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"History Wars"—"Holy Wars" or, History in Contention

by Keith C. Sewell

I have been asked to discuss the topic of "history wars." Of course, "history wars," in the sense of historiographical and methodological controversy between and concerning historians, is nothing new. If we take a broader view of the history of our discipline, we are immediately confronted with the truth that the study and narration of human history has always been in contention. So we can use our historical knowledge of the history of our own discipline to get some sense of perspective on our contemporary situation. If the truth be told, we historians are fighters from way back!

In this paper I am not going to attempt even the briefest of overviews of the history of *Weltgeschichte*. What I shall attempt is to discuss in a preliminary way a number of themes pertinent to our understanding and teaching of "world" or "global" history at the present juncture. Although I use these terms, I am not altogether sure of their correctness. A case could be made for preferring "human history" or "the history of humankind." The themes I have selected are as follows:

(1) The "end of history" thesis;
(2) The emergence of postmodern thought and the techniques of deconstructionism;
(3) The response of evangelical pietism to the postmodern critique of modernism;
(4) The relevance of reformational philosophical perspectives to these issues;
(5) "World History" as an alternative to "Western Civilization" courses; and
(6) The challenge of developing what might be called "biblically-directed historical thinking."

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1. The "end of history thesis"

Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* burst upon the world in 1992. For Fukuyama, we have reached the end of history because the whole historical process has virtually reached its end point in the now supposedly imminent—if not yet actually complete—global triumph of liberal democracy and the market

economy. This is the optimum state of affairs that can be expected. He who has achieved this point is the last man; there is nowhere else to go; there can be no further *progression*. Of course, Fukuyama is not saying that there will be no further events, but that liberal democracy and capitalist economics represents the culmination of the historical process. They are final in that they cannot be improved upon. This is a global-secular realized-eschatology with a vengeance!

In my opinion, Fukuyama's book lacks cogency and consistency. I share the view that as a historian he is superficial. Much more could be said, but for the present I would like to emphasize that his argument is not new. In certain respects his is the old liberal-protestant "whig interpretation of history" revisited: once again the past is used to ratify what is (temporarily) preeminent in the present. Arguably, the reception that Fukuyama's book received was more significant than the cogency of its contents. It enjoyed a season of remarkable popularity. Why? I think that part of the answer is a mounting disillusionment with rigorous historical research and detailed historiography—and with science and scholarship generally.

Whereas what Karl Popper presented in T*he Poverty of Historicism* (1944/45) and *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945, 1962) was clearly that of a pre-Hegelian liberal, Francis Fukuyama is a liberal of the post-Hegelian variety. The essence of the historical process had been ideological struggle, and that struggle was now—post Berlin Wall, post Soviet Empire—definitively resolved in favor of liberal democracy and free markets. As there are now no ideological—some might say "holy"—wars to be fought, no fundamental standpoints in contention, the utility of history as a discipline providing a theater for such contest became redundant. So an argument was provided for a sentiment that was already appearing in the 1980s: Why study history at all?

This sentiment was no mere revival of the "bunk" and "full of sound and fury and signifying nothing" responses to history. In a world where marketplace acceptability and performance are experienced as crucial, many students deeply resent being asked to spend any time deepening their historical understanding, and they resist being driven to anything like rigorous historical reflection. Our students have come to maturity in an educational environment strongly prone to giving the retention of facts priority over insight and understanding. Across the western world higher education exhibits an increasing tendency to train students to be efficient absorbers of information rather than analytically critical thinkers. These and related attitudes have become more entrenched in the 1990s. With the pace of market-driven technological change being so rapid, there seems to be an emerging conviction that the past offers us no source of guidance for the future. Hence students' question: Why bother to study history at all?

Moreover, as we are all aware, history—and I think especially global history—does not merely have to contend with the late-modern secular liberal democratic triumphalism of Fukuyama. Historical research, scholarly historiography, and history educators now confront the formidable challenges presented by postmodernism,—and especially by deconstructionist critiques of the structure of historiographical narratives.

