CHALLENGES FOR HISTORIANS

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Nearly fifteen years ago, when the junior college where I teach first opened its doors, Chancellor George Simpson came to our campus to address the faculty. He explained our mission in higher education. It was to take students who, for the most part, were woefully unprepared for college work, and prepare them for successful transfer to senior colleges. The Chancellor admitted that it would not be easy to cover all of the courses required in the first two years of the core curriculum, plus remedial courses in English, mathematics and basic study skills in a two-year period. Nor, he added, would it be easy to develop proper study habits, broaden vocabularies, and stimulate creative thinking and critical analysis among students who had never shown much interest in such matters, who had not taken college preparatory courses, and who held part-time or full-time jobs. Nevertheless, that was our mission, and we were to accomplish it in two years.

Though hundreds of students have passed through my classes since that meeting in 1970, I still vividly remember one young lady from that first year. She illustrated perfectly the problems the faculty would encounter. In an American history survey course, I had been lecturing on Hitler and World War II when something in the lecture seemed to spark this young student's curiosity. I was, first of all, pleased to observe that she was alive, since her appearance in class and performance on tests had left me somewhat in doubt. I was even more pleased to discover that she suddenly had found history to be relevant to contemporary events. My enthusiasm knew no bounds when it appeared that she had actually learned to relate material from the classroom to a television program. The program she had associated with the lecture, it turns out, was "Hogan's Heroes." My intial job, however, soon turned to total and complete amazement when, upon further probing, I learned that not only did she think that "Hogan's Heroes" was a realistic depiction of a Nazi prisoner of war camp but that it was also a live production! When students think that World War II is still being fought twenty-five years after its conclusion and is being broadcast in humorous half-hour weekly installments on television, the faculty indeed has a difficult job. Preparing her, and others like her, for senior college was our challenge, the Chancellor had solemnly informed us.

The challenge of teaching the unteachable is still with us today, and every teacher here could relate similar examples. Moreover, it is not likely to disappear as long as open admission policies are practiced. But in addition to that perennial problem, the historian of 1984 faces new challenges as well. In the brief time available, let me call your attention to three of them - technology, pluralism and values.

Increasing technology is a fact of life for western society and the world at large which cannot be escaped. Alvin Toffler's Future Shock is upon us. Whether the technology of atomic energy, lasers, robots and computers will lead man to utopia or armageddon is a debatable point. But wherever it will take us, it seems clear that our society will continue to emphasize new technological developments. Given the conditions of today's world, there seems to be little choice.

In all probability the technological advances of the 1980s will equal, and probably surpass, those of the 1970s and 1960s.

The question that emerges is: What role will history play in the computerized society of the future? Or perhaps the question should be: Will history play any role at all? It is at least conceivable that history will be removed from the high school and college curriculum altogether and discarded as an irrelevant relic of the past. Assaults upon history have been evident for many years and they are not likely to subside. Historians love their subject and can usually produce an impressive list of reasons why the subject should be studied. Unfortunately, however, few have been convinced by our arguments. The newer behavioral sciences have breached Clio's ramparts, and now high tech, often depicted as the savior of the nation's ills, threatens to destroy them altogether. History simply is not in vogue and hasn't been for several years. Indeed Robert Penn Warren, in pointing out the dehumanizing effects of technology, noted that "history today is almost ceasing to be studied."[1] Thus, in proving the value of history to a skeptical public, historians face a formidable challenge.

As American society has changed technologically, so it has changed socially and culturally. Who would have imagined fifteen years ago that today abortions would be legal and commonplace; that women would be in corporate board meetings doing more than pouring coffee; that a woman would be serving on the Supreme Court; that Hispanics would be so numerous that they would be courted by presidential candidates; that Hollywood would apparently be incapable of making movies without sex, violence, nudity, profanity or perversion; that television would leave little to the imagination except what the Old West was like, since westerns would no longer be offered; that homosexuals would not only "come out of the closet" but move center stage to become the dominant political force in some communities and a powerful pressure group on the national level; that black mayors would abound from Atlanta to Los Angeles and from Cleveland to Birmingham; and that the most exciting entertainers would be the Jacksons - Michael and Jesse?

In response to the rapid and profound social and cultural changes that have occured in recent years, history survey texts have been rewritten. Invariably the new editions place more emphasis on minorities, urban problems, women, and environmental concerns. Typical is Portrait of America, edited by Stephen Oates, the book of readings I use in the American survey. It was revised for the third time in 1983. Gone from volume two were articles on the "Wild West," industrialization, the I.W.W., Theodore Roosevelt, the Ku Klux Klan, D-Day, and John Kennedy. Appearing in their stead were new articles entitled: "Aprons and Plows: Daily Life on the Prairie," "New York's Jewish Immigrants," "Urban Home and Family," "Saint Jane and the Ward Boss," "Don't You Know There's A War On?: The Home Front," and "Richard Nixon and Television Politics." The same pattern occurs in volume one, with new selections entitled: "Courtship, Marriage, and Children," "America's African Astronomer," "The Lords and the Mill Girls," "Men, Women, and Margaret Fuller," and "Women and Their Families on the Overland Trails."

