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IMPLICATIONS OF THE CHRISTIAN

UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE

FOR THE WRITING AND TEACHING OF HISTORY

by

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Although many writers have discussed the problem of approaching history from a Christian point of view, most discussion has taken place only on the theoretical level. As a result, there has been little direct application to the actual teaching and writing of history. In an effort to move in the direction of practical application, this paper examines the assumptions and interpretations found in several historical works from the perspective of both philosophy of history and Christian theology. By focusing on the understanding of human nature, a key element in all three disciplines, the paper seeks to demonstrate that the often unspoken assumptions with which one begins the scholarly endeavors of teaching and writing shape the end result. Whether or not one begins with Christian assumptions, therefore, makes a difference in what one teaches and writes.

I

In his analysis of why historians disagree with one another, philosopher W.H. Walsh argues that differences in historical interpretation result from contrasting presuppositions. Included among these underlying moral and metaphysical beliefs is the historian's conception of human nature which shapes his understanding of history.[1] Essentially, Walsh is stating that despite refinement of research techniques and analysis of data, the discipline of history is unable to free itself from values. In fact, he suggests, differences of interpretation will continue to occur until historians attain agreement on a set of presuppositions, something not likely to be accomplished in the near future.[2]

What Walsh recognizes as the essentially personal nature of the historical enterprise has also been argued by eminent practicing historians. In 1933 Charles A. Beard, author of numerous works on American history, told the American Historical Association in his presidential adress: "Any selection and arrangement of facts pertaining to any large area of history . . . is controlled inexorably by the frame of reference in the mind of the selector and arranger. This frame of reference includes things deemed necessary, things deemed possible, and things deemed desirable."[3]

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[1] W.H. Walsh, Philosophy of History: An Introduction (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958), 100-101, 104-108.

[2] Ibid., 118.

[3] Charles A. Beard, "Written History as an Act of Faith," in The Historian and the Climate of Opinion, ed. Robert Allen Skotheim (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969), 19.

More recently, John Higham, another historian of the American experience, ventured further than Beard: "Discussion has not ordinarily gone beyond the point of recognizing that the historian's own values inevitably color his writing. At best, we have acknowledged this coloring as a mark of our humanity. . . . Historical method acquires a new dimension when we begin to speak of the criticism of life in addition to the technical criticism of documents. Then moral evaluation becomes a professional task, not just a predilection of our unprofessional selves."[4]

Admittedly, not all historians accept the view that presuppossitions or values will always shape the historical task. Those who have adopted the use of social science techniques, such as the annales school in France and Alan Bogue and Lee Benson in this country, hope through concentration on quantitative data informed by the findings of such fields as psychology and sociology to develop a history that minimizes or even escapes the influence of pre-existing values. Benson has gone so far as to say that "the main business of historians is to participate in the overall scholarly enterprise of discovering and developing general laws of human behavior."[5] But such a position is in the minority, even among social science adherents. After examining the impact of the concept of human nature underlying both humanistic and social science oriented history, Merle Curti concluded:

> Most of the historians, I suspect, supposed that that such views of human nature as they expressed or implied stemmed from the evidence. Few, it seems, were aware of the role of their own experience and assumptions in the interpretation of evidence, in attributing motives, or in constructing syntheses. Nevertheless, judgments of the motivation and behavior of historical figures and the larger generalizations, especially about national character, rested in part on these personal views and assumptions interacting with social context.[6]

For the historian who is also a Christian, recognition of this fact is of considerable significance, for it indicates the possibility that there really is such a thing as a "Christian history" or a "Christian approach to

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[4] John Higham, "The Historian as Moral Critic," in Ibid., 206-207. Further evidence that historians do make assumptions regarding human nature appears in Floyd W. Metson, The Idea of Man, (New York: Delacorte Press, 1976), 164-180.

[5] Lee Benson, "Quantification, Scientific History, and Scholarly Innovation," American Historical Association Newsletter, 4 (June, 1966), 12.

[6] Merle Curti, Human Nature in American Historical Thought (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1968), 108.

history." Such awareness is not new. As one surveys the essays in two anthologies[7] of twentieth-century Christian discussions of history, the point appears over and over. As the writers attempt to delineate the content of these Christian presuppositions, a recurring theme is that of human nature. George Marsden states that "the Christian historian, with such knowledge that man is capable of being both the crown and the scum of the universe, views man's cultural achievements in this perspective."[8] Similarly, C.T. McIntire calls for a Christian historiography that examines history "according to the sorts of insights and values provided by a Christian view of people, society, norms, history, the world and the whole of created reality."[9] Even Arthur Link, a historian generally skeptical of attempts to establish a Christian interpretation of history, suggests that "Biblical faith gives additional vital insight to the historian in its view of man."[10]

The recognition by secular historians that underlying presuppositions, including our understanding of human beings, shape the way we write and teach history, and the continuing emphasis by Christians that the Biblical view of human nature is an important aspect of the way we perceive history, behooves us to examine more closely the Christian understanding of humans and its relationship to historical study.