2. Postmodernism and deconstructionism

Fukuyama's disposition to speak of an "end" of history is congruent yet not fully compatible with the challenge presented to conventional professional historical scholarship by postmodernist writers. So, what is postmodernism? Is there such a thing as a postmodern condition?

David Harvey, in his *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1990) suggests that a postmodern era commenced in the early 1970s. I am not so sure. Although certain cultural changes certainly started to manifest themselves at this time, I am inclined to think that the immediate origins and precursors of these so-called "sea changes" to "postmodernity" are to be found in the late 1950s and early 1960s. At the same time, I would like to suggest that what is generally referred to as "postmodernity" is a further reassertion of the "freedom" motive within "the modern humanistic ground-motive of nature and freedom," to employ the language of Herman Dooyeweerd.

On this view of the situation, the so-called sea change to postmodernity is but another expression

of the dialectical restlessness within the humanistic ground motive. In postmodernism we certainly encounter a reaction against the rationally ordered and the scientifically rigorous. The logical positivism of the mid-twentieth century no longer holds sway. Those of us who first came to grips with Calvinistic-reformational thought in the 1960s now find that we are operating in a profoundly changed intellectual and cultural situation. And historians now find that their beloved detailed narratives based on the scrupulous researching of source materials are regarded as *passé* at best, and as the authoritarian imposition of forms of intellectual totalitarianism at worst.

Although the literature has yet to reach a comprehensive maturity, some interesting work has already been done on the origins of the shift to postmodernity. Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) certainly portended profound changes. However, for historians the break-up of the old objectivist-reconstructionist model was perhaps first heralded by Hayden White's *Metahistory* (1974). Kuhn's work presented a strongly perspectival rather than exclusively empiricistic view of scientific research and discovery and articulated the concept of paradigm change. Kuhn's concept took off like wildfire. A paradigmatic / perspectival view of science gained much ground in the 1960s *because the times were ready for it*. It was an idea whose time had come, *because deep within the heart of western humanism a basic movement was already taking place against the much-claimed "objectivity of science,"* a movement towards the emotive and subjective.

White addressed questions such as the history of the historical consciousness, the status of claims to historical knowledge, and the manner in which historiographical narratives function in and for contemporary culture. According to White, when the historian confronts the evidence s/he 'pre-figures' the field of study even before applying the standard analytical/conceptual techniques of the discipline. For White, the historian proceeds from *emplotment* to *formal argument and ideological implication* to explain the material only on the basis of the manner in which it was pre-figured in the first place. White argues that no narrative represents events non-interpretatively. Narrative is not neutral. It is partial as to what is included and excluded, and perspectival in that everything is seen from the narrator's standpoint. Moreover, narratives are constructed and delivered in a manner reflective of ineluctable choices that have philosophical, ideological, and political implications.

Of course, historians have long been aware of the distinction between history as past events (*res gestae*), and history in the obviously limited sense of narrative historiography (*historia rerum gestarum*). What was new about White was the radically relativistic conclusions that he, and his followers, drew from his formulations. Hitherto it has been assumed by their advocates that different types of historical interpretation (Catholic, Liberal, Marxist, and so forth), articulated in more or less detailed narratives, were what they claimed them to be—true literary representations of past conditions, events and developments. And this truth, it is argued, is what has contributed to people and societies defining and understanding themselves in such terms. However, as the views of Jacques Derrida, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault, and particularly Jean-François Lyotard, in *The Postmodern Condition* (1986), have gained strength, the basis of all such narratives has come under attack. For many, such as Frank Ankersmit, Keith Jenkins, and Alun Munslow, all such narratives are now considered to be highly contestable if not completely discredited.