One can sympathize with Professor Oates and all other

authors and editors of surveys on American history. Goodhistory today must recognize the cultural and ethnic diversity of the American experience. Adequate attention must be given to social concerns, ethnic minorities, and the daily routine of ordinary men and women. But at the same time, students should also be familiar with the famous leaders who molded this country's past, and they must understand the essentials of the political and economic systems which provided the basis for America's rise to world leadership. Nor is it unreasonable to expect college students on the freshman and sophomore level to know something about American diplomacy and America's role in world affairs, including its wars. But how does an author include all of these essential things in a book of 300 or 400 pages? And how does an instructor really teach all of these topics in a survey of ten weeks? To be honest, it cannot be done properly (though we historians hesitate to say it in the hearing of an administrator or a member of a rival discipline). Something, by necessity, gets left out. Teaching all of the pluralism that needs to be taught in today's surveys is another challenge that historians must face.

There is yet a third challenge, more difficult than the other two, which historians today must confront. That is the challenge of values. Good historians, as we know, strive for honesty and objectivity in their works. They search for the truth, and to the best of their ability they try to eliminate errors of fact and personal bias. Unfortunately, as long as history involves the study of man and as long as it involves interpretation, some bias inevitably seeps in. As Samuel Eliot Morison explained over thirty years ago, "It goes without saying that complete 'scientific' objectivity is unattainable by the historian. His choice of facts to be recorded, his distribution of emphasis among them, his sense of their significance and relative proportion, must be governed by his philosophy of life. No historian of my generation has ever pretended otherwise."[2] Nor is it likely that any historian of this generation would disagree. In a similar vein, the contemporary scholar D.W. Bebbington remarked that "the historian's history is moulded by his values, his outlook, his worldview. It is never the evidence alone which dictates what is written."[3] In noting that historians are influenced by the times in which they live, he states that "the unconscious assumptions of the historian's own age are inescapble."[4] In view of Morison and Bebbington's comments, several questions immediately come to mind: How does contemporary society influence the writing of history? Are historians aware of their biases? What are the values, the outlooks, the world views of historians today?

From the early colonial period through the 19th century a Christian consensus prevailed in American society. Though all Americans were by no means Christian, there was nonetheless widespread agreement on basic principles. "The Christian tradition," Merle Curti wrote, "was the chief foundation stone of American intellectual development."[5] Despite wide differences in social and ethnic groups, Americans shared a common Christian conception of human nature, of social relationships, and of the nature of knowledge, and "all were substantially agreed on the supernatural origin and destiny of man and the supernatural basis of the universe itself."[6] From this perspective individuals concluded that the universe was

orderly, that life had meaning, that human institutions should be based on biblical principles, that judgment awaited all mankind, and that God moved mysteriously in the lives of men to accomplish His divine purposes. Numerous examples from William Bradford at Plymouth to Washington and the Founding Fathers to Abraham Lincoln could be cited to illustrate their conviction that God influenced the affairs of men.

Since the Christian consensus affected the way people thought and lived, it inevitably influenced their writing of history. The early writers of American history textbooks interpreted the past from a decidedly Christian perspective. Their works were full of flesh and blood people engaged in deep conflicts. The authors did not hesitate to express moral judgments, for to them history dealt with the cosmic struggle between the forces of good and the forces of evil. Like Bradford, Washington, and Lincoln, they discerned the invisible hand of God operating in history. As Charles Goodrich stated in his 1832 testbook, "History displays the dealings of God with mankind."[7] George Bancroft, author of a popular 19th century multi-volume history of America, explained that his works would "follow the steps by which a favoring Providence, calling our institutions into being, has conducted the country to its present happiness and glory."[8]

Such views are now regarded as quaint, biased and antiquated, and they are seldom, if ever, expressed in contemporary textbooks and monographs. Today the Christian consensus no longer dominates American society. It has been replaced by a humanistic consensus. Now we have, as Francis Schaeffer puts it, only the memory of the Christian consensus.[9] This is hardly a new concept, for a generation ago Arnold Toynbee observed that the western society was living in a "post-Christian world." The values that Christianity had once provided, he stated, has been replaced by secular ideologies, including individualism, Communism and Nationalism.[10] When Schaeffer and other evangelicals argue that America's basic institutions - families, public schools, court system, television, newspapers, movies, etc. - reflect more humanistic values than Christian values, it is difficult to refute them. Since the society has changed so drastically in the 20th century, it should not be surprising that the history published today bears little resemblance to that published a century ago. In general, modern historians are more professionally trained, employ more scientific methods of research, and present their material in a more concise style. They also place greater emphasis on psychological and sociological factors and economic forces, and they deal with subjects largely ignored by earlier writers. But just as the Christian consensus shaped the values of the historians of the 19th century, the humanistic consensus shapes the values of historians today.[11]

No longer able to perceive a divine play in history, historians now seek rational, scientific explanations for all phenomena. Trained to be skeptical of all evidence, historians now accept only what can be proved with empirical evidence. This methodology, of course, eliminates God from consideration as a force in history, since He can be neither proved nor disproved in this fashion. Whether He exists or not, He becomes irrelevant to the study of history. Textbooks now generally follow this pattern, but probably the best example that can be cited is Jacob Bronowski's popular book

and film series, The Ascent of Man, which traces the history of man from his primordial beginnings fifty million years ago to the present without ever mentioning God.

