

Mortimer Jerome Adler (1902 - 2001)

American philosopher Mortimer J. Adler, an intellectual giant, and a man of remarkable wisdom was a staunch defender of classical education.

He taught at Columbia University, where he took a special honours course in which "the best sellers of ancient times" were read as a "cultural basis for human understanding and communication." After teaching at Columbia, where he received his Ph.D.(1928), he became professor of law at the University of Chicago. One of the greatest achievements of his life was co-editing the 54-volume *Great Books of the Western World* (1952), which were published by Britannica and became a roaring commercial success. The list of his notable contributions is long. He was an author of many books, the director of the Institute of Philosophical Research, and the director of planning for Encyclopedia Britannica. He also co-edited the ten volume *Gateway to the Great Books* (1963) and from 1961 an annual, *The Great Ideas Today*.

Adler was a champion of absolutes in education, and spent much of his life battling the pernicious influence of John Dewey (1859-1952), the so-called "father of modern education, " who is responsible for most of the ills plaguing public education today. Dewey taught that there are no fixed norms for human action. Science can establish norms, or at least show which customs are best. Adler did not mince words. In 1940, he declared, referring to those intellectuals who had abandoned historically accepted moral truths," We have more to fear from our professors than from Hitler." Adler didn't believe that education should be determined by social engineering but by unchanging standards of truth. "There are," he said, "universal truths about what constitutes a good education, for all men at all times and places simply because they are men."

He was convinced that the naturalism and materialism that inform humanist thought would destroy the humanitarian ethic. Without anything transcending the material, the love ethic is without foundation. Adler understood that in order to have objective, ethical principles, there must an absolute source, a transcendent authority. He believed that the Great Books approach offered a sound correction to the educational trends of his day. Significantly, this program was more influential in the field of adult, non-formal education than it was in "academic collegiate studies."

When Adler spoke about transcendent truth he realized there had to be a source of that truth. He recognized that one's view of God is the starting point for all worldviews. In his Great Book series, he commented, "More consequences for thought and action follow the affirmation of denial of God than from answering any other basic question." Although Adler was inclined to accept the claims of Christianity's intellectual propositions, his god of was "the god of the philosophers."

Canadian philosopher George Grant, an outspoken Christian, had a negative reaction to Adler's religious views. He had been hired by Adler to write two pieces for his project *The Great Ideas Today* 1961, but became quite uncomfortable with him. He was a good philosopher, he concluded, but he lacked the transcendent mysticism and ecstatic side of Christianity. Adler's problem was the gulf between his mind and his heart. He resisted the moral changes Christianity demanded of him. When pressed on his reluctance to become

a Christian, he replied, "That's a great gulf between the mind and the heart. I was on the edge of becoming a Christian several times, but didn't do it. I said that if one is born a Christian, one can be light-hearted about living up to Christianity, but if one converts by a clear conscious act of will, one had better be prepared to live a truly Christian life. So you ask yourself, are you prepared to give up all your vices and the weaknesses of the flesh?" But eventually Adler did become a Christian. In lengthy obituaries the secular press recorded Adler's many great achievements, but not a word was said about his conversion. In the obituary Charles Colson wrote, he drew the readers' attention to Adler's move from belief in "the god of the philosophers" to the God of the cross. In 1984 - bedridden with illness - Adler committed his life to Jesus Christ. He received what he called "the gift of grace" and professed belief "not just in the God my reason so stoutly affirms," as he said, "but the God..on whose grace and love I now joyfully rely." Colson commented that the reason why secular-minded journalists ignored his conversion is their inability to accept that the Christian faith is logically coherent and reasonable. And he concluded that the latter is "something we are to remind our neighbors of and ourselves every day."