And this position clearly has implications for any view of world history. For example, in Lyotard the repudiation and de-legitimization of "meta-narratives" tends toward privileging the plural, the immanent, the regional, and the local. The all-encompassing vision is resisted as inherently totalitarian. On this view, it would seem that any interpretation of world history would seem to be problematic—be it that of Augustine, Bossuet, Ranke, Comte, Marx, Spengler, Toynbee, McNeill, or any other. The whole orientation of postmodern thought resists the quest for the universal that a world history project would seem to imply. Consequently, there can be no single narrative of world history. We are told that "the past" is no longer a single story or a thread of stories—such stories are narrational artifacts of our own construction. The actual past, it is now argued, is simply not amenable to narrative representation

because it was a vast mass of complexity. Such complexity does not "contain" narrative; rather, it is we who retrospectively and ideologically *impute* narrative to, and thereafter *derive* narrative from, the past.

These are the problems with which the contributors to the recent volume *World History: Ideologies, Structures and Identities* (1998) consciously wrestle. By and large, however, I think that we must say that historians—Christian, humanist, whatever—have only just begun to respond to the postmodern challenge. Part of the explanation here is that in the English-speaking world academic historians have tended to resist reflection on matters of philosophical prolegomena as being beneath them or simply irrelevant. The rise of the postmodern-deconstructionist critique of narrative caught these practitioners of traditional historiographical narrative explanation well and truly on the hop. Within professional historiography, to take England as an example, the old fight used to be between the "establishment" represented by figures such as the late Geoffrey E. Elton and more "sociologically-minded" figures, such as E.H. Carr. Elton saw the task of the historian as a rigorous literary-narrational reconstruction of the past. There was much of Ranke, Maitland, and *verstehen* in this. Carr drove Elton to fury with his greater willingness to partake of the insights and methods of the social sciences. The latter view was more nomological than ideographic, and was more congruent with later versions of the "covering law model of historical explanation." Latter-day postmodern writers, intent on the deconstruction of traditional historiography, represented the view of Elton as reconstructionist—that is, as purporting to reconstruct the human past. In comparison, the view of Carr has been described as constructionist—as offering a construct of the past using subsequently formulated (usually sociological or socio-economic) concepts for the purposes of historical explanation.

However, if the earlier Elton was driven to fury by Carr's tendency toward sociological explanation, the later Elton was driven to something more like apoplexy when confronted with the challenge represented by postmodernism. I think that this response occurred because postmodernism, especially when in strong deconstructionist mode, seems to radically undermine any claim the narrative has to impart something of the truth about the human past. It is as if the narratives that we have told about ourselves, to others and ourselves, have all proved to be false—and false in such a way as to lead us to doubt even the possibility of ever constructing a valid story again.

The construction of truly valid narratives is now seen by some as a hopeless task—a seriously misguided venture doomed to failure. There are no true stories from the past, and no true historiographical narratives, because there are no "stories *in* the past" to which any latter day historiographical narratives might correspond. The only "stories in the past" are those that historians, novelists, scriptwriters, and others impute *to* the past. Moreover, such narratives can be seen as hopelessly self-authenticating: the narrative always authenticates the author's standpoint. In other words, although events certainly did happen in the past, they did not happen as stories—either as 'short stories' or as extended narratives. The narrative form of discourse (written or spoken) is a verbal or literary artifact; it is a construct, and as such it is a response to the way in which reality is perceived.

To postmodern thought, there can be no single narrative of world history.

This skepticism concerning narratives and narrative explanations is close to the heart of the so-called "postmodern condition," at least as far as its challenge to conventional historiography is concerned. And we should be clear that this incredulity towards all meta-narratives includes Platonism and Christianity as well as the alternatives arising from the enlightenment, such as Liberalism, Socialism, and Marxism.

Once this doubt toward narratives is absorbed into the practice of research and teaching in history and the humanities, the tendency is towards the fragmented, the disconnected, and the ultra-subjective. Old school guild historians, such as Keith Windschuttle, in *The Killing of History* (1994), can criticize the new wave for its shoddy research and loyalties to new forms of political correctness.

