

Will Christianity Outlive Its Critics?

The cities of Sodom and Gomorrah God burned to ashes, and condemned them to total destruction, making them an object-lesson for godless men in future days. But he rescued Lot, who was a good man, shocked by the dissolute habits of the lawless society in which he lived; day after day every sight, every sound of their evil courses tortured that good man's heart. Thus our Lord is well able to rescue the godly out of trials, and to reserve the wicked under punishment until the day of judgement. —2 Peter 2:6–9

NO WORLD RELIGION has been more abused and assailed by foes within and without than has Christianity. Yet it is the first of the great world faiths to attain a global presence and enlists almost a billion adherents even in the present generation.

But is its future secure?

Do we speak only of a cultural oddity when, two decades after Mao, we note that over 10 million Christians now populate mainland China in contrast to 700,000 before brutal Red Guards desecrated churches and banned Bibles? Or that after two generations of communist virulence, evangelical Christianity in eastern Europe is today more vigorous than ever? Or that churches in Kenya are multiplying so quickly that not enough pastors can be found to lead new congregations? Or that in Korea 25 percent of its inhabitants eagerly declare themselves Christian?

Do such phenomena reflect merely a momentary culture-swing or culture-lag? Must we view evangelical resurgence even in the United States within a larger philosophical and historical framework that destines biblical theism to inevitable obsolescence?

I

EARLY IN THIS century religious modernism trumpeted worldwide its confident verdict

that evangelical orthodoxy represents but a kind of religious senility that portends early death.

To be sure, modernism found in the Bible much that surpasses rival ethico-religious outlooks. It tributed Jesus of Nazareth, for example, as the supreme moral example of personal trust in a providential Father's care for his creatures.

Modernism nonetheless repudiated miraculous theism on the premise that scientific laboratory observation and duplication comprise the superlative way of knowing. "Once-for-all" facets of Christian confession—special revelation, singular incarnation, Jesus' virgin birth, substitutionary atonement, and bodily resurrection—it therefore disavowed as pious myth. It welcomed Christianity only as the "highest" expression of "religion-in-general"; it commended evangelical regeneration only for its ability to remedy personality conflicts through trustful dependence on the Father.

Western universities and mainline seminaries eagerly joined modernism's defection from evangelical orthodoxy. Viewing miraculous theism as now outdated, they consolidated modernist bureaucracies to exclude so-called "fundamentalist" scholars from faculty posts. They wrested denominational institutions from their original doctrines and purposes and

deployed evangelical endowments to promote new teachings and goals that the founders would surely have disapproved.

No religion in history has had to contend—and yet has survived stronger than ever—with the phenomenon of scholars who dismissed central elements of Christianity as but legend and myth, while at the same time professing to speak as its friends. In many cases such revisionist critics drew salaries from schools that were originally established to defend the credibility of inherited core-beliefs.

In due course, confidence in philosophical reasoning came to eclipse faith in transcendent divine revelation. Speculative philosophy of religion displaced revealed theology. The case for theism was argued not on the basis of divine disclosure but through a search for God in the “not-god,” that is, in nature, history, and conscience.

Students of philosophy and of history should not have been surprised by modernism's consequent collapse. Optimistic emphasis on the competence of reason and on man's essential goodness and the inevitability of progress could not be reconciled either with the course of history (most notably World War II) or with the human condition (especially Freudian analysis and the fury of the Nazis). Nor, as Karl Barth and his neo-orthodox followers emphasized, could modernism be reconciled with the Bible's insistent witness to once-for-all revelation grounded in the self-disclosing God. Nor, as religious humanists rightly noted, could it be dignified as philosophically consistent: By the empirical scientific criterion that it espoused, modernism was unable to validate its own confidence that trust in Jesus is incomparably integrative of an internally discordant self. Other religions offered supernatural and nonsupernatural alternatives. And evangelical Christians emphasized that psychological integration, however important, is not basically what Christian theism is about.