Such an endeavor, however, brings us up immediately against the problem that the Bible, the source of Christian understanding, contains no developed statement on human nature. Apart from an occasional isolated statement and a few passages in the writings of Paul, the Bible primarily portrays rather than analyzes human beings.[11] This necessitates that we turn to the systematic theologians who, using the Biblical materials, have developed a theological analysis of human nature.

II

[7] George Marsden and Frank Roberts, eds., A Christian View of History? (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975). C.T. McIntire, ed., God, History, and Historians: Modern Christian Views of History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).
[8] George M. Marsden, "A Christian Perspective for the Teaching of History," in Marsden and Roberts, 41.
[9] C.T. McIntire, "The Ongoing Task of Christian Historiography," in Marsden and Roberts, 53.
[10] Arthur S. Link, "The Historian's Vocation," in McIntire, 387.
[11] For a discussion of the Biblical materials see Reinhold Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, Vol. 1: Human Nature (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 151-166.

Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Lutheran theologian, has probably been the most influential twentieth-century figure in the Christian theology of human nature. Educated in the optimism of theological liberalism, he discovered while pastoring a working class church in Detroit after World War I that such hopefulness regarding people did not address the realities of the human situation. Reflecting on his own experience, he concluded that only the Bible presents people in all their complexity, in their depths as well as their heights. He therefore began rethinking his view of human nature, a process that reached its fullest expression in his Gifford lectures presented on the eve of World War II and published as The Nature and Destiny of Man.[12]

The significant fact about people, according to Niebuhr's interpretation, is that while they are creatures they are also spirits. By virtue of this creatureliness they are a part of the natural world, but by virtue of their spirit they are able to transcend the world, to observe themselves from without. Because they are part of nature they are finite, subject to limited knowledge and limited perspectives. Because they are also spirit they have freedom by which they become conscious of their very finiteness. But this finiteness and spirit are a unity, thus even in their freedom human beings are limited by their finitude.

This position of human beings as both in and above nature is the occasion for their sin. Through their spirit they realize what they ought to be and also the impossibility of attaining that goal because of their creatureliness. Thus they become anxious. If they would accept their finiteness and place their trust in God they would no longer be anxious. This they will not or cannot do. The alternative is rebellion against God, the attempt to make something finite into something ultimate. This is humankind's sin and is expressed in several ways.

Human beings are anxious. Sometimes they succeed in repressing or rationalizing their insecurity so that they are no longer conscious of it; nevertheless it is still deep in their subconscious. Often this anxiety is revealed in the pride of power. The ego forgets that it is finite, only a small portion of the whole of existence, and attempts to establish a security which is beyond the limits of human beings. The will-to-power involves the ego in injustice by attempting to establish control over the lives of others.

A second manifestation is intellectual pride. The self forgets that it is part and parcel of the temporal process, that it can never gain complete transcendence over history. Thus it claims for its knowledge a completeness which it can never attain. As with the will-to-power the self attempts, consciously or unconsciously, to obscure the fact that it has a taint of interest in whatever the matter may be.

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[12]   The following discussion is based on Ibid., 150-264.

Perhaps the most serious manifestations of humankind's sin are moral and spiritual pride in which its relative standards of values and morals are made absolute and in which the human's own freedom of spirit is substituted for God. Niebuhr believes religion to be the final battleground between God and humankind's self-esteem. People in their freedom are constantly being reminded of their own finiteness, but nevertheless they continue in their attempts to make the finite infinite.

Because people are constantly involved in this vain attempt to make themselves supreme, and because they are constantly defeated in their attempts as individuals, they seek to establish their infiniteness in the group. Group pride is just an extension of the pride and arrogance of the individual, but it is all the more dangerous because it claims a certain authority over individuals and makes unconditioned demands upon them. Through their involvement in the group, which is larger than the individual and thus offers a seeming security, human beings make their last effort to cast off their finitude. But it is forgotten that the group is also involved in the processes of history and is thereby only conditional in its claims.

This is the manner in which human beings express their sin. All people do this, but the extent to which it takes place is different in each individual. Thus all people are equally sinners but not all people are equally guilty. Sinners are held responsible for their sins but the actual consequences can be judged only by that ultimate standard of value that is beyond all human standards and lies only in God. It should also be recognized that the position of a person in the earthly sphere determines the temptation that comes to the individual. The pride of power, for instance, will tempt persons in the position of power more than it will tempt one of their subjects. But this is no excuse for succumbing to the sin, and the guilt will be judged accordingly.

Niebuhr's understanding of human nature, therefore, places human beings in the uncomfortable position of being inevitably sinners yet nevertheless responsible for their sins. This responsibility is revealed by the fact of their remorse or repentance. Both are expressions of human freedom, the former being freedom without faith and the latter freedom with faith. Ultimately, humankind's freedom lies in its ability to recognize its finiteness and to see in God both its limits and its fulfillment.

About the same time that Niebuhr was rethinking his conception of human nature, Emil Brunner, a continenetal theologian, was pursuing similar lines. Though some of Brunner's emphases differed from Niebuhr's, he also portrayed human beings as creatures continually attempting to put themselves in the place of God.

According to Brunner,[13] despite their sin human beings
retain something of the image of God. This means that their
very existence and knowledge is grounded in God, that they
define themselves through decisions regarding their
relationship to God. Humans, however, have chosen (are
choosing) to oppose their own origin in God, a choice that
has produced a conflict between their true nature and their
actual nature or, in other words, between what God created
them to be and what they have chosen to become.