However, old style guild historians have not risen adequately to the theoretical and philosophical challenge presented by postmodernism, and especially to the challenge presented by deconstructonism to the narrative itself. For example, while Windschuttle scores palpable hits when exposing the shoddy research behind postmodern representations of human history, it cannot be said that he offers any philosophical rebuttal to the postmodern critique of the traditional narrative mode as based upon the enlightenment ideal of individual objectivity. Time and again his argument relies upon an unsubstantiated assumption that such objectivity is possible and generally attainable. Richard J. Evans, *In Defence of History* (1997), makes a greater effort at this point, but his work seems to me to lack the required philosophical rigor. And so, although historians still seem to be able to construct cogent historiographical narratives, the postmodern critique thereof has yet to receive an adequate philosophical rebuttal.

The modern / postmodern divide continues to be reflected in the divide between those who see history as a discipline and those who would regard it as a discourse. And most of all World History would seem to be rendered the most tenuous of subjects, on account of the trends I have sketched.

3. Evangelical pietism and modernism

But what of our constituency? Many of us here teach in institutions where we expect that most of our students will be the fruit of a Christian upbringing. Many come from Reformed or Presbyterian contexts. Here I would like to offer some theses and observations which I think are generally valid, and then point to what I see as their relevance to the teaching and reception of world history to and by our students generally. Many Christian students are more influenced by evangelicalism than they are by a reformed perspective. Moreover, evangelicalism has had a great deal of influence on the reformed traditions of the English-speaking world. So, what has been the evangelical response to postmodernism? Here it might be argued that the response has been ambiguously mixed. I would argue that this mixed response can be attributed to unresolved problematics at the heart of evangelicalism itself.

Few evangelicals realize the extent to which their evangelicalism expresses the individualism of the enlightenment and the emotive sensibilities of romanticism. While the former might express itself in strict views of private morals, the latter might be manifested in the emotionalism of revivalist fervor. And so when postmodernism hits evangelicalism, the latter tends to oppose, for example, the public legitimization of alternative moral-codes (such as the legal recognition of monogamous same-sex relationships) while at the same time evangelical pragmatism—always for the sake of preaching the gospel—is capable of indulging in all manner self referential "feel good" devices in public worship. This contradiction is the "culture-lag" evangelicalism that makes its own negotiated absorption of the ways of secular western culture 5, 10, or 15 years after everyone else. Arguably, the charismatic movement (which came into mainline evangelical churches in the crucial 1960s decade) has functioned as the vehicle for and expression of the postmodernization of many evangelical churches. It is a fine example of the truth that Christianity is either world-formative, or it will be formed by the world.

Generally, Christians have lost track of their traditions. Many now exhibit a deepening diffidence towards their traditional meta-narratives. Christians have ceased talking of being Anglicans or Presbyterians or Baptists; they now postmodernistically distance themselves from their narrative and provisionally locate themselves by referring to their "background." The subjective experience of worship takes precedence over the authoritative exposition of the Word. We are moving from ministers to pastors; from preaching to counseling; from eldership to leadership; from holiness to spirituality; from the congregation to the audience. Is it possible that the general decline in expository preaching is related to these trends, and connected with a certain loss of confidence in the coherence of the biblical narrative? I do not intend to give offense by saying these things. I know that I am generalizing. Neither would I want to take up a position within conservatism. At this point I am inclined to argue that, although many Bible-believing churches raise their voices against the (postmodern) relativism of our age, the life and conduct of these same churches—often in urban

areas exhibits a tendency to go with the post-modern cultural flow.

Why? I think that the short answer is that Christianity of the evangelical-pietist variety lacks a normative understanding of the meaning and significance of human culture. And to the extent that this is so, we may expect that our students will have but a poor appreciation of the importance of historical studies. Their attitude towards historical studies, animated less by a biblical sense of calling than by a secular sense of career, is likely to be "as little as possible"—hardly an encouraging prospect when considering the appropriateness of a World History course in the Christian higher educational institution.