Having eliminated God from the real world of human endeavor and relegated Him to the care of metaphysicians and theologians, historians no longer discern any divinely inspired moral code. They are left with relative morals and values and situational ethics which change from time to time. Nor do they have any basis for dealing with supernatural phenomena. Take, for example, the case of Charles G. Finney, the great evangelist who served for many years as president of Oberlin College. In his autobiography he describes his emotional conversion experience in considerable detail. He records, "The Holy Spirit descended upon me in a manner that seemed to go through me, body and soul. I could feel the impression, like a wave of electricity, going through and through me." Finally Finney said, "Lord, I cannot bear any more."[12] A popular college textbook, which recognizes that Finney's life was transformed at the time of his conversion, explains this supernatural event in typical fashion. The conversion resulted, the text says, not from the power of the Holy spirit, but from Finney's dissatisfaction with the practice of law and the nagging of a pious fiancée.[13]

Could it be that we historians have lost sight of what man really is? Do we perceive man as a special creation of God, possessing a soul, and being ultimately responsible before God for his actions and behavior? Or do we lean more toward the view that man is a product of natural evolution, an accident of time and circumstance, a product of his environment, and a result of economic forces and sociological and psychological conditioning? It seems to me that American history textbooks are heading in the direction of the latter view, if indeed they are not already there. The present age has largely succeeded in separating church and state, both literally and intellectually. But for the historian it is not so cut and dried. As C.S. Lewis observed, "There are no non-religious activities: only religious and irreligious."[14] If he is correct, then the study of history is either a religious or an irreligious activity. In either event, the historian cannot remain objective. Inevitably he must be biased.

In recent years, the history profession has suffered a sharp decline in public esteem. Required history courses have been deleted from college curricula, student enrollment in history courses has declined alarmingly, attendance at history conventions has dropped, and academicians have commented publicly on the irrelevancy of studying history. I am not suggesting that a return to the style of Goodrich or Bancroft will immediately solve all our problems, nor am I suggesting that we ab nd n modern methodology altogether. What I am proposing is that the profession should recognize, in a more meaningful way, how pervasively the society has influenced our thinking and writing; that it should admit more forthrightly its biases; and that it should reassess, with deep and profound study, its concept of man and values for society. Herbert Butterfield explained that "our final interpretation of history is the most sovereign decision we can make, and it is clear that every one of us, as standing alone in the universe, has to take it for himself, it is our decision about religion, about our total attitude of things, and about the

way we will appropriate life."[15] That decision, it seems to me, is the most perplexing and fundamental challenge historians of 1984 must face.

NOTES

[1]Robert Penn Warren, "Can Democracy Survive in a World of Technology?" U.S. News & World Report, August 18, 1980, p. 64.

[2]Samuel Eliot Morison, "The Faith of a Historian," in Harvey Wish, ed., American Historians (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), p. 381.

[3]D.W. Bebbington, Patterns in History: A Christian View (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), p. 5.

[4]Ibid., p. 6.

[5]Merle Curti, The Growth of American Thought. 3rd ed., (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964), p. 3.

[6]Ibid., p. 4.

[7]Charles A. Goodrich, A History of the United States (Hartford: H.F. Sumner & Co., 1835), p. xi.

[8]George Bancroft, History of the United States. 10 vols., 12th ed., (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1845-75) 1:4.

[9]Francis A. Schaeffer, Death in the City (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1978), p. 11. Francis a Schaeffer, A Christian Manifesto (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway books, 1981), pp. 17-18.

[10]Arnold Toynbee, Change and Habit: The Challenge of Our Time (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 110.

[11]Schaeffer, A Christian Manifesto; Francis A. Schaeffer, How Should We Then Live? (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell, 1976); John W. Whitehead, The Second American Revolution (Elgin, Ill.: David C. Cook Publishing Co., 1982), pp. 25-42.

[12]Charles G. Finney, An Autobiography (Old Tappan, N.J.: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1908), pp. 16-21.

[13]Allen Weinstein and R. Jack Wilson, Freedom and Crisis. 2 vols., 2nd ed., (New York: Random House, 1978): 1: 287.

[14]Quoted in R.F.R. Gardner, Abortion: The Personal Dilemma (Old Tappen, N.J.: Spire Books, 1974), p. 75.

[15]Herbert Butterfield, Christianity and History (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949), p. 25.