wild things
who do not tax their lives with forethought
of grief. I come into the presence of still water.
And I feel above me the day-blind stars
waiting with their light. For a time
I rest in the grace of the world, and am free.

Here you can hear echoes of King David being led by "still waters" and "green pastures" (Psalm 23).

Piety postures us to receive wisdom. After all, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (Proverbs 9:10). Piety helps us see as the Psalmist saw: how "The heavens declare the glory of God, and the sky above proclaims his handiwork. Day to day pours out speech, and night to night reveals knowledge."

Science without piety is, at best, dull. I prefer Wendall Berry to Wikipedia. At worst, science without piety greases the wheels of our rebellion and taken to its extreme is death. However, science with piety, or natural philosophy is life-giving. It stirs the heart. It enchants us. It helps us access the transcendent and encounter our Maker. It helps us understand why we were

created. It enables us, as theologian Malcolm Guite observed, to see the world around us pregnant with significance and meaning—that reality isn't merely material or purposeless, but has a transcendence that we need reason *as well as* imagination and faith to apprehend.

At Anthem, piety and reverence for God is at the center of our educational paradigm. As you learn more about and experience our curriculum, I hope you'll see that that is the case.

I hope you'll find that we teach **math** not only so that students have the formulas necessary to manipulate nature or have the necessary skills to manage money but that they learn math to grasp something divine: the form of reality, order, symmetry, proportion, harmony, and their elegance.

I hope you'll find that we do **recitations** not just to train your children's cognitive muscle so they get good at memorizing facts that will help them score high on college admissions tests. We do recitations so they feel the meter and rhythm of the eternal song that God has always sung and resonates in all creation. As that great hymn "Come Thou Fount" goes, we are tuning our students' hearts to sing His praise. In the same way that we tune our radio to receive the proper frequency of the signal, we want to tune our students' souls to hear their Creator's song, that they might, in turn, love and declare His excellencies.

I hope you'll find that we teach **music, painting, and other related arts** not for just for self-expression or so that students have some neat skill so they can be popular on social media, but so that students have a vehicle to rise above themselves, to have a means to gaze outward instead of inward, to have their souls lifted higher, to encounter the transcendent, and to meet God, the ultimate Artist.

I hope you'll find that we read **literature** that has been read across time, culture, and place to enter into an enduring conversation about the human condition, about what is true, about what is good, and about what is beautiful, and in that conversation are "spurred towards love and good deeds" and encounter the Author of all things.

Let's "pursue excellence in character, scholarship, and service out of reverence for God and His glory." Let's do this, by God's grace.