

Winter 2004

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## Recommended Citation

Published in *Fides et Historia*, 36(1), Winter/Spring 2004, pp. 118-124 by the Conference on Faith and History  
<http://www.faithandhistory.org/fides-et-historia/>

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# TEACHING HISTORY AS CREATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Paul Otto, George Fox University

**My object in this article** is to share ways that my faith commitments are manifest in my teaching of history. It should be made clear from the outset that I currently teach, and have taught, at explicitly faith-based institutions—George Fox University and Dordt College—and this fact doubtless shapes what I have done in my classes, and how I have done it. First, I will briefly summarize my understanding of history in terms of creational development and the exercise of human cultural formative power and its results. Then I will share a few ways my pedagogy reflects this understanding or is aimed at promoting it among my students. The first section is philosophical, the second practical. My comments are intended to introduce readers to my self-consciously Christian way of thinking about history and teaching it.

I understand history as the story of the universal or global human response to God's call to his image bearers to "subdue the earth and fill it."<sup>1</sup> Calling this cre-

<sup>1</sup>My ideas on history are consistent, I think, with what has been called reformational thinking. I do not believe there exists a general reformational understanding of history, although several scholars have considered the question. Depending upon who is asking the question—philosopher, historian, or other—different answers are offered. My ideas in this and the following paragraphs stem from several sources, I list a few select titles here. Herman Dooyeweerd, *Roots of Western Culture: Pagan, Secular, and Christian Options*, tr. John Kraay, eds. Mark Vander Vennen and Bernard Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge, 1979), C. T. McIntire, "The Focus of Historical Study: A Christian View," unpublished essay (1980), C. T. McIntire, "Historical Study and the Historical Dimension of Our World," in *History and Historical Understanding*, eds. C. T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 17–40, C. T. McIntire, "The Ongoing Task of Christian Historiography" (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies, 1974), Sander Griffioen, "The Relevance of Dooyeweerd's Theory of Social Institutions," in *Christian Philosophy at the Close of the Twentieth Century: Assessment and Perspective*, eds. Sander Griffioen and Bert M. Balk (Kampen, Kok, 1995), 139–58, Bob Goudzwaard, *Capitalism and Progress: A Diagnosis of Western Society*, trans. and ed. Josina Van Nuis Zylstra (Toronto: Wedge/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), xix–xxi. Other works worth considering in this tradition include Herman Dooyeweerd, *Christian Philosophy and the Meaning of History* (Lewiston: Edwin Mellin, 1997), C. T. McIntire, "Dooyeweerd's Philosophy of History," in *The Legacy of Herman Dooyeweerd: Reflections on Critical Philosophy in the Christian Tradition*, ed. C. T. McIntire (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1985), M. C. Smut, *Towards a Christian Conception of History*, ed. and trans. H. Donald Morton and Harry Van Dyke (Toronto: Institute for Christian Studies/Lanham, Md.: University Press of America,

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ational, or cultural, development, I interpret history as the result of the exercise of human cultural formative power—that is the power to create, shape, and direct culture, whether in tangible or intangible forms. This quality or ability, I believe, is an important aspect of what it means to be created in God's image.

Christians might quickly—and rightly—ask where, in my definition of history, is the story of sin and redemption? As Christians study the past, we certainly must also include our understanding of this grand drama, this struggle between good and evil, between the forces of darkness and light, between Satan's minions and Christ's great redemptive forces. But before we discuss that part of the story, we need to first remember God's revealed intentions for his creation. We should imagine, for a moment, history without sin and the corrective divine forces offered to its remedy. Do we envision a static, unchanging world in which human beings live on in ignorant (and naked) bliss in the Garden of Eden? Or do we imagine that human beings, created in God's image, will develop that creation, will do the work of Jabal, Jubal, Tubal-Cain, and others, who, although they descended in the line of Cain, nevertheless lived out God's expectation of his image bearers to actively engage and develop his creation?<sup>2</sup> I hold to the second assumption. Were it not so, I think, the image presented in the book of Revelation of the New Heaven and Earth would have at its center a pristine garden. But it does not; instead, the centerpiece of the New Earth is the New Jerusalem, incorporating some aspects of the garden, but clearly a city—an institution usually recognized as the product of human cultural activity.<sup>3</sup>

Thus history underlies the story of sin and redemption, and is part of God's expectations for his creation from the beginning. Yet the exercise of this cultural formative power reflects the religious or faith commitments inherent in being created in God's image.<sup>4</sup> Called upon to glorify God in everything we do, human beings have not only power, but choice. We choose to develop the creation in ways obedient or disobedient to God's Word for his creation. Those choices stem from our ultimate religious commitments and produce the various aspects of culture which reflect those belief systems. In a fallen world inhabited by sinful people, our religious choices are born of disobedience. We develop belief systems which direct us away from the sovereign Lord towards ourselves or some other part of his creation.

