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America: last bastion of the liberal arts

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America: Last Bastion of the Liberal Arts

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America: Last Bastion of the Liberal Arts



Creation, Donald Jackson with contribution by Chris Tomlin, Copyright 2003, The Saint John's Bible, Order of Saint Benedict, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA.

Recent travels have taken me to Carson-Newman University outside of Knoxville, TN, and to the Oklahoma City Art Museum for events related to *The Saint John's Bible*. In both places, the excitement around *The Saint John's Bible* was palpable. At CNU, the faculty and staff were excited about the possibilities for using the Bible in classes and in extracurricular programming but also about using this powerful combination of art and theology to build community with those who live near the University. In Oklahoma City, the Museum staff knew that the *SJB* would delight most museum members and regular patrons, but they were even more excited about the possibilities of drawing new visitors to the Museum who might be curious about the first illuminated, handwritten Bible in 500 years. The expressed hope was that these new visitors would find the power of calligraphy and illuminations moving enough to encourage future visits to the Museum to explore many other forms of artistic expression.

In both cases, the individuals who brought *The Saint John's Bible* to their communities believed in the power of art and scripture to give joy and meaning to those who experienced this masterpiece. This belief is completely consistent with the goals of the creators of this Bible –Donald Jackson and the monks of Saint John's Abbey. They had the lived experience of art making life more meaningful and enjoyable; they

understood the human need for beauty.

These experiences are troublingly at odds with news out of the United Kingdom that there will no longer be an **A-Level Course in Art History**. Briefly, A-Levels are the college preparatory courses that British high school students take in anticipation of the subjects they will study at University. To drop a subject from the A-Level options is to signal the lack of perceived importance of that subject and to severely limit the pool of students who might choose to study that subject at university. And, as the British model requires university students to commit to a single subject of study, with no liberal arts or breadth requirements, the number of British students exposed to art history as an academic subject is likely to drop sharply, possibly threatening the existence of the subject at many universities.

The reason for dropping art history from the A-Level options was given as a desire to drop “soft” subjects to encourage students to choose “hard” disciplines when they get to university, implicitly suggesting that in a world where education is apparently viewed instrumentally, “hard” subjects are the best preparation for the 21st century job market. A government spokesperson said, “Our number one priority is making sure every student gets the result they deserve – and the complex and

specialist nature of the exams in this subject creates too many risks on that front.”

The *Guardian* article notes that this is “the latest in a cull of perceived ‘soft’ subjects following the curriculum changes begun by the former education secretary Michael Gove.”

This instrumental view is mistaken in at least three important ways:

- First, the idea that the humanities cannot be studied rigorously and provide students with excellent preparation for the kind of thinking and communication that will be demanded of them in the market place is naive and lazy. The ability to analyze ideas, explore different perspectives and communicate clearly are at the heart of the humanities and are certainly consistent with what employers say they want.
- Second, the equally naive idea that we know what subjects will best serve students over a 50 year career has surely been soundly refuted by the rise of the internet, artificial intelligence, biotechnology and any number of fields that were non-existent a few decades ago.
- Finally, to view education as simply or even primarily about economic returns is to view individuals narrowly as simply *homo economicus*, economic actors with no interest in or need for meaning, relationships and community.



Image: Pete Ashton via Flickr

Despite some of the world's finest universities and a centuries-old educational tradition, the British model of higher education, which has largely been adopted by most of the world outside the United States, is disappointingly narrow. Students are typically limited to studying one subject for their undergraduate degrees, which provides great depth but almost non-existent breadth. This move to further narrow the options of students by discouraging the study of “soft” subjects—primarily defined as the humanities—will ill-serve students and the British economy.

Give me an accountant who knows some art history or a chemist who understands Kant or a lawyer who knows about the Council of Trent any day. The uniquely American liberal arts curriculum, and its attendant liberal arts colleges, have served our country, its citizens and economy well for over two hundred years, and I see nothing in the future that will change that, regardless of the shifting educational fashions abroad (or at home).

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).