This choice to declare their emancipation from God is
humanity's sin, involving defiance, arrogance, and a desire
for equality with God. These elements lie at the root of
all sin, sins of weakness as well as power, for humans are
anxious that they might lose something of themselves if they
rest in God. Therefore sin arises both out of a crisis of
confidence in God and an assertion of human autonomy. It
can occur only because human beings are created in the image
of God and thereby have the power to rebel against their
destiny.

The result is that while people retain the good that
comes from their origin, that good stands under the rule of
sin. Therefore all love and justice, for example, are
tainted witih egoism. Furthermore, this sin is not some
static state of being but is an act. Each sin is a fresh
decision against God which, because it rejects the real
order of things for which there is no substitute, creates a
situation that cannot be reversed. People as sinners cannot
become non-sinners; they have put themselves in a situation
from which they cannot escape.

Humankind's position as creatures made in the image of
God and as rebels against that God manifests itself in the
actual world. Elements that reveal their divine origin are
their search for truth, quest for the ideal through
technical and artistic means, speech, reason, the drive for
community, ethical thought, and the sense of the holy. None
of these aspects, Brunner argues, can be accounted for on a
naturalistic basis. But humanity's sinfulness, or
contradiction, also manifests itself in the ambiguous
results of the pursuit of knowledge, technology's
enslavement of human beings, intellectualism's destruction
of our humanity, the creation of alternative gods, the fear
or feeling of not being at home in the universe, and finally
the ambiguity of human history itself:

> Since history has been in existence this has been its
> theme: the contrast between individualism and
> collectivism, freedom and authority, independence and
> submission, the predatory man and the herd-man. Every
> movement which aims at helping the individual to attain
> his rights ends in libertinism and the dissoloution of
> community -- the Athenians knew quite well why they

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[13] The following disscussion is based on Emil Brunner, Man
in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology, tran. Olive Wyon
(Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), 82-211.

gave Socrates the cup of hemlock; and every reaction
which tries to assert community, authority, order, the
whole over against the caprice and the egoism of the
individual, ends in oppression, violence, and dull
stupidity. The movements for freedom, at first full of
vitality at the outset, and splendid in their leaders,
shatter community, and the movements for community, at
first full of a deep sense of responsibility and of
service, trample on the individual and his rights. It
is not the observation of the processes of nature, but
contemplation of this tragic element in human history,
which is the school of pessimism, of despair of man,
and of his destiny. [14]

A contemporary continental theologian, Wolfart
Pannenberg, places the issue in somewhat more "liberal"
terms. Like Niebuhr and Brunner, he finds sin to arise out
of an inherent conflict within the human consciousness. In
his terminology, this tension involves the opposition of
humankind's openness to the world and its egocentricity.
The openness propels human beings to move beyond themselves,
to engage in community with others, to control their
environment through technology, and ultimately to achieve
their destiny, community with God. But human ego often
interferes with human openness which causes people to draw
back within themselves. As Pannenberg puts it, "Left to
ourselves, given up to our ego, we would have to smother in
indolence or in arrogance, to consume ourselves in greed,
envy, avarice, and hatred, to sink into anxiety and
despair." [15] When the ego or selfhood, conflicts with
humanity's movement toward its destiny it becomes sinful.
"The image of the individual who takes himself or herself to
be the center of his or her life aptly describes the
structure of sin." [16] A harmony between humanity's openness
and its egocentricity can only be received from outside the
self, namely from God. This is achieved through Christ who
by the cross has reconciled people to God. This idea of
reconciliation through Christ, Pannenberg asserts,
"constitutes the distinctively Christian perspective of
human existence." [17]

This brief survey of the thought of three
representative Christian thinkers suggests that the
Christian view of human nature revolves around a tension
between positive and negative elements. The positive side,
what Brunner calls the image of God and Pannenberg
humanity's openness, is the source of human achievements in
intellectual, scientific, technological, artistic, ethical,

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[14] Ibid., 183-184.
[15] Wolfart Pannenbeg, What is Man? Contemporary
Anthropology in Theological Perspective, trans. Duane A.
Priebe (Philadfelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), 82-211.
[16] Wolfhart Pannenberg, Human Nature, Election, and History
(Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977), p. 26.
[17] Ibid., 14.

among other, spheres. Ultimately, whatever development and progress appears in history comes from this side of humankind. Pannenberg goes so far as to say that humanity's historicity is based on its inherent openness to God.[18] At the same time that humans achieve so much that we may call good, another aspect of their nature often distorts or interrupts these achievements by making them in one way or another subordinate to the self. Known as sin in the Christian tradition, it is the source of much of the suffering, destruction, and conflict in human existence. While they may call this picture "human nature," all three theologians emphasize that it is not some static mechanical structure but rather a dynamic forged anew through every human decision.