First in Europe and then in America neo-orthodoxy brought new excitement. Theologically pluralistic seminaries wel-

comed its doctrinal components: rejection of objective scriptural authority, and insistence on the absolute uniqueness of non-propositional redemptive revelation and on an internal volitional response to dynamic divine confrontation. The view attracted even backsliding evangelical seminarians who under incessant critical fire wearied in defending the Bible. But however much neo-orthodoxy penetrated denominational seminaries and religious colleges, its impact on secular university campuses was negligible except in religion departments; here it was customary while largely excluding evangelical orthodoxy to welcome almost any and every novelty. As a formative cultural influence, however, neo-orthodoxy proved to be less significant than modernism.

II

SECULAR HUMANISM is what reaped the fruit of modernism's collapse and then of neo-orthodoxy's decline. More than any alternative, radical humanism shaped the worldview impact of public schools, colleges, and universities upon the younger generation. Belief in God, while not at first disallowed or caricatured, was considered nonetheless a merely private option devoid of public significance. The campus curriculum allowed God no role in science, in history, or in much else. God emerged now and then in literature classes where the genre of fiction could easily contain him. Secular humanism infused university learning in the West: All reality is reducible to impersonal processes and quantum events; existence is time-bound and perishable; theological, philosophical, and moral principles are culture-relative and subject to revision; human beings autonomously and creatively impose whatever values history and the cosmos acquire.

Despite its supposedly thoroughgoing empirical bent, secular humanism nonetheless also insisted on an agenda of social ethics—most notably, human equality and rights, ecological concerns, and, in many cases, concern also for the poor (usually to

be expressed in a political response). The fact remains, however, that in a context of comprehensive evolution and change fixed social imperatives are fictions. More consistent naturalists therefore considered such social principles as but an emotional compromise of philosophical consistency. Evangelical Christians on the other hand recognized them as fragments of a denigrated Judaeo-Christian inheritance; some declared them to be an unwitting deference to the created *imago Dei* which, despite the Adamic Fall, survives and will survive in all human experience.

Humanism's current decline into raw naturalism manifests itself in growing indifference to and acquiescence in barbaric patterns of modern thought and existence. Human life is increasingly regarded as animal flesh to be exploited for sexual pleasure, private greed, or political gain. Abortion in the United States of 10 million fetuses in a single decade is but one of many indications of today's infatuation with the pagan god Eros and a skewed morality. Major universities, proud of scientific learning, outrun the ethical implications of many of their laboratory achievements. The sense of the unique value and meaning of human existence continues to decline; melancholy and despair characterize much of life.

III

WHILE THE CONFLICT between Christianity and the major non-Christian religions remains highly significant in Asia and Africa, the Western world's spiritual struggle now rages mainly between Christian theism and deteriorating humanism or raw naturalism. In the decisive European and Anglo-American cultural centers it is humanism that most influentially conditions education, the mass media, and politics. Evaporating from the cultural context are many symbols and supports that previously made Christian faith seem at least outwardly acceptable and credible even in a society governed by hostile influences. The principle of church-state separation is now widely interpreted and invoked in the

United States to discourage any overt Christian presence in public education and in the public square. Despite an evangelical resurgence that now enlists some 66 million professing "born again" believers, the mass media, educational areas, and political sphere for the most part reflect radical humanist premises.

However much ignored or disparaged in the classroom, it was biblical theism that nonetheless stimulated dynamic parachurch student movements like Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship, Navigators, Campus Crusade for Christ, Young Life, and International Students. And in professorial philosophical circles, where a positivist analytic temper long held sway, cognitively competent theists began identifying with the increasingly influential Society of Christian Philosophers.