As human beings exercise cultural formative power, they make choices about how to apply it stemming from their religious commitments. I believe that those religious commitments, while complex and difficult to unravel, can represent particular people at a particular place in time so that it is appropriate to speak of

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2002); Groen Van Prinsterer, *Unbelief and Revolution*, Lectures VIII & IX, Lecture XI, ed. and trans. Harry Van Dyke (Amsterdam: The Groen Van Prinsterer Fund, 1975, 1973).

<sup>2</sup>Genesis 4:20–22. Scripture reveals that already Cain and Abel were busy in God's world in agricultural endeavors (Genesis 4:2) and Cain built a city (Genesis 4:17).

<sup>3</sup>Revelation 21:1–22: 6.

<sup>4</sup>A useful book for exploring this relationship between structure and direction is Albert M. Wolters, *Creation Regained: Biblical Basics for a Reformational Worldview* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985).

worldviews, religious beliefs, faith commitments, or cultural ideals of a particular civilization throughout a particular era. Related to these cultural ideals are the societal structures I mentioned above which are often shaped by (and sometimes shape) the cultural outlook of a particular society. Much of what we do, as we study history, is to explore the interaction of worldview and societal structures as they change, develop, and transform over time. At the heart of this is the exercise of human cultural formative power, never neutral, always in obedience or disobedience to God's law.

As I organize and teach my courses, especially at the introductory level, these basic ideas about cultural formative power, creational development, and worldview and societal structures shape the way I structure each class and the pedagogy I employ. Most of my experience in introductory courses has been teaching Western Civilization. I have also taught lower division American history courses and upper division courses in Early American and Native American history. Over the years I have experimented in these courses with a variety of ways of helping students understand the use of human cultural formative power, the influence of ideas and structures on their lives, and their own responsibility for and influence on global historical development.<sup>5</sup>

There are several ways this happens. First, I usually spend the initial few days of an introductory course engaging students in a discussion of the meaning and definition of history, exploring what insights we can glean from Scripture and the structure of the Bible as we develop a definition together.<sup>6</sup> I usually begin with brainstorming sessions in which I ask students "what is history?" This exercise prepares them to appreciate that one cannot study the past without coming to terms with how interpretation shapes our understanding of it. Closely related to that, I want them to consider more seriously what interpretation they bring to the past, or should bring to it. My hope is that they will begin to grasp the importance of developing an authentic Christian interpretation. But the next step of thinking about how Scripture should inform them can be somewhat difficult for them to take since they often are not accustomed to reading and applying Scripture in this way. In order to accomplish this, I ask them in a classroom discussion to answer the question, in light of what the Bible reveals, when did history begin?

This question leads to a variety of responses: "with God," "with the creation," "with the development of language," "with the creation of books," "with sin," "with the emergence of civilization," "at the beginning of time." Not all of these suggestions are clearly founded on their reading of Scripture, so I push them to tell

<sup>5</sup>My former colleagues at Calvin College and Dordt College have influenced me in both how I have thought about history, how I have developed and modified my courses—particularly Western Civilization—and the various pedagogical strategies I have employed. In particular, I have benefited from the suggestions, advice, and examples of James Bratt, Hubert Krygsmann, Dan Miller, Keith Sewell, and Mark Tazelaar. Many of the ideas which follow can be traced back to their suggestions or examples.

<sup>6</sup>I assign a wide range of passages which address human cultural formative power, humankind's fall into sin, God's covenant, redemption, the Lordship and redemptive work of Christ, and the consummation of God's Kingdom: Genesis 1:24–31; 2:4–9, 15–20; 3; 4:17–22; Job 38–42; Matthew 3; Mark 2; John 1:1–15; Philippians 2:5–11; Revelation 21:1–5.

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me about history from Scripture. When they focus on history beginning with God, I suggest that while that may be, our limitations as finite human beings prevent us from knowing or understanding anything about time before our own existence other than what God has revealed, which is very little. Some will emphasize the role of time and argue that history begins with time. That, too, is an arguable point, but I ask them if there would be history if God had stopped creating after the second day, or third, or fourth, or fifth? This helps students consider the relationship between time and history. Although many understandably draw a close connection between the two, I argue for more than just the unfolding of time. In addition to the creation existing in time with all of its seasons and lifecycles, I argue that change has to take place. But not only change, also modification, development, the making of new things—all activities connected to the presence of human beings.