While Seventh-day Adventists have always conceived of human beings as sinners, they haave not often explored this concept theologically. Instead, Seventh-day Adventist interest in human nature has focused on the issue of dualism, the soul-body relationship.[19] Ellen White, however, described human beings as having "a perception of right, a desire for goodness" against which there struggles "an antagonistic power. . . . There is in his nature a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, he can not resist."[20] This viewpoint is developed theologically in Jack Provonsha's God Is With Us.[21] In his chapter "Strangers in a Garden," Provonsha uses language quite similar to that of the theologians previously examined. He interprets the story of original sin in heaven and in the garden of Eden in terms of attempts at self-sufficiency and independence from God. As he explains it, "The essence of both stories is that creatureliness is perceived by the creature as an inhibition or deprivation rather than the basis of meaningful existence, thus calling the trustworthiness of God into question."[22]

Provonsha distinguishes between the original sin, the attempt at self-sufficiency, and its consequences, the state of original sin into which each of us is born. This state

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[18] Pannenbereg, What is Man?, p. 141.
[19] See LeRoy Edwin Froom, The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers: The Conflict of the Ages Over the Nature and Destiny of Man, 2 Vols., (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assn, 1965-1966. Carsten Johnsen, Man--- The Indivisible: Totality Versus Disruption in the History of Western Thought (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1971). J.R. Zurcher, The Nature and Destiny of Man: Essay on the Problem of the Union of the Soul and the Body in Relation to the Christian Views of Man, trans. Mabel R. Bartlett (New York: Philosophical Library, 1969).
[20] Ellen G. White, Education (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1903), 29.
[21] Jack W. Provonsha, God Is With Us (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1974).
[22] Ibid., 116.

is one of isolation from the creator which is revealed in
feelings of alienation, estrangement, guilt, and
unworthiness. Human beings attempt to overcome these
feelings through a number of strategems or particular sins:
pride, false moralism, escape, and inhumanity. Passed from
generation to generation, this self-perpetuating wheel of
sin can be overcome only through God himself who through
grace restores the oneness lost in the Garden.

If what Provonsha has written can be accepted as
representative of Adventist theology, then his similarity--
despite perhaps some technical differences--to Niebuhr,
Bruner, anad Pannenberg gives us some confidence in taking
their perspective[23] as we think about the relationship
between the Christian concept of human nature and the work
of the historian. From a theoretical standpoint, it appears
that their suggestions regarding the consequences of human
goodness and sin in the outward life of people would, if
taken seriously, offer a distinctively Christian view of the
human past.

III

But it is one thing to look at a problem theoretically
and suggest a solution and another to indicate that the
theoretical solution has practical significance. Because
many Christian writers, myself included,[24] have argued that
the Christian view of human beings provides a unique
approach to history it remains, now that we have some
understanding of what that concept means, to demonstrate
whether this is indeed true.

As a test case, I am going to examine the way in which
several historians have looked at the abolitionist movement
in the nineteenth-century United States and then attempt to
determine whether the Christian view of human nature would
offer any distinctive approach. I have chosen abolitionism
because it strongly engages the emotions of those who study
it. If a historian's preconceptions regarding human nature
affect historical writing, it would seem that they would be
clearest in a subject that historians have found so
difficult to write about dispassionately.

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[23]   V. Norskov Olsen's Man, the Image of God: The Divine
Design, The Human Distortion (Washington, D.C.: Review and
Herald Publishing Assosciation, 1988) describes human nature
as paradoxical and quotes both Niebuhr and Brunner
approvingly. See 31-33, 65, 73, 119-120.
[24]   See "An Adventist Conception of History," Journal of
Adventist Education, 36 (October-November, 1973), 19-22.
"Providence and Earthly Affairs: the Christian and the Study
of History," Spectrum: A Quarterly Journal of the
Association of Adventist Forums, 7 (April, 1976), 2-6.
"Toward a Useable Philosophy of History," History Section,
North American Division Higher Education Conference, Andrews
University, August 17, 1976.

In approaching abolitionism historians have been concerned with two major questions: why abolitionists became abolitionists and the effects of their agitation. Both questions involve assumptions about human nature, for they are asking what motivates human beings and what determines their response to stimuli.

Historians of American abolitionism comprise two broad classes. One group, generally of the generation that did its writing from the 1930's to the 1950's, regards abolitionism as an unfortunate movement that through its fanatical attachment to immediate emancipation prevented a peaceful solution to the slavery problem. This position, as Thomas J. Pressly asserts regarding Avery O. Craven, assumes that "conditions in the 1850's were such, and the nature of human beings was such, that the individuals of that era should have remained calm and moderate."[25]

Within this framework a number of historians have regarded those involved in abolitionism as primarily self-seeking, though the specific nature of this personal interest in reform has received differing interpretations. One of the earliest scholars to take this stance toward the abolitionists was Gilbert H. Barnes. In The Antislavery Impulse he made a major contribution by pointing to the revivalistic origins of much of the antislavery movement. But he interpreted the role of the revival in somewhat negative terms. Barnes argued that because revivalistic conversion affected primarily young people it involved more a change of attitude than behavior. Young people then would take very negative attitudes against drinking or sexual immorality, for instance, and believe that their religious duty was fulfilled by denouncing these sins. Reform was unnecessary, for they were too young to have indulged in these practices. As Barnes put it, "Denunciation of evil came first; reform of the evil was incidental to that primary obligation."[26]

As a result of conversion a number of young people needed to denounce sin and slavery became an obvious target. Referring to the radical followers of William Lloyd Garrison, Barnes stated that the New England Anti-slavery Society "was primarily an association of independent abolitionists for mutual self-expression."[27] In the West Theodore Dwight Weld's mission, according to Barnes, was to denounce slavery as a sin.[28] The basis of the whole

[25] Thomas J. Pressly, Americans Interpret Their Civil War (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961; Reprint ed., New York: The Free Press, 1965), 318.

