
Pro Rege

Volume 28 | Number 4

Article 5

June 2000

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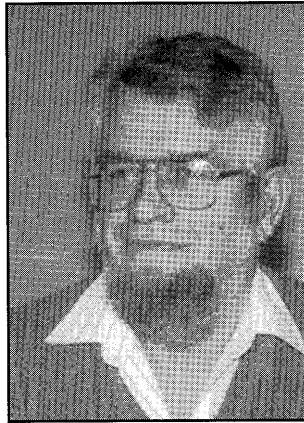
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Recommended Citation

Groenewold, Harry J. (2000) "Vision of History for Students," *Pro Rege*:
Vol. 28: No. 4, 34 - 38.
Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol28/iss4/5

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A Vision of History for Students



by Harry J. Groenewold

These musings on western civilization, the demands of global history, and historiographical assumptions have been shaped extensively by my classroom experiences of nearly thirty years, especially at The King's University College. The college prides itself on being ecumenical or interdenominational: the staff may be described as evangelical Christian with a significant dash of reformed colleagues; the student body is multicultural, with a wide variety of beliefs; and the academic vision of the college is inspired and informed by a rich reformed heritage. Not surprisingly, discussions are frequently lively, requiring participants to develop a vocabulary and ideas that will resonate within such a diverse academic community.

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Amid this diversity, confessional assumptions become especially prominent when discussing curricular issues, academic objectives, and the needs of students. This concern also applies to the required history curriculum. Keep in mind that most students will take only two semesters of introductory history—and that often under duress! In that context, what should the history curriculum seek to do? How can and should students best benefit from such a brief exposure to several thousand years of history? It seems to me that the history curriculum should seek to instill in students a critical awareness of their cultural heritage and of the spiritual dynamics which have shaped it, and a Christian perspective for interpreting history.

Students should be reminded that their heritage has been shaped by two traditions: the Greek and the Hebraic-Christian. Most ancient peoples, including the Greeks, accepted a cyclical pattern of time and history or embraced a belief system which asserted that the true meaning of life was found in escaping from time and history. Such ancient peoples fell short of the idea of history. Even the Greeks, with the powerful narratives of such writers as Herodotus and Thucydides, had little use for history with its flux and change. Plato and Aristotle scarcely took note of the momentous events of their day. The Greeks, along with most ancient peoples, did not see history as a real source of knowledge, and they had no sense of a goal-directed history.

These ancient themes of eternal recurrence or a spiral of time, and of the desire to escape from history, have been revived in one form or another in modern historiography: Schopenhauer, Nietzsche,

Spengler, Toynbee, and others. These interpretations must be truly abhorrent to the Christian historian because they shatter all meaning and purpose and plunge humanity and the creation into nihilistic oblivion. Must we endure endless cycles till the stars turn cold? Must we experience the endless repetition of the Big Bang? Or shall we ignore meaning and purpose and doggedly pursue empirical history and its intricate puzzles?

These challenges remind Christian historians that fundamental, confessional choices are always made in studying and teaching history. Eventually, historians will trace everything to God, or they will trace everything to blind chance, fate, or destiny. This choice-making puts in stark relief the significant contribution made by the ancient Hebrews to understanding history. The Hebrews had a keen sense of history—one that was far more than the telling of tales, for their history was a narrative filled with hope. To put it differently, the ancient Hebrews introduced a linear view of history, with a beginning and a journey to some end or goal. For them, history was filled with meaning and purpose—a meaning and purpose not to be found in Nature but in God's promises.

This linear view of history, so deeply ingrained in our historical consciousness, makes ancient Israel the home of the first historians, not ancient Greece. Ancient Hebrew historians portrayed a fully human encounter with God through the course of history. Their portrayal included three important features. First, it displayed a significant development in their perception of God. In the days of Joshua, God was portrayed as a warrior-deity. By post-exilic times, He was perceived as the universal God who guides and rules a universal history. Secondly, the ancient historians revealed a profound realism about human nature. They insisted that, because humanity is created in God's image, there is no room for autonomy or spiritual neutrality. And most importantly, they confessed the unity of the human race.