I think it possible that the postmodern refusal of "the burden of history" can be seen as a refusal on the part of modern/postmodern supposedly-autonomous ("a law unto itself") humanity to take responsibility for the way it has used its God-given power. Arguably, this refusal points us to the spiritual roots of the sidelining of the scholarly study and teaching of history in many institutions of higher education. And it is possible to argue that evangelical pietism has, in fact, facilitated the secularization of the West. Accordingly, to the extent that our students are caught up, via the influence of what I would call "a-historical evangelical pietism," with the temper of our times, we cannot expect them to have any immediate and automatic appreciation of the importance of historical studies—World History included.

4. The relevance of reformational philosophical perspectives

I now want to consider the relevance of Calvinistic thought of the reformational philosophical variety for these problems. This philosophy first gained significant exposure in the English-speaking world from the mid-1950s to the late 1960s. At that time the dominant viewpoint was that of neutral, value-free science. The legacy of logical positivism was still powerful. Many historians (misreading Ranke, and misled by John B. Bury) argued for a value-free, non interpretative historiography. If the western historical consciousness had been deeply stirred by romanticism, the avowed methodology of many English-speaking historians bore the unmistakable imprint of the enlightenment.

How the climate has changed! Over the last twenty years, we have witnessed a major swing away from the illusions of objectivism to the disintegrations of subjectivism. The meaning of historical texts is now seen to lie not in the intention of the author but in the historically changing interpretative stance and strategy of the reader!

Now, I just said that "Christianity of the evangelical-pietist variety lacks a normative understanding of the meaning and significance of human culture." I would suggest that such an understanding is exactly what we do require if we

Christians now distance themselves from their traditional meta-narratives.

are to develop and communicate to our students what I would like to term "biblically-directed historical insight." I would suggest that achieving such insight and understanding is one of the unrealized promises inherent in the reformational philosophical work of Dooyeweerd, Vollenhoven, Mekkes, and their co-laborers in the Netherlands. I would like to make two observations in reference to this work:

(1) The philosophy to which I refer has repeatedly warned against the perils of reductionism and absolutism. It has insisted that also in our theoretical thought we are to honor the rich multi-faceted diversity of the order of creation. There is no absolute within this creational richness and diversity because 'all things' are dependent upon their Creator. From its own standpoint, reformational thought has addressed many of the totalizing propensities of modernism that deconstructionism has sought to expose and that postmodernism typically repudiates. Long before the postmodern critique of enlightenment-based modernism was annunciated, Calvinistic philosophy had formulated its own critique of "the pretended autonomy of theoretical thought."

It is the narrative that enshrines, privileges, and imposes enlightenment-based modernism that postmodernism has particularly in its sights. Such

narratives, according to this view, close rather than disclose. Hence the postmodern turn towards deconstructionism. The latter approaches narratives not merely in a spirit of cautious skepticism. Rather, deconstructionism sees narratives as the means of legitimizing the claims of religions, philosophies, ideologies, regimes, churches, and corporations. By deconstructing the narrative so as to exhibit its non-correspondence to the full complexity of the past, deconstructionism seeks to demolish the basis upon which such standpoints and structures lay claim to power and authority.

We may indeed accord with an agenda that seeks to dethrone what false religion wrongly enthrones, but serious problems remain. One of them is that postmodernism—perhaps I should say, prevailing postmodernities—have not abandoned "the pretended autonomy of theoretical thought" by moving in the direction of a radical subjectivism. Postmodernism may—sometimes provocatively—think that it has exposed what lies behind enlightenment-driven modernity, but it remains deeply mired in what it purports to expose. Its ultra-subjectivism is dangerous. Even as it may disabuse our minds of illusions, it can induce widespread cultural crises by eroding the narrative foundation of systems of power and intellectual authority.

