

# WHAT ARE THE GREATEST BOOKS?

**KOLBE'S GREATEST BOOKS** are an Accumulated Treasury of Human Wisdom. As such, they are indispensable components of liberal education because liberal education—unlike training and schooling—culminates in wisdom.

They are called “Greatest” because of the formative impact they have had as a tour de force of Christian civilization, because they masterfully deal with the greatest questions the human mind is capable of examining, and because they help readers acquire truth, which is the one attainment of the human mind that sets a person free (John 8:32) or “liberates”. This is why the Greatest Books are key components of “liberal” arts education; liberal education is education intended for free men and women or for those who desire to be free to develop all their human potential.

Because human beings are endowed with an intellect and will made to the image and likeness of God, they possess the potential to become increasingly Godlike. This is a trinitarian mystery manifest in man's highest intellectual faculties: intellectual apprehension, understanding (also known as reason), and the ability to love (which is an intellectual appetite that involves the body but originates in, and proceeds from, the mind).

When human beings properly exercise and develop these faculties the result is ongoing growth in knowledge, understanding, and wisdom leading to ongoing sanctification in a spirit of unitive love. This is a uniquely human process referred to by Western mystics as “divinization” (in the East it is referred to as “theosis”) resulting in spiritual growth and phenomenal creative expression in the arts, sciences, and humanities. The Greatest Books are an indispensable collection of many such authors (some further developed than others) whose wisdom graces the various arts and sciences in the Judeo-Christian and classical natural law tradition.

Here in 101 color coded volumes are the writings of eminent statesmen, philosophers, poets, saints, and scientists, the greatest thinkers and

exemplars of humankind; men and women dedicated to the development, penetration, and diffusion of noble literature, artistic beauty, and demonstrated ideas that have shaped the legal, ethical, moral, and spiritual codes, which are the bedrock of Christian civilization.

**BROWN – MATH & SCIENCE**

**GREEN – LITERATURE**

**BLUE – POLITICS, HISTORY, LAW**

**BLACK – PHILOSOPHY**

**PURPLE – THEOLOGY**

**RED – SPIRITUAL CLASSICS**

These masterful writings have enlightened popes and kings, savants and generals, along with countless others everywhere. They form the intellectual record of our Judeo-Christian patrimony and the story of its development.

*Kolbe's Greatest Books* are an integral part of authentic liberal education, education devoted to the acquisition of intellectual skills leading students to knowledge of truth and acquisition of wisdom, which help set them free to live a good life in pursuit of happiness. In every age men and women seek clarity and understanding of ultimate questions asked about the nature of things, about God and man, heaven and hell, wisdom, justice and charity, virtue and vice, about human suffering, the best form of government, the use and abuse of power and authority, the meaning of life and death, and other fundamental questions, which perplex the human soul.

In Dickens and Dostoevsky human nature combats pride, ambition, greed, and envy; in John of the Cross and Teresa of Avila human nature seeks highest perfection; in King Alfred the Great's Law Books the Old Law revealed to Moses is united to the New Law revealed by Jesus; in La Maitre and Einstein man struggles to understand the cosmos; in Augustine and Shakespeare man endeavors to understand himself, while Aquinas and Dante explore virtue, sin, grace, redemption, and final judgment.

When most current novels and best sellers are no longer remembered,

the *Greatest Books* (which have stood, and continue to stand, the test of time) will still be cherished and read by millions as they have been for over two thousand years.



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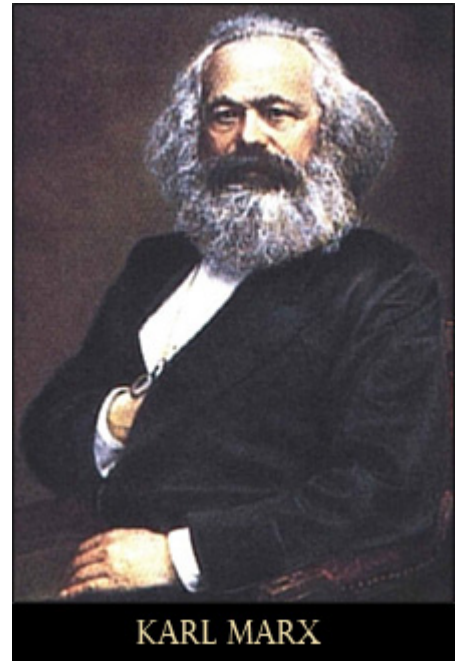
## THE GREATEST BOOKS ARE NOT THE GREAT BOOKS

[KOLBE'S GREATEST BOOKS](#) are often confused with BRITANNICA'S GREAT BOOKS. The two are alike in that they are compilations of outstanding written contributions to the advancement of civilization. The only question is: What civilization are they advancing? Kolbe's Greatest Books are all part of the Judaeo-Christian, Greco-Roman natural law tradition. Britannica's *Great Books of the Western World*, edited by Robert Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler, are often antithetical to this tradition.