It is true, of course, that many biblical critics still pursue negative theories. But a growing number of scholars now reject as futile the unsuccessful search behind the Bible for supposedly more ancient and more reliable manuscripts that canonical writers allegedly revised by adding legendary and mythical flourishes to promote miraculous Hebrew-Christian theism. Meanwhile evangelical scholars have increasingly given themselves to writing major commentaries and other texts that reflect the rational strength of biblical claims. Christian schools—day schools, colleges, and seminaries—are drawing ever larger enrollments and channel a steady stream of well-equipped candidates into expanding church ministries.

The face of the evangelical is not without disconcerting features, however; entrepreneurial rivalry, commercial opportunism, ministerial scandals of one kind or another are but some of its warts and wrinkles. Although it lives on moral levels significantly above those of secular society, and remains both an evangelistic lifeline and a fast support system for global missionary effort with evangelist Billy Graham as its popular voice, the American evangelical movement stands in need of spiritual and ethical renewal.

Evangelicals have forfeited major

opportunities—not least of all the establishment of a quality university in a major metropolitan center. What they lost in intellectual cohesion was by many leaders thought to be outweighed by their numerical strength and diversity. The eventual cost of such a trade-off may yet remain to be seen and may be higher than appears on the surface. Not all, perhaps few, evangelical colleges fulfill their long-declared promise to so teach the Christian world-life view that it integrates all the disciplines of learning. Business and economics are displacing philosophy and other collegiate humanities courses as leading majors. Some seminaries carry an evangelical label but hesitate to affirm comprehensive biblical truthfulness and a stable epistemic base.

Evangelicalism's growing interest in political affairs was activated and channeled into the Religious Right by Jerry Falwell who initially sought to rechristianize or to christianize America by legislative change. A highly vocal but much smaller group, the Christian Reconstructionist, who consider democracy heretical, has tried to co-opt evangelicals' political involvement to affirm Mosaic legislation as the divinely intended framework for all civil government. Community confrontation of established political channels outran conversation and cooperation. Such confrontation tended to insert aspiring religious leaders between voters and their elected representatives, and accommodated Pat Robertson's run as a presidential candidate.

In the absence of a comprehensive public philosophy, evangelicals concentrated mainly on special issues and tended to favor an agenda that lent itself to financial appeals. Despite the expenditure of many millions of dollars, efforts by the Religious Right did not achieve passage of a single piece of preferred legislation, nor did they solidify political power.

The present vacuum in civic life is now being probed by those who see in it a propitious opportunity for Catholic initiative and Catholic-Evangelical cooperation in both public affairs and spiritual

endeavor. In distinguishing rhetoric appropriate to a pluralistic republic from that suitable to particular religions, this proposal relies mainly on the assumptions of natural law theory. Its ready confusion of general revelation and common grace with natural law poses problems for Reformed evangelicals, as does the prospect of a renewed Roman Catholic religious-political force.

As recently as January, 1989, in a statement of concern presented at the Global Consultation in Singapore, on World Evangelization by AD 2000 and Beyond (GCOWE 2000), Latin American participants protested that Roman Catholicism remains "the most fierce opponent to all evangelistic efforts on our part." Lausanne II, held in Manila less than six months later, was ambivalent; it welcomed Catholic participation from countries where evangelical leaders approved. Latin American Christianity, American Catholics point out, should not be considered normative. But, respond uneasy evangelicals, it provides relevant evidence nonetheless of what can and does happen when Catholicism controls the political scene.

For all their seeming resurgence, evangelicals achieved only limited gains in public education, the mass media, and politics; their leaders accordingly welcomed informal alliances with Catholic forces to promote shared cultural and political objectives. The inclusivist Religious Right, in which conservative Catholics actively participated, has placed moral values prominently on the agenda of public debate. Catholic leadership largely shaped the stance of pro-life concerns. Politically conservative Jews, Catholics, and ecumenical Protestants, evangelicals among them, effectively promoted compatible ends through such agencies as Ethics and Public Policy Center and the Institute on Religion and Democracy. At a time of rampant ethical relativity and religious skepticism, their collective emphasis on common moral and religious concerns gained noteworthy attention. A program of co-belligerency for limited

objectives might conceivably emerge from an Evangelical-Catholic alliance enlisting not only Protestant ecumenists interested in traditional values but also Jews and Mormons—and for certain ends perhaps even some secular humanists. Yet the danger of politicizing evangelical Christianity itself remains, particularly if, beyond co-belligerency, projection of a Christian political party should become viable in the future.