[26] Gilbert Hobbs Barnes, The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844 (Washington, D.C.: The American Historical Association, 1933; reprint ed., Gloucester, Mass.: Petere Smith, 1957), 25.

[27] Ibid., 89.

[28] Ibid., 79.

movement, in short, "was denunciation and not reform."[29] In Barnes's reading, therefore, religious excitement generated an emotionalism that found release in moral reproof of others but felt no need to pursue constructive reform.

Avery O. Craven similarly disliked the denunciation of slavery as sin--he called such language unreasonable[30]--but found its source in the economic and social change that the United States was passing through. Economic shifts in the northeast, particularly the rise of a new wealthy class, challenged the economic and social status of the common person. Reform movements arose "to unseat aristocrats and re-establish American democracy according to the Declaration of Independence. It was a clear-cut effort to apply Christianity to the American social order."[31] The fanaticism which Craven regarded as characteristic of abolitionism was "a normal product of social phenomena acting on certain types ofpersonality."[32] The protest against slavery, therefore, was an expression of the personal need for recognition.[33] To the slaveowner "were transferred resentments and fears born out of local conditions."[34] Abolitionism, Craven concluded, became the one great reform because it combined the moral and democratic appeal and coincided with sectional rivalry: "To the normal strength of sectional ignorance and distrust they added all the force of Calvinistic morality and American democracy and thereby surrounded every Northern interest and contention with holy sanction and reduced all opposition to abject depravity."[35]

More recently, David Donald and Stanley Elkins have explored variations on this self-interest theme. Donald, while recognizing that the decision to become an abolitionist was one of conscience,[36] sought for a deeper explanation of that decision. Making a social profile of abolitionist leaders, he concluded that they were the younger sons of the old social elite--ministers, lawyers, professors, etc.,--who had been bypassed in status by the new business entrepreneurs. Wanting to lead but having no followers these young people were a displaced class.[37] "Their appeal for reform," therefore, "was a strident call for their own class to re-exert its former social

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[29] Ibid., 101.
[30] Avery Craven, The Coming of the Civil War (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941; reprint ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 120.
[31] Ibid., 134.
[32] Ibid., 117.
[33] Ibid., 136.
[34] Ibid., 150.
[35] Ibid.
[36] David Donald, Lincoln Reconsidered: Essays on the Civil War Era (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 22.
[37] Ibid., 33.

dominance."[38] Victims of the status revolution, these reformers sought through emancipation of the Negro in the South to restore "the traditional values of their class at home. . . . Basically, abolitionism should be considered the anguished protest of an aggrieved class against a world they never made."[39]

Taking a more explicitly psychological approach, Stanley Elkins focused on the element of guilt, which he regarded as a necessary aspect of any reform. Pointing to the role that intellectuals played in abolitionism, he noted:

> A gnawing sense of responsibility for the ills of society at large appears to be experienced most readily in this country by groups relatively sheltered, by groups without connection and without clear and legitimate functions, . . . and by people who have seen older and honored standards transformed, modified, or thrown aside.[40]

Because the United States had no secular or religious institutions that could absorb and transform this guilt, Elkins said that

> it accumulates like static electricity; it becomes aggressive, unstable, hard to control, often de structive. Guilt may at this point be transformed into implacable moral aggression: hatred of both the sinner and the sin.[41] Such was the story of abolitionism which was more interested in spreading its gospel than in striking at slavery's vulnerable points.[42]

Each of these writers seems to have believed that the strident moralism of the abolitionists prevented a more reasonable approach to the problem of slavery, thereby bringing about the Civil War. Barnes, reflecting Ulrich Phillips's paternalistic view of slavery, implied that slavery had a function "as a system of control and protection of a barbaric race"[43] and stated that had a realistic program of reform been required of abolitionism "the entire movement would have soon ended."[44] The other writers were less apologetic about slavery but just as condemnatory of the abolitionist's methods. Craven regarded colonization as a "sane" method and looked for a "temperate policy" that respected property rights and pressed for liberty.[45] "Those who force the settlement of human

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[38] Ibid., 34.

[39] Ibid., 35-36.

[40] Stanley M. Elkins, Slavery: A Problem in American Institutional & Intellectual Life (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1959; reprint ed., New York: Grosset & Dunlap, The Universal Library, 1963), 161.

[41] Ibid.

[42] Ibid., 186.

[43] Barnes, 79.

[44] Ibid, 101.