Of course some students quickly acknowledge the role of human beings in history since they point to the fall of man as the beginning of history. For these students, history is the story of sin and redemption. God created man and woman as perfect, unfallen beings to carry out their existence in the pristine beauty of the Garden of Eden. When Eve was tempted, fell, and Adam immediately followed, the earth was cast into shadow and history began. That history is characterized by the struggle between Satan and Jesus Christ. The two bright spots in history are Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, and his Second Coming. One can hardly deny that history includes this very important theme. But, I challenge my students, what would have happened had Adam and Eve not fallen? Did God intend for his image bearers blissful ignorance surrounded forever by natural beauty?

In discussing these questions, and pushing them to Scripture for insight, I usually end this discussion by considering what the book of Revelation tells us about the redeemed and restored heaven and earth. In those final chapters of the Bible, I remind them, we are taught that at the center of God's consummated kingdom stands the New Jerusalem. Not a garden, but a city—the product of human cultural formative activity. Cities themselves are not bad, are not products of the fall, since one figures prominently and with God's blessing in his Kingdom. In other words, once sin and evil are removed from the scene, the artifacts of cultural development remain. Culture and society in and of themselves are not bad but only the direction in which they were developed. Redemption does not mean a return to the pristine and idyllic experience of the Garden of Eden, but a continuation of what God intended for his creation—its development and the emergence of culture—purified from the sin, corruption, and disobedience of thousands of years. History begins with the creation of human beings as God's image bearers and his command to develop the creation. I also point out to my students that their view of the future, whatever it is, affects their view of the past.<sup>7</sup>

I also use Scripture to help my students explore the relationship between a sovereign God and a morally responsible people, i.e. historical agents. Especially

<sup>7</sup>A useful essay reminding Christians of God's promises for his creation, and one I have often assigned for my students to read, is Brian Walsh, "Headed for Hope or Destruction?" *The Banner* 132 (23 June 1997): 16–18.

for students with Calvinist or Reformed leanings, the emphasis on cultural development can sometimes be troubling. Some students can be quite principled about this, reserving for God all agency, while others simply seem complacent, exhibiting a cavalier attitude about human responsibility while maintaining that nothing they choose to do or not to do makes any difference anyway since God is simply in control.<sup>8</sup> Assigning Scripture texts related to the “fatherless and the widows,” I seek to develop in students a more complex understanding of God’s sovereignty.<sup>9</sup> In reading these passages, they confront Scriptural truths which lay down expectations that the people of Israel must care for the fatherless and the widows, that God himself is the protector of the fatherless and the widows, and that the people of Israel are condemned and punished for neglecting to protect and care for them. In discussion, I ask students what could account for this seeming incongruousness and work towards the idea that through humans, as his image bearers, God works out his sovereign will for his creation.

The second way I develop a Biblically-oriented understanding of history is to employ opportunities for my students to explore faith commitments that help shape a people’s society. In Western Civilization, for example, I speak quite explicitly about the relationship between worldviews and societal structures. Although the course usually begins with the Renaissance, I spend a couple days discussing the Ancient and Medieval periods. In particular, we examine and compare ancient Mesopotamian and Egyptian societies as early examples of human cultural development. I emphasize the similarities such as rule by religious-political leaders based on their close relation to the gods, the hierarchical organization of social classes related to this relationship, reliance on agriculture, and so forth. Then I address the differences—how the Egyptian pharaoh ruled by virtue of being a god himself whereas the rulers of Mesopotamia claimed only the ability to intercede between the people and the gods. This significant difference in the two belief systems is in turn reflected by differences in their legal structures such as the fluidity of Egyptian law, dependent only upon the word of the Pharaoh, and the fixed nature of the law in Mesopotamian society (Hammurabi’s Code).

Using broad periodization and emphasizing the character of each era in the organization of my courses also aims at heightening students’ sensitivity to worldview and societal structures. This works particularly well in core survey courses where we must paint with broad strokes. So in a Western Civilization course beginning with the Renaissance, I usually spend a few days laying out the nature of the late medieval world and use that as a backdrop to explore throughout much of the rest of the class the emergence and development of the modern worldview. In the final weeks of the course, I conclude with a consideration of the decline of

<sup>8</sup>This fatalistic attitude appears to be similar to that held by Muslims. Referring to influential Abu’l Hasan al-Ash’ari of the ninth century, Bassam Michael Madany writes that “Fatalism is part and parcel of his theological system.” *The Bible and Islam*, available on-line, <http://www.safeplace.net/members/mer/BAI-II.3.html>, accessed 15 February 2003.