Third, the Hebrew idea of covenant underscored a linear view of history. This idea of covenant included a view of history with eschatological expectations, insofar as the covenant points to a Transcendence and reinforces the confession that the ultimate goal of history lies beyond the historical realm. And since the full meaning of events is beyond history this covenant also relativizes the historical narrative and demands a degree of modesty from the historian.

This theme of the covenant also insisted on humanity's creative participation in God's creation order. History came to be seen as the terrain of human freedom and responsibility, the place where God calls, and the arena where it is possible to deal with an approachable God. Abraham discussed Sodom and Gomorrah with God. In spite of God's and Samuel's opposition, Israel's demand for a king was granted. Both instances emphasize humans' responsible free will and their ability to participate in the shaping of history. These episodes also reveal a God who is intimately connected with the world of human activities and relations.

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The writers of the historical books and of the prophetic literature were very much concerned with real history: with economics, politics, the military, and other mundane matters. They were less concerned with causality in history than with revealing divine purpose in this very worldly history. This literature could also be described as a collection of interpretive essays describing God, the Lord of History, directing the destinies of peoples and nations. These essays also emphasized that history is of one piece, one great God-directed drama that was universal in scope.

The Hebrew writers were very aware that history was the scene of good and evil, but they proclaimed a victorious God who destroys His adversaries. In fact, even these adversaries were instruments in God's hands to execute His judgments. The Hebrews never glossed over the reality of sin or the abuses perpetrated by individuals. David and Bathsheba were punished. Solomon's abuse of power and his grandiose dreams cost the people dearly. The worship of Baal called down the anger of God. History included judgement.

Thus it was ancient Hebrews who developed a concept of history as a significant process: a process that pointed to the mediating task of the Hebrews. Their task was to let all nations know of the God who seeks justice for all. The gospel writers embraced this theme and interpreted the life

of Jesus in the light of this mediating task. They purposely made connections with their inherited past.

Although slow to develop a view of history, the early Christians accepted unequivocally the Old Testament and the gospels as Holy Scriptures. From the beginning these historically-minded Christians were keenly aware of the fundamental difference between their linear view of history and the prevailing Stoic vision of the Roman world. These Christians confessed their faith to be a historical religion: a faith that proclaimed Jesus, the Lord of History, as the mid-point of the cosmic historical drama.

But this confession was, and still is, very problematic because it claims history with its cruelty, barbarism, and evils as its own. What sane person would even desire to entertain this seemingly anachronistic Jewish obsession? Why should Christians want to accept the burden of history? How could such a Lord of History allow the Evil One to wreak such havoc?

And yet, in spite of these and many other questions, Christianity stakes everything on that claim, recognizing and confessing a profound mystery in history. This claim gave rise to a biblically-inspired Christian interpretive framework which shaped western historiography until the Age of Enlightenment. From St. Augustine to Bossuet, historians took for granted, in one way or another, that history was ultimately in the hands of God; that history was the record of divine providence in a direct and literal sense; and that punishment and reward could be discerned. God's will was done!

This framework also gave generations of Christians the courage to face an unknown and frequently fearful future. They worked and persevered in a declining Roman Empire; they christianized medieval Europe; and they formed culture without knowing the outcome. One cannot help but have some fleeting nostalgia for the faith that shaped this historiographical tradition. At its best, this tradition speaks eloquently of God's judgment, of His ways in history, and of His dealings with peoples and nations. Who cannot help but be moved, even inspired, by the grand vision of St. Augustine?

