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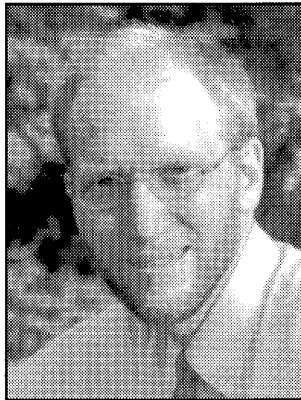
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“Global History or Western Civilization”: A Symposium



by Paul Otto

Global History or Western Civilization—which should be the focus of the required history course at a Christian college? This was the central question for a symposium held at Dordt College during March 22-25, 2000. The same question has attracted the attention of historians across North America.¹

Historians often have defined the focus of historical inquiry in response to their own context. Before World War I, for example, American historical study, shaped by American exceptionalism, focused primarily on the United States and its developing identity and political system. Following World Wars I and II, more American historians began to see connections between

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American and European history, and argued that all students should study Western Civilization as part of their general education. More recently, due to post-modern sympathies or to sensitivity to globalization, Americans have begun to question the primacy of Western Civilization in their core requirements.

At Dordt College, where we seek to develop a biblically-directed perspective on all of life, such presentist concerns seem insufficient for curricular decision-making. While we believe that historical study should serve the contemporary needs of our students, we also believe that the debate about Global History or Western Civilization involves other principles. As Christian historians, we must ask: What is history and why do we study it? What do our students need to learn about history? And how should we interpret and teach history? Our speakers would all agree on the need to address these questions. They would also agree that history, as the story of humankind's response to God's mandate to develop His creation, is global in scope. That is, human culture-formation takes place at all times and all places. But how such a definition of history translates practically into a core requirement at a Christian college remains a point of debate.

The essays that follow are written versions of the presentations given at our symposium. I hope that readers of these pieces may be stimulated in their thinking on matters of Christian historical interpretation and challenged to consider the significance of the global scope of history.

END NOTES

1. See *Fides et Historia*, Vol. XXXI:2 (Summer/Fall 1999), and *Perspectives on Teaching Innovations: World and Global History*, Introduction by Robert Blackley (Washington, D.C.: American Historical Association, 1999).