Greatest Books: [Politics – Law – Social Theory](#)

Greatest Books: [Theology](#)

Britannica's Great Books include thinkers such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Hegel, Sigmund Freud, Charles Darwin, Niccolo Machiavelli, and Jean Jacques Rousseau; these men are atheists, deists, agnostics, anti-Christians, and revolutionaries. The *Great Books* collection also includes an additional series of 102 "Recommended Readings" that embrace thinkers antithetical to Christian civilization such as Ivan Pavlov, the father of classical conditioning, Sir James Frazier who endeavored to reduce Christianity to a human construct and the Son of God to a myth.



KARL MARX

They also include Herbert Spencer, a social evolutionist and cultural determinist, the agnostic Thomas Huxley, and others such as the François-Marie Arouet (Voltaire) and the deist Thomas Paine who waged ceaseless war against Christianity. According to Paine, the Christian system of faith is "derogatory" and "repugnant".



THOMAS PAINE

"Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is no more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory to itself than this thing called Christianity. "

Voltaire signed his letters *Écrasez l'infâme!* – "crush the wretch" by whom he meant the Catholic Church. He made her destruction the center of all his efforts. According to Voltaire, enlightened statesmen and philosophers should focus all their efforts on destroying the church's "infamous missionaries"; they should be willing to "risk all things,

even to be burned in order to destroy it. Let us crush the wretch!  
Crush the wretch! *Écrasez l'infâme!*"

In short, the "*Great Books of Western Civilization*" are not the "*Greatest Books of Christian Civilization*"— the Great Books are often arrayed against Christian Civilization. Is it a good thing to introduce young underdeveloped minds to advanced thinkers such as Hegel and Freud before they have developed critical intellectual skills as well as knowledge and understanding of their own intellectual-cultural tradition? We can do to better than this.

Nonetheless, for the very reason that the Great Books are often antithetical to ideas expressed in the Greatest Books, they help students develop dialectical thinking skills, analytical judgment, and substantive evaluation, which are essential to intellectual formation.



Consequently, The Great Books form a part of Kolbe's series **to be respectfully approached after students have had a solid formation in their own tradition** including studies of history, theology, social science, philosophy, and literature from a perspective of faith and reason, *fides et ratio*.

Parents and professors need not cower to those who claim that education in the Christian tradition, including faith and reason, is tantamount to indoctrination rather than the freedom and emancipation that accompany wisdom toward which liberal education aims:

**Faith is not indoctrination; faith is enlightenment**

**that helps keep one from being indoctrinated.**

Intellectual formation that includes faith and reason is the highest guarantor of freedom. When faith and reason are coupled with higher dialectical studies, including many of the authors of the *Great Books*, the mind is sharpened, fine tuned, and intellectually challenged thereby leading to the work of further expansion. As a result of dialectical studies, the mind is continually exercised leading to increased insight, to new discoveries and the joy of finding creative solutions to antithetical challenges coming from many different directions. These challenges tend to sharpen the intellect, enhance focus and increase mental acuity thereby preparing students for life in the “real world”, a world wherein the wisdom contained in the *Greatest Books* necessarily dialogues with contrary and often inimical ideas.”

In authentic education, *reason* is regent (in a spirit of charity). Aquinas defines law as a dictate of reason; law cannot validly be a force of the will as some ideologues would have it; nor does faulty or undemonstrated reason have the force of law. Law is a rule of reason it is not an undemonstrated dictate of the will (minority or majority). If an idea is to be accepted, it must have the force of right reason (*rex ratio*) behind it: Human beings have minds that must be developed and respected. Demagoguery is an affront to human dignity.

Britannica’s *Great Books of the Western World*, although graced with sagacity and wisdom, are unfortunately laced with deceit and chicanery. Such books are properly introduced to students *after* they have explored, become conversant with, and demonstrated sufficient mastery, of their own broader Christian tradition, which includes Judaism, the pagan natural law tradition that begins in classical antiquity, and the writings of Christian savants, scholars, scientists and statesmen that are available in Kolbe’s *Greatest Books of Christian Civilization*.

Without *The Greatest Books*, *The Great Books* often become a stumbling block rather than a blessing.