But one cannot return to that tradition. The tradition of Machiavelli, Voltaire, Gibbon, Ranke, and generations of modern historians makes that impossible. These historians have raised serious doubts

about the possibility of knowing the ways of God. Many of them insist that the focus of history must be humanity without any reference to Transcendence. Indeed, the vast majority of modern historians have removed God from history altogether. These historians assume that, given sufficient time and detailed research, history can be known as a whole. Their evolutionary or developmental approaches are based on certain key beliefs: there is no need for the Divine; humanity is alone in the world; the world can be known completely; Progress is inevitable; and utopia can be achieved on earth by humans. Many of these approaches, so popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, assumed that diligent research would reveal the historical laws and the secrets of cultural change. In the process of implementing these approaches, their practitioners were not always concerned with human beings in their unique historical situations. In these historians' deterministic and closed universes, human beings were often sandwiched between factors and systems beyond human control. Their conclusions often shaped, indeed determined, their historical analysis.

All these grand schemes of history have fallen by the wayside. The history of historiography is littered with the failed dreams and discarded blueprints of Hegel, Comte, Marx, Spencer, Spengler, Toynbee, and others. These schemes failed because their creators refused to acknowledge that history has no immanent meaning, no immanent rationale or purpose. In fact, history cannot be known as a whole, and all claims of empirical completeness are bound to fail.

These grand philosophies of history and their underlying assumptions came increasingly under attack during the course of the twentieth century. The naive optimism of modernity faded rapidly in a turbulent and bloody century. A growing pessimism questioned all claims of human dignity. Philosophy fell silent as the existentialists abandoned all hope, meaning, and purpose. Academic history willingly reduced its mandate to the gathering of empirical data as an end in itself and as a means of professional advancement. Many secretly agreed with Camus that history was absurd. In dealing with a fallen humanity without hope we, too, are left with only hopelessness and despair, waiting for death and oblivion. The earth, after all, is one huge, eternal graveyard marked with meaningless crosses.

Modernity and its meta-narrative collapsed under the onslaught of the twentieth century, leaving contemporary culture uncertain and uneasy about the future. All narratives, and especially meta-narratives, were rejected as totalitarian, oppressive, and discriminatory. Although most historians have not rushed to embrace postmodernism, they certainly share its conviction of disbelief in any meta-narrative. This disbelief is particularly influential in the Anglo-American cultural tradition which has always underestimated the power and influence of ideas in life and culture, making it relatively easy to divorce culture from religion. Our contemporary culture has reduced religion to an impotent pietism that has a limited role in church and in personal lives but is wholly irrelevant in cultural or historical analyses. The very language of faith has been abandoned, so that concepts such as God, sin, grace, salvation, creation, and the like are dismissed as alien intruders in contemporary discussions and scholarship.

In this cultural and academic context, the Christian historian is confronted with "The Problem of God." This problem is very acute because, even for the Christian, God and humanity have become estranged from each other. God has become a mystery, a remote Presence in the background who lurks on the periphery of human existence, seeming to hover above history and our heads while history seems to go its own way.

Some Christians attempt to solve this problem by claiming God's presence in the history of salvation and the life of God's church on earth. But no Christian historian can be satisfied with this proposal because it limits God's presence in history. This limit becomes evident when we are reminded of the Evil One stalking about in God's creation in the form of slavery, fascism, genocide, poverty within global plenty, and the like. And what is the Christian historian to do with the Lord of History and the claims of the Book of Revelation? The opening chapter of Revelation proclaims Christ's imperium, and in chapter five the Book of History is placed in the hands of the Lamb of God. The Lamb of God has taken control of history, and only He can open and understand the Book of History. If we confess this Christ, we have no choice but to accept His Lordship. The Word of God does not cater to our contemporary understanding of history. Nor does the Word of God commend our self-righteous pessimism based on a

mistaken reading of God's will. In taking control of history, Christ issues a warning to historians to be modest in their interpretations because a tremendous mystery remains. The ultimate why of history will only be answered by God at the end of time.

In confessing Christ as the Lord of History, the Christian historian readily accepts the fundamental unity of global history, but because of our creatureliness and because of sin, Christian historians cannot survey or comprehend that unity. We, as historians, are unable to oversee history because we are in it. At best we can only survey fragments of history. But, in spite of our very fragmentary knowledge, we do

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confess that each history contributes to a universal history, and that each has a mission even if the historian does not know it. The Lord of history draws to Himself the entire human race: its past, present and future.