[45] Craven, 119.

problems by war," he stated, "can expect only an
unsympathetic hearing from the future."[46] Donald much
preferred the moral but unmoralistic Lincoln to the
unreasoning abolitionists who were "unburdened with the
responsibilities of power, unaware of the large implications
of actions."[47] And Elkins certainly wished that America had
the proper institutional channels to make guilt effective in
dealing concretely with social problems.[48]

     Each of these individuals assumed that slavery was a
social problem that could be dealt with through the arts of
compromise so applicable to the issues of the tariff or
western lands. In so doing they minimized the moral element
and its emotional connotations, believing that slavery as a
problem could have been dealt with reasonably by reasonable
people. Commenting on Craven and others of his school,
Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. has summarized their ideas:

>   Revisionism has rested on the assumption that the non-
>   violent abolition of slavery was possible, such
>   abolition could conceivably have come about through
>   internal reform in the South; through economic
>   exhaustion of the slavery system in the South; or
>   through some government project for gradual and
>   compensated emancipation.[49]

     Another group of historians, however, has challenged
this view of the abolitionists as primarily a collection of
frustrated or guilt-ridden individuals seeking an outlet for
their tormented spirits. Rather, these historians, mainly
younger people writing in the 1960's and 1970's, have taken
seriously the need for a moral-based reform in the
nineteenth century and regard abolitionism as a movement
that ably met that social need.

     A long-time student of anti-slavery, Dwight L. Dumond,
apparently reacting to the effort by his colleagues to find
some ulterior motive for anti-slavery, believed that the
moral element is sufficient reason of itself to explain
abolition. After describing the role of westward migration,
revivalism, the communication of ideas, and political
democracy, he asked:

>   Need one look beyond these impulses for the
>   intellectual ferment of the three decades before the
>   Civil War? Need one wonder why an institution at war
>   with the natural rights of man, the cardinal principles
>   of the Christian faith, and the ideals of individual
>   freedom and social progress was swept away? Is it
>   necessary to labor over the source of opposition to the
>   extension of slavery beyond the Mississippi and to

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[46]   Ibid., 118.
[47]   Donald, 19.
[48]   Elkins, 206.
[49]   Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., "The Causes of the Civil War: A
Note on Historical Sentimentalism," Partisan Review, 16
(October, 1949), 973. See also Curti, 99-100.

colonization?   The answer, of course, is an emphatic
no![30]

Similarly, Russel B. Nye regarded the moral element as
an adequate explanation for abolitionism. In his study of
William Lloyd Garrison, the bete noire of the first group of
historians and an unfortunate character even to Dumond, Nye
pointed to the role of moral principle based on religious
faith. Garrison's sympathy for the underdog, in this
reading, had no more complicated origin than his hard and
lonely youth[31] and "the central fact of Garrison's life was
his religious faith."[32] This does not mean that Nye viewed
Garrison as some sort of demigod; he called the abolitionist
morally self-righteous and stated that he "lived in terms of
his future epitaph, and carried his own Westminster Abbey
about with him."[33] Nevertheless, Garrison was a man who
followed principle wherever it led him, regardless of the
consequences. He was a "true revolutionary
individualist."[34]

A third member of the older pro-abolitionist
historians, Louis Filler, did not spend much time analyzing
motives, but he too appears to have regarded the moral
element as the major stimulus to reform. Though recognizing
the significance of social change[35] he accorded to religion
the role of shaper, to a great degree, of this reform[36] and
combining it with democratic ideals explained the nature of
abolitionism: "The truest reformer, in the period 1830-
1860, included the Negro in his program because he thought
of him as a person rather than a cause."[37]

The more recent studies by younger scholars, while
looking favorably on the abolitionists, have taken a
somewhat more complex view. In a sense, what they have done
is combine the social and psychological factors pointed to
by Craven, Donald, and others with a recognition of the
power of moral principle and the implicit understanding that
humans are moral beings. James Stewart, for instanace, saw
provincial New England culture in a defensive position,
challenged by economic change, urbanization, democratic
politics, and mass communication. Within this context,
social discontent and political alienation found expression

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[30]   Dwight Lowell Dumond, Antislavery: The Crusade for
Freedom in America (Ann Arbor; University of Michigan Press,
1961; reprint ed., New York: W.W. Norton & Co., The Norton
Library, 1966), p. 157.
[31]   Russel B. Nye, William Lloyd Garrison and the
Humanitarian Reformers, The Library of American Biography
(Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1955), 19.
[32]   Ibid., 199.
[33]   Ibid., 202-204.
[34]   Ibid., 201.
[35]   Louis Filler, The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830-1860
(New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1960), 277.
[36]   Ibid., 30-32.
[37]   Ibid., 46.

through the conversion experience. The crusade against
slavery sprang from this "defensive setting."[58]

As there were social stimulants, so Stewartfound
psychological antecedents--self-confidence, a sense of
individuality, and "a deadly earnestness about moral
issues."[59] Events of the early 1830's, including slave
rebellions and the Nullification Crisis, moved these
individuals from gradualism to abolitionism.[60] Adoption of
immediatism was an act of self-liberation similar to
conversion:

> By freeing themselves from the shackles of gradualism,
> American abolitionists had finally triumphed over their
> feelings of selfishness, unworthiness,and alienation.
> Now they were morally fit to take God's side in the
> struggle against all the worldliness, license, cruelty,
> and selfishness that slaveowners had come to embody.[61]