<sup>9</sup>Exodus 22:22–24; Deuteronomy 10:18–19, 14:28–29, 24:17–21, 26:12–13, 27:19; Job 22:9, 31:16–23; Psalms 10:14, 10:17–18, 68:4–6, 94:4–7, 146:9; Proverbs 23:10–11; Isaiah 1:16b–17, 1:23, 10:1–2; Jeremiah 7:5–7, 22:3; Hosea 14:3; Zechariah 7:10; Malachi 3:5; 1 Timothy 5:3–5.

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the modern perspective and the emergence of post-modernism. As we look together at the changes taking place in Western ideals, political structures, economic practices, social classes, family organization, and church-state relations, I refer time and again to the Medieval, the Modern, and the Post-Modern. Such an approach is obviously not designed to introduce students to the nuances of historical development, to the complexities of shifting ideals and practices, to the synthetic and inconsistent nature of individual's and societies' value systems. While I try to alert my students to these characteristics of historical development, I am more concerned that those who may take only one history class during their time in college will come away with a framework for future study and an appreciation for the broad commitments and practices of a particular culture. History, to our students, is often little more than a collection of information, a pile of facts to be encountered, remembered for a short time, and spewed back to us on papers and exams. Even the committed students do not often understand that "the past is a foreign country" which needs to be understood on its own terms.<sup>10</sup>

Another way to help students understand the role of faith commitments and worldviews is to assign novels—those written during the time period under discussion—as windows into the cultural outlook of historic peoples. For a long time, I assigned Thomas More's *Utopia*, Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*. Writing assignments related to these usually consisted of take-home exams in which students were required to analyze the novels in light of their understanding of the period and historical developments leading up to it. In the commitments of the authors, the concerns addressed in their works, or their literary approach, the authors represent the times in which they were a part and I ask students to examine the books in light of these questions and demonstrate how they were products of their respective societies. Students discover in the work of More the new horizons to which early humanist thought expanded and the encounter with the New World, in the work of Defoe both the Puritan understanding of a sovereign God on the one hand and the commitment to a rational understanding of economics and social order, and in Remarque's stream-of-consciousness recounting of the trenches of World War One, the loss of innocence and dying faith in progress.

Closely related to this kind of assignment is my use of documentary analysis to help students understand historical/cultural context (not necessarily chronology or cause and effect). In most of my classes, I have students read and analyze some primary sources. In Western Civilization, if not reading the novels cited above, they read excerpts of primary documents such as discourses by the philosophers, reflections by romanticists, manifestos by communists, diatribes by fascists, and so forth. In the American history survey, I have asked my students to read first-hand accounts of antebellum slavery or World War Two. In connection with these writing assignments, students are required to write short papers explaining how such documents reflected the values and structure of the society in which they were produced or demonstrate important changes affecting such values and struc-

<sup>10</sup>David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

tures. My goal in doing so is to have them search for the aspects of cultural outlook or societal structure as revealed therein.

Third, because I want my students to understand not only that history is the story of cultural development but that they, as image bearers of God, also exercise cultural formative power, I have developed assignments aimed at awakening this awareness. One way I have done this is by assigning as a final project a research essay requiring them to undertake research within their own family and to explore how the history of their family or some family member shared in the historical trends and patterns of the twentieth century. I find this assignment attractive because my own family's story has so much more meaning for me now that I have learned the context of historical development in which it took place. In the same way, many of my students have found this a very satisfying experience, in part because they become more intimately acquainted with their family history (and some family members), but also because for many of them, they finally realize that history was not just something in which other people were involved but that it affected and related to them personally. This assignment forces them to write themselves into history, to see that history is *their* story.

Another way in which I have encouraged students to see their call as image bearers with cultural formative power, is to ask them, as a cumulative final exam question in a core history class, to identify a challenge or problem facing contemporary society and to trace its historic roots. Like the previous one, this exercise helps students see that our study of the past is not disconnected from the present. I also believe that it forces them to face squarely the fact that the world they live in represents the products of their forebears' exercise of cultural formative power and that they too, in their own modest ways, exercise such power. Students write on a variety of issues: abortion, environmental concerns, the status of women, materialism.

My hope for them as they write these essays is that they will come to understand and appreciate that how society got to where it is today and where it will end up is not a matter of fortune, fate, or even the seemingly capricious actions of God, but the outworking of his sovereign will through his image bearers to develop his creation, redeem it from sin, and give glory to him. Notwithstanding human depravity and evil in the world, God's kingdom will come, his will will be done, and human beings will play a role, as he directs, in its consummation. History courses are not spectator sports, and neither is historical development. Studying history is to learn what it means to be God's image bearers; to discover how our choices, as we exercise cultural formative power, shape the society around us, and to consider how best to exercise that responsibility in the future.