What is certain by now is the realization that every historian is confronted by a most profound question: What do you think of the Christ? Is this Christ the center of the universe? Of history? Or must we look to some other person or event? The answer to this question requires a decision of faith. Thus, ultimately, all history is faith history—every view of history and every interpretation is grounded in an affirmation about existence. Put another way, to see meaning in history is an act of faith, an act that all historians must make. All people are incurably religious. Faith is the greatest busybody: it refuses to be limited to the private and personal and intrudes into all of life.

This faith-shaped worldview, therefore, involves the inner being of the historian: his or her hopes, fears, frustrations, dreams, credo of life, and the like. Historians interpret history on the basis of their own norms. They most certainly are not bound by rules laid down by those of a different worldview with different norms and values. We can accept that historians of equal integrity can hold fundamentally opposing interpretations of what actually happened. Each historian develops a structured argument to convince

the audience that his or her account is the most plausible, probable, consistent, and satisfying of narratives.

The idea of a structured argument underscores the reality that historians are always highly selective, incorporating only a minute part of the totality of the historical data. Records are often lost or incomplete and many past events have left no material trace. Furthermore, historians are unable to know fully the minds of individuals: What secret passions, dreams, and personal thoughts animate people to action? And it is the cultural elites who leave behind available sources for historians. Losers are often given short shrift by history and historians.

A Christian structured argument rejects the notion, so widely held today, that all cultures are equal, and of equal value. Such an idea is dangerous, especially in the spheres of religion, morality, law, and socio-cultural formation. In these areas of life, differences are truly profound because fundamental worldviews interpret the creation order in such a way as to exclude the possibility of compromise. Is, for example, a compromise possible between Islamic law and the western legal tradition?

A Christ-centered worldview confesses truths that shape the work of the Christian historian and, hopefully, inspire the student taking his or her obligatory introductory course. This confession recognizes God the Creator who has created and does sustain a purposeful and intelligible creation, and has created humanity in His own image and as the crown of creation. This confession celebrates this complex human being of worth and dignity responding to God's word for and in His creation. Therefore, it portrays humans realistically: they are able to love, respond, and think; to choose ideals, values, and virtues; to accept challenges and form culture; to be playful and artful; and to seek pleasure.

This Christ-centered view of history is essential in seeking to interpret global history. Beneath the bewildering varietics of cultures on the globe, there is a fundamental constancy and unity: all human beings, in their creaturely freedom and responsibility, respond to God's creation. In seeking to understand humanity's response, the historian recognizes that there is something wrong with the world and that there is tragedy in history. The pages of history are bloody because human nature is flawed and the creation is groaning. Christian historians are keenly

aware of the trail of tears, of the many attempted towers of Babel, and of the complexity and duplicity of the human heart. They are only too aware of the need for divine forgiveness because of human depravity, evil, and failings. Even humanity's greatest works are tainted.

This confession shows a much more accurate appreciation of human nature than many modern philosophies. One need only compare the biblical view to Hegelian idealism, to a Marxist dialectic, to the bleak materialism of a d' Holback, or to the naive belief in the natural goodness of humanity. All of these modern heresies portray a humanity that flourishes briefly and is no more, and its history as an unending monologue. But the Christian vision confesses a Creator and Redeemer God in ongoing dialogue with the crown of His creation, constantly reminding His image-bearers of their task to serve and glorify Him.

This vision demands that students know their Western heritage intimately and, at the same time, be aware of global developments and the rise of cultural interdependence in the modern world. It also reminds students that the Word of God is culturally formative and is heard and acted upon in a variety of cultural contexts. And, most importantly, it reminds all of us that in all times and places—past, present, and future—people stand and act in creation before the face of God. In this rich and variegated cultural activity, God's judgment and grace stand revealed in the very structure of the history of humanity. God judges but His grace makes renewal possible: it repairs mistakes, and it turns disasters into something good. So the task of the Christian historian is to narrate humanity's story of its journey just as the people of old were reminded to tell their story of God's faithfulness to the next generation.

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