

HIS TRUTH SHALL MAKE US FREE: Lessons From the History of Western Civilization

By Edward Coleson, Ph.D. and Donald Ratcliff, Ph.D.

INTRODUCTION

A number of years ago, Bill Buckley wrote an exposeⁱ of the anti-religious atmosphere at Yale, a school which was once a religious college. He described the university in detail, including the names of professors and the books they used, both of which he felt were atheistic and subversive. *God and Man at Yale* made Buckley a public figure and created a great stir across the country, but if he was trying to reform education with the book, he accomplished little.

The irony is that most Christian colleges today use exactly the same textbooks and ideas that are used at Yale and other secular universities. For example, a one survey of psychology classes at Bible colleges revealed that all in the sample used standard secular texts, even though Christian alternatives were available.ⁱⁱ Our modern revision of James 1:5 seems to be “If any of you lack wisdom” consult an expert at a state university.

Good lectures are not the entire answer to the problem. A distinguished, effective professor once described an entire hour of class in which he warned his students to beware of the ideas in the next chapter of the textbook. Yet when he gave a test shortly afterward, the students only repeated what the book stated. His warning had accomplished nothing.

We are afraid that too much of “Christian” college teaching is only a secular education prefaced with a prayer and conducted in spiritually “air conditioned” environment. Is it worth all the effort and money merely to retail what the secular universities wholesale? We think not.

Long ago, Christians decided that piety and politics do not mix, thus we rarely try to apply our faith to public policy issues and human relations. No one will disagree with a person who speaks in favor of “the right thing,” but when he begins to define the “right thing” specifically it often threatens people who have vested interests. Thus it is far easier to stick to the ethereal (and useless) ideals, and in the practical realm continue to muddle along from crisis to crisis without any real intellectual or moral guidance.

There is definitely a Christian alternative to our modern problems, founded upon principle and not just pious sentimentality. We may not be able to produce a paradise on earth, but there is much that can be accomplished by a realistic social policy based upon biblical ethics and the lessons of history. Many of our baffling problems would seem less perplexing to Moses and the prophets than to us. Christ is still the answer if we would but apply His teachings to the problems of people and nations.

When Mother Eve used to tell little Cain that she had never “seen such a child” she was undoubtedly speaking the truth, but others who have said this are not. The problems of the modern age, including wars, economic difficulties, and social problems, are as old as the human family. Even the threat of nuclear destruction is in essence an old problem--humankind was almost destroyed when Cain killed Abel, when half of the people of Germany were killed during the Thirty Years War and the widespread death due to various plagues in history. At one time inflation was cured--during the Middle Ages--but many countries of the world continue to have this problem. These are all the consequences of human behavior, consequences that can be predicted from looking at history.

In this book we will attempt to find a “Christian Perspective” of history in which God’s

Truth is deemed relevant to life in all its dimensions. The ideas expressed here are not new. Indeed they are the foundations of Western culture. They may seem radical to some only because our modern culture has departed so far from both its Christian and classical roots. Only by understanding and profiting from the important lessons of history, as well as by submitting to the sovereignty of God, can we be truly free. "The Truth" from both special revelation--the Bible--and general revelation (history and social science) shall indeed "make us free" (socially, economically, politically, and spiritually). As Sophocles had his heroine, Antigone, tell a Greek tyrant nearly 2500 years ago:ⁱⁱⁱ

Thy writ, O King, hath not such potence as will overweigh the laws of God . . . fixed from everlasting to eternity.

THE AUTHORS

Edward Coleson received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. He has authored a number of professional and lay publications, including four college textbooks^{iv}--two on history and two on economics and government. Most recently he authored a chapter on liberation theology for a sociology text, a chapter which was later translated into Spanish for another publication and re-published in English for a scholarly journal. He has been a speaker at a number of national conventions, and has made trips to Africa, Europe, Brazil, Costa Rica and the Caribbean.

As Dr. Coleson grew up--during the Great Depression and with the second World War an obvious possibility--he became very concerned over our growing problems. After much thought, he concluded that if we would simply apply Christian principles to the affairs of men and nations, we would begin to find our way out of our frustration and despair.

The slogan “Christ is the ANSWER” was very popular in Christian circles at the time, but he never met anyone who was even trying to work out the practical implications in local, national or international policies. The Nazis and Communists were busy attempting to solve all the problems of the world, but he did not have any faith in their efforts. Subsequent events have shown how right he was, but as we blunder along from crisis to crisis, a Christian solution is still not very obvious and there do not seem to be many people looking for one. There have been isolated individuals who have tried, such as the late Francis Schaeffer, but the search has not yet become fashionable in Christian circles.

Edward Coleson spent the Depression years going through high school, farming, teaching at a country school, and trying to get through college. His majors then were mathematics and science, as he planned to go into research. Upon graduating from Marion College, he was able to get a position in the laboratories of a large industry. Several years later he went back to teaching and also pastored a church. He then started graduate work at the University of Michigan. In the meantime he concluded that, although he liked science as much as ever, his earlier and continuing interest in a Christian solution to world problems should be his major concern in graduate study. That decision brought problems, however. What should one study when the field you are interested in does not exist?