Ronald G. Walters has also seen an interplay between
social and psychological factors that "push" the reformer
and the moral element that "pulls" him into action.
Abolitionists, he found, assumed a sense of responsibility
for national affairs, believed in the Democratic ideal of a
state free of coercion, stressed the individual conscience,
and accepted revivalistic millennialism.[62] For them
abolitionism "defined their role in society, whom they
associated with, what they surrounded themselves with, and--
for a few--how they died."[63] In Walters's view,
abolitionism became a church whose broad reform theology
offered direction to individual dissatisfactions and "a
sense of personal meaning and moral direction reformers no
longer found within the formal structure of American
religion."[64] In the end, Walters concluded, the antislavery
appeal involved a complex of meanings:

> Caught in social and economic processes they did not
> fully understand, they fashioned what they could from
> the materials of the time. Abolitionism became for
> them a cause in which to find personal meaning and
> direction; it provided solidarity and moral certainty
> no longer available from the state, the churches, or
> conventional social relationships, all fragmented and
> seemingly corrupted by fearsome and promising America.
> Slavery and the South, for the abolitionists, became
> reference points by which to organize a general, yet

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[58] James Brewer Stewart, _Holy Warriors: The Avolitionists_
and American Slavery, American Century Series (New York:
Hill and Wang, 1976), 34-36.
[59] Ibid., 39.
[60] Ibid., 41-43.
[61] Ibid., 43-44.
[62] Ronald G. Walters, _The Antislavery Appeal: American_
Abolitionism after 1830 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins
University Press, 1976), 18.
[63] Ibid., 33.
[64] Ibid., 52-53,

emotionally compelling pattern of perception; in
slavery and the South moral men and women could see the
negation of their own progress, their ideals, and their
hopes. And so reform always is: as much for the
reformer as for the reformed—an interplay between
widely-held values, social conditions, events, and the
mystery of personality. It is also, we should not
forget, a noble glimpse of the disparity between common
ideals and reality.[65]

Along with this more favorable view of abolitionist
motivations, these historians also took a positive position
regarding abolition's relationship to the Civil War. Just
as they recognized the role that moral principle played in
motivating abolitionists so they also realized,in the words
of Schlesinger, that "a society closed in the defense of
evil institutions thus creates moral differences far too
profound to be solved by compromise."[66] Thus Nye described
Garrison as a part of the moral cause of the war.[67] Filler
concluded that extremists were as necessary as moderates to
the ultimate success of abolition.[68] Walters found that
"the most irresponsible men were those who fanatically
refused to take the issue of slavery seriously, who ignored
it whenever possible and compromised it when it could not be
ignored."[69] Finally, Stewart concluded that a moderate
approach to slavery was impossible in Jacksonian America.[70]
In any case,

Without this romantic faith that God would put all
things right, abolitionists would have lacked the
incentive and creative stamina necessary for sustained
assaults against slavery. Moreover, by stressing
intuition as a sure guide to reality, abolitionists
made an unprecedented attempt to establish empathy with
the slave.[71]

IV

We now return to the original question with which we
began this survey ofhistorical opinion: Will the Christian
historian interpret history any differently because of his
understanding of human nature? That understanding, let us
be reminded, views humans as creatures created in the image

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[65] Ibid., 144-145.

[66] Schlesinger, 977.

[67] Nye, 206. Nye also notes that Garrison was a factor in
convincing the South that the approaching conflict was
irrepressable.

[68] Filler, 279.

[69] Walters, xvi. Walters also notes that abolitionism did
help create a cast of mind that accepted disruption of the
government, even war, as a means of ending the slave
institution.

[70] Stewart, 47.

[71] Ibid., 49.

of God who are at the same time sinners, beings who seek to live independently of that God. Thus even humanity's good is corrupted by humanity's ego.

Before going further, however, a few caveats must be offered. First, of those historians surveyed we do not know the degree to which they may have been directly influenced by Christianity; if there has been such influence we cannot expect that our determination of a Christian view will necessarily be distinct. Secondly, any view of history must be controlled by documentary evidence used in as objective a fashion as possible. We cannot here examine that evidence; but any suggestions of a distinctive Christian view must recognize that all interpretation is limited by its evidential basis. Thirdly, a Christian view is not necessarily a distinctive one. There are at least two reasons for this. On the one hand, ours is a culture shaped historically by Christian thinking. Therefore Christian understandings of human nature may well continue to pervade even the secular form our contemporary culture has taken. On the other hand, if the Christian view of human nature fits what has happened in human history, general revelation perhaps, then it should not be too surprising if secular students of that history have been driven to it, whether they recognize their understanding as Christian or not. Finally, I doubt if there is one "correct" Christian view of history, for the individual personality of the scholar and his position in society and time affect how he uses the Christian tradition and the materials of history.

With these limitations in mind we pursue the problem. It appears to me that a Christian would have difficulty accepting the arguments of abolitionism's critics. Their tendency to see spiritual and moral forces within human society as little more than unconscious devices for the anxieties of the self might fit the Christian view of human beings as sinners but holds little in common with human beings as the image of God. The Christian regards people as spiritual and moral beings and therefore takes seriously -- if the evidence warrants it--claims to spiritual and moral commitment. Furthermore, with a consciousness of the struggle between good and evil, the Christian historian finds it impossible to view an institution such as slavery with moral indifference. The Christian therefore would regard abolitionism as something more than a movement of self-seeking fanatics who brought on the nation an avoidable war. A Christian historian, I believe, would be an unlikely candidate for the school of Craven, Barnes, Donald, and Elkins.