(2) It is arguable that postmodernism—at least on its own assumptions—is capable of undermining every standpoint expressed in terms of the already mentioned meta-narratives. How are we, as Christian historians who take our bearings in the reformational tradition, to respond to these challenges?

I must say that when I read the repudiations of the enlightenment and encounter the radical subjectivism of postmodernist writers, I am often reminded of Herman Dooyeweerd's repeated warnings and strictures against *historicism*, and especially its corrosive effects, in his lectures entitled *In the Twilight of Western Thought* (1960). I would like to suggest that these warnings need to be revisited as we consider the task of teaching world history under contemporary conditions. This is especially so when some would have us think that the notion of an order of creation is expressive of a baptized and now discredited platonic meta-narrative! Even if those who claim that the old enlightenment-based "rational / empirical foundationalist" meta-narratives are ailing if not already dead, this claim does not require that we hurl ourselves into the intersubjectivisms of postmodernism. We do not have to surrender ourselves to either modernist or postmodernist alternatives. Our view of world history does not have to be shaped by either standpoint. Many of the contemporary "history wars"—be they holy or unholy—are certainly of interest to us. These "wars" may be more or less congruent with the "modern"-"postmodern" counterpoint, but yet they are not at root our wars.

Moreover, we should recognize that the current vogue of postmodernism and deconstructionism will not last. The term "postmodern" itself exhibits a certain presumptuous finality, since the movement will in its turn be surpassed. We may await with interest the advent of neo-postmodernism followed by post-neo-postmodernism, not to mention the arrival of contra-deconstructionism. We must expect theoretical thought to exhibit a constant restlessness until it finds its perfect repose in Jesus Christ. The challenge before us is therefore to work towards a biblically-directed understanding of world history, utilizing the admittedly fallible and incomplete insights of reformational philosophy to date.

I am inclined to say that we have hardly begun to appropriate, critically and appreciatively, the general and specific insights that reformational philosophy can impart. We need to avoid the temptation to choke on the Euro-centricity of some of Dooyeweerd's examples, allowing that the insightfulness of his reflections is sometimes superior to the aptness of his illustrations. And, beyond this issue, let me suggest that certain of the first principles of this tradition of philosophical reflection need to be brought to bear with far greater precision on the often insufficiently-examined texture of our historical thinking.

Let me give you an example. This philosophy insists that no aspect of things is the all determinative point around which all else revolves, and upon which all else depends. Similarly, no societal structure or institution known among us is in some sense the absolute key to everything else—not marriage, the family, the school, the corporation, the state—not even the church! These cannot be

reduced to each other—they all exhibit a distinctive integrity of their own. In our quest to identify individuation, differentiation, and integration historically, I think that we may yet have to confront the full significance of this "always dependent, therefore non-autonomous, yet exhibiting an irreducibly distinctive structure" character of the culturally-wrought creatures we encounter in our historical explorations, narrations, and explanations. Such a standpoint was at least in principle free from all ideologically driven overemphasis or reductionism. In this respect it may be seen as pointing the way towards a new critique of historical thought and historiographical method—a critique much more incisive than those arising from the subjectivisms of deconstructionism.

5. World History and Western Civilization

Ever since I first reflected on these questions, I have become less and less satisfied with our general picture of the history of the West, and our general picture of world or global history overall. The history of the writing of world history is illustrative of our problem. We have witnessed attempts to construct a world or global history—by way of extrapolation from the prophetic books of the bible, or on the theme of human strength as expressed in the quest for empire, or around the theme of the abiding legitimacy of an ecclesiastically unified culture, or on the basis of the doctrines of dialectical materialism, or on the theme of the triumph of western liberal-democracy . . . and so forth. These historiographies all exhibit the absolutizing totalizing tendencies railed against as oppressive meta-narratives by the contemporary postmoderns. Nevertheless, I would argue that they are all much more incisively exposed to critique from a reformational standpoint.