He decided on an interdepartmental program for his Ph.D. in what could perhaps best be described as social science. His dissertation was an economic development study of Sierra Leone, West Africa. His field work in the “bush villages” of that little colony introduced him to a poverty he had not known in America even during the Great Depression.

His graduate work and dissertation included a broad, general study of human problems

rather than some narrow specialty, the latter being the norm in most advanced study today. In his college teaching of more than thirty years, he has taught almost every subject except music, art and physical education. Since the human dilemma is interdisciplinary, this breadth of training and experience has been very valuable in his quest for solutions to our present problems.

However, he still believes that a few simple, related, God-given principles--within the comprehension of most everyone--will be the basis of any successful reform. He is an optimist too, not for the immediate future but in the long run.

Dr. Coleson believes the Lord guided him in his search for an education, including his choice of Sierra Leone as a thesis topic. It was through his study of the early history of that colony that he first learned of the great reforms that were a practical consequence of the Wesley Revival. The founding of Freetown was a byproduct of the English abolition movement. His continuing research has concentrated on all aspects of that age of reform, not just the slavery issue.

It was a tremendous discovery to find Christian statesmen in England having done what he believed we should have been doing here in America. They did their work well, while our modern attempts at reform are less successful. American saints apparently decided that the political man was "not subject to the law of God, neither indeed should be," revising Saint Paul to fit our modern thinking (Rom. 8:7). This change of thinking came after the Civil War and has produced the bitter fruit that could have been predicted from previous history. As Edmund Burke said two centuries ago, "All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing."

After retiring from many productive years of teaching at Christian liberal arts colleges,

Edward Coleson moved to Puerto Rico where he began learning Spanish. He taught at a Wesleyan school in a suburb of San Juan for many additional years until he was no longer able to continue.

I (Don Ratcliff) am not a historian by training. I received my Ph.D. in educational psychology from The University of Georgia. I have edited or coauthored a number of books, most of them on psychology or religious education. As an undergraduate, I attended Spring Arbor College [now Spring Arbor University] in the small Michigan town by the same name. There I met and studied under Edward Coleson, a teacher well-known for his dry wit and provocative ideas.

Coleson's approach to history was appealing because it was much more than just a recounting of long distant wars and people, instead it became almost prophetic of the future. In a 1972 class Dr. Coleson stated his amazement that no major scandal had yet occurred in the White House. Only months later Watergate began to unfold. He also spoke of the potentially devastating effects of wage and price controls being set in place by Nixon. Before long the predicted shortages came about. While not a prophet in the biblical sense, Coleson's perceptive understanding of history did reveal the most likely outcomes of decisions and trends.

Coleson's approach to teaching was most unconventional. Most days he would come to class with a large stack of books, news magazines, and newspapers. He would read a passage from a book describing an event in history. Sometimes he read two or three such passages from other books, describing other events from other points in history, reflecting similar decisions,

values, and perspectives. After one or more such readings, he then turned to the newspaper or news magazine--almost always a recent paper or magazine, and read part of an article that reflected much of the same thinking. Then he would take another, possibly related topic, and go through the process again, reading history book passages, and then newspapers and news magazines. He could cycle several times--often on very different topics--in a single class session.

At the time few recognized the genius it took to teach history in this manner, where he would consider an idea or issue reflected at several different point in time, and then show how these were very live topics yet today. His point was that there is a continuity between different points of history and the present; similar decisions are made again and again in history, with similar results. He taught students to learn from history the likely results of key decisions, and how political leaders often made the same mistakes time and again as their predecessors in history. The bottom line was: We can learn from history how to make good decisions today, if we just study it.

Coleson wrote several privately published manuscripts on history, reflecting this same approach. These, other more standard publications that he authored, and his personal interaction with me by mail and in person were used to help put together this manuscript. Their original genesis was a summer "internship" in history--which he did without payment, to help an impoverished and struggling new college teacher prepare for a two-semester seminar in Western Civilization. I daily went through the pattern of reading passages of his books and other materials he assigned, having a one to two hour dialogue with him over what I had read, and then my writing out lecture notes from the books, materials, and dialogue. Over the summer I developed notes that reflected his perspectives on history. I learned a lot that summer. Several years later,

with his encouragement, I summarized my notes in the present form. These notes do not do justice to the incredible scholarship of Dr. Coleson, but they at least summarize the perspectives he painstakingly searched out over the years. Perhaps someday his writings will again become available in their original form, although even they do not capture the incredible scholarship reflected in his teaching and use of hundreds of books in class.

Studying with Coleson enlarged my world-view; I began to see how Christianity could meaningfully interface with all of learning. To use Fosdick's analogy--a favorite often cited by Coleson--Christianity became the "hub of the wheel" that related the "spokes" of knowledge. As with Dr. Coleson, finding distinctively Christian answers to the important issues in life has become my lifetime quest.

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- i. Bill Buckley, *God and Man at Yale*.
 - ii. Donald Ratcliff, "General Psychology in Bible Colleges," *Journal of Psychology and Theology*, vol. 14, no. 4.
 - iii. Sophocles, *Antigone*.
 - iv. *Our Western Heritage, The Harvest of Twenty Centuries, The Scriptural Standard in Economics and Government*, and *God, Government and the Good Life*.