On the other hand, the pro-abolitionist position of Dumond, Nye, and Filler, from a Christian standpoint probably takes too little recognition of the corrupting elements of self-righteousness, moral absolutism, and ego-fulfillment. At the same time that the Christian accepts spiritual and moral commitment as a reality, he recognizes that it is mixed with sin. As Brunner argued, all love and

justice are tainted with egoism. Abolitionism with its
schisms and sense of moral superiority offers plenty of
evidence to support such a view.

In short, the Christian views human beings as complex,
as creatures with intertwined elements of good and evil that
thread their way in varying degrees through the individual
decisions that make up human experience. The
interpretations of historians such as Walters and Stewart,
therefore, with their emphasis upon the mixed elements of
personal fulfillment and moral impulse appear to be close to
if not identical with a Christian understanding of man.

Rather than offering a pre-determined interpretation of
historical events, I believe, the Christian understanding of
man should sensitize the believing scholar to the multiple
components that may appear in any historical situation.
Judgment of what those components are, their relative
importance, and their interrelationship can legitimately be
made only after the historian has engaged in dialogue with
the evidence.

It might be objected that the foregoing statements are
simply descriptive of good history. But we must remember
that all of the books reviewed here have been praised by
significant portions of the historical community. What I am
suggesting is that Christian historians, sensitive to man's
complexity, should critically examine fashions of historical
interpretation, especially when they emphasize one-sided and
amoral viewpoints.

That the most recent books are those with which I am
most comfortable should not be too surprising for at least
one reason. As Gene Wise pointed out, the writings of
Reinhold Niebuhr have had great influence on post-World War
II historical writing in America.[72] He observed that The
Nature and Destiny of Man is "one of the fullest statements
available of basic counter-Progressive assumptions about the
dialectical nature of man."[73] Thus our own time is one in

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[72] Gene Wise, American Historical Explanation: A Strategy
for Grounded Inquiry (Homewood, IL.: The Dorsey Press,
1973), 270 ff. See also Robert Allen Skotheim, American
Intellectual Histories and Historians (Princeton: Princeton
University Press, 1966), 251-252 and Curti, 26-34.
Niebuhr"s primary influence occurred during the 1950's and
early 1960"s but he seems to have helped push historical
thinking in a direction from which it has not yet turned,
for the most part.
[73] Ibid., 272. This Christian understanding of man has
pervaded even the writing of an avowed atheist such as Perry
Miller who availed himself "of Niebuhr's conclusions without
pretending to share his basic and, to him, indispensable
premis." Perry Miller, "The Influence of Reinhold Niebuhr
(review of Pious and Secular America by Reinhold Niebuhr),"
The Reporter, 18 (May 1, 1958), 39-40. See also Curti, 31-
33.

which a Christian view of man is likely to appear in works
of history.

This view of man leads to a certain tone in historical
writing. Discussing the situation in which post-World War
II America found itself, Reinhold Niebuhr drew attention to
the element of tragedy. He wrote,

> Could there be a clearer tragic dilemma than that which
> faces our civilization? Though confident of its
> virtue, it must yet hold atomic bombs ready for use so
> as to prevent a possible world conflagration. It may
> actually make the conflict the more inevitable by this
> threat; and yet it cannot abandon the threat.
> Furthermore, if the conflict should break out, the non-
> Communist world would be in danger of destroying itself
> as a moral culture in the process of defending itself
> physically.[74]

In addition to tragedy, Niebuhr found in history even
stronger elements of irony. Whereas in tragedy men are not
wholly responsible for what they do, in irony they are fully
in control of their choices. Summarizing Niebuhr, Wise
states, irony "comes only because human beings make certain
kinds of choices in essentially open circumstances. When
intention here fails to produce the desired consequence,
then it is _people_ who must bear the burden of failure."[75]

Did not nineteenth-century abolitionists find
themselves in a situation holding both of these elements?
Remaining silent they would have allowed slavery to continue
to poison the soul of the nation. Yet in opposing it,
abolitionists risked the unity of the nation they sought to
purify. The largely unintended war that culminated their
efforts, bringing their goal of emacipation to fruition,
left its own bitter legacy to be worked out and through in
succeeding decades. The Christian historian will always
write and teach, for underlying assumptions affect the
teaching as well as the writing of history, with a sense of
these tragic and ironic elements, this awareness that the
"paradoxical relation between the possible and theimpossible
in history proves that the frame of history is wider than
the nature-time in which it is grounded."[76]

But such an observation leads us to the conclusion that
the Christian view of history will always become clearest
when history's meaning is conceived in its totality. At
such a point it becomes theology and that leads us back to
where we began this essay: that theology--indeed faith --
contains the basic assumptions or world view with which the
Christian approaches historical study.

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[74] Reinhold Niebuhr, _The Irony of American History_ (New
York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 1-2.

[75] Wise, 298.

[76] Niebuhr, _Irony of American History_, 144.