So where are we headed? I heed Acton's remark that our wider view of history is not to be a rope of sand. It should exhibit an integral unity. I suggest that it should find its unifying principle in its recognition that all human cultural-formative action—be it obedient or disobedient—is not sovereignly autonomous, but contingently dependent. Accordingly, our historiographical narrations and explanations should not be "closed-down" by way of absolutizing church, state, market, or whatever, but "opened-up" by way of a full recognition of their distinctive but dependent integrity and significance.

In other words, I have in view here a historiography that is neither relativistic in a historicist or postmodernist sense nor in the service of an idolatrous misappropriation of that which in truth is only creaturely. What I have in view here is a *disciplined* historiography—and postmodernists might jump to add this to their list of proscribed meta-narratives. But they would be wrong, because this is a historiography *disciplined by a discipleship* that aspires to set aside idolatrous interpretative commitments which are the true source of the totalizing oppressiveness of which the postmodernists complain.

We need not surrender ourselves to either modernist or postmodernist alternatives.

The historiography that I envision here, up to and including the scope of world history, arises from a view of history which is open because it has set aside all idolatrous absolutizations and over-estimations. This historiography entails a view of global history that does not privilege our favored individuals, ideas, and institutions. I would see it as entailing a *discourse* of profound care as to how we understand and portray others, an awareness of the incompleteness and provisionality of our understanding, and an abiding awareness that we and all humankind dwell constantly before the face of Almighty God.

So where might this bring us in our discussions of the relative merits of Western Civilization and World History? I agree with Theodore von Laue when he observes that there is no part of contemporary human culture that is not directed, affected, or at least circumscribed by the global reach of the West. Accordingly, no consideration of appropriate introductory survey course content can, in my judgement, ignore the history of the West. Yet I think that we all have some sense that when we examine the average Western Civilization course we seem to be in the presence of a gigantic piece of *hubris*. Norman Davies is right in observing

that this course format survives only where the American undergraduate college model prevails. It seems to have no true counterpart in European universities. Possibly Western Civilization survives on this side of the Atlantic because it can provide a broad sweep and late-humanist ratification of the present dominance of the USA in world affairs, as if this dominance was the end—the *telos*—of human history.

If this is the explanation, I would suggest that the Christian college and university should not be satisfied with it. We need an alternative that neither privileges nor ignores the West. We need an approach that will take seriously tribal societies as well as urban civilizations. We need an approach that, for example, takes eastern Asia as seriously as western Europe. A Euro-centric bias—an improper glorying in the works of our hands—might actually be impeding our insight into western civilization itself. For example, understanding the emergence of a feudal society in Japan might help us to achieve a clearer understanding of the emergence of feudalism in France.

We cannot ignore both the challenge and promise of working at a biblically-directed understanding of world or global history. However intense, fascinating, and worthy our particular specialties may be, our endeavors stand to be impoverished to the degree that we ignore the wider challenge of the global-ecumenical dimension.

6. The challenge of "biblically-directed historical thinking"

Moreover, we should not be content to rest with a formal critique of all other historiographies. Beyond the latter (which still have much to teach us), I see an even greater challenge. It lies in the direction of what I would like to call "biblically-directed historical thinking."

Here I envision a systematic and sympathetic analysis of the complex interactions and transpositions opened up to our attention by historical research. Here is a realm in which we investigate the functioning of intended and unintended consequences. Here we examine not merely humankind's use of God-given cultural-formative power—power to devise, make, maintain, and destroy. Here we may do something further. By a rigorous analysis of the intended and unintended consequences of the use of that God-given power, we may demonstrate that humankind is not autonomous, and not by any means the sovereign disposer of human destiny. And we have yet to see an interpretation of the history of humankind adequately articulated in these terms. To this purpose may we labor while it is yet day.

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