IV

DURING A PRIVILEGED meeting of scholars that included historians, political scientists, and social scientists an unscheduled discussion recently arose as to the present condition of America. In a momentary reference, one participant thought my recent *Twilight of a Great Civilization* (1988) to be too pessimistic, despite its emphasis that twilight is not yet midnight. Another observed that irregular culture-swings may suggest that a nation is declining when in fact it is actually on the threshold of unprecedented advance. Several espoused the confident evolutionary premise that, in the end, change means progress.

The conversation soon shifted to a regard for knowledge as the chief factor in forestalling the decline of any political world-power. Knowledge, it was stressed, gives decision-makers more leverage and makes for less gullibility. Technical progress, moreover, can contribute to security; America, for example, can now send entire documents to various European allies instantaneously and simultaneously.

Rebuttal was swiftly underway. Conventional wisdom may reflect only a political fad, it was said. Yes, knowledge is important, but how do we know what knowledge is relevant? Much information that might be helpful is secret or is available only to privileged persons. Mere bits of data, moreover, are not necessarily analytic knowledge. What's more, policy-making can and sometimes does override both intelligence and historical memory. Our inferences are not infallible; sheer

luck may at times be as important as other factors.

Worse yet, the dialogue continued, our predictions are repeatedly overtaken by surprises. Not even historians can forecast the future. The only thing that is assuredly predictable, one observer commented, is that our predictions are subject to surprise. We cannot even assuredly foresee what parts of the world will be important a generation hence. None of the self-styled futurists predicted the world petrol crisis. A generation ago who foresaw the remarkable tenacity of the North Vietnamese; the Iranian shah's overthrow; Marcos's exile from the Philippines; Lech Walensa's successful defiance of Polish communist leaders; a key role in world affairs for Islamic Shi'ites; Soviet *glasnost* and *perestroika*; or Soviet troop withdrawal from Afghanistan in disgrace? No intelligence officer foresaw even a year in advance the Eastern European repudiation of communist tyranny and of socialist economics, and the collapse of long-standing East-West barricades. Who foresaw the emergence in Moscow of a protest movement of 300,000 persons—the largest demonstration in 70 years in Soviet Russia—demanding an end to the communist political monopoly? Who can now foretell the PLO's eventual role in Israel? What of a Sino-Soviet split or alliance? Call our mega-projections what we will, sooner or later they run into trouble.

Discussion next turned to moral and religious matters, even if briefly. Many contemporary scholars refer to an ethico-religious dimension of history, but avoid sustained discussion of it, much as the Victorian era avoided open talk of sex. Despite the importance of knowledge, volunteered a learned historian, education *per se* is no sure panacea; a more highly educated communist leadership is not necessarily "a good thing." Problems of morality are not susceptible of simple solution either by knowledge or by political power. No amount of even ideal knowledge will assure its proper appropriation. To be sure, the Greek sages optimistically believed that if a person knows the truth, he

will do it. They failed, however, to consider the unregeneracy of the human will, humanity's resistance to light, and the need of a regeneration of character.

Despite the Eastern European clamor for Western-style freedom and democracy and private property, for example, three facts become increasingly clear. One is that the West has not deeply appropriated the truths and values that can spare either the East or the West from disillusion; already East Germany is concerned about the vulnerability to AIDS that West Berlin poses. Another is that any revolution, peaceful or not, runs high risks if it moves toward a formless future; the loss of totalitarian tyranny can yield to increasing anxiety, fear and chaos unless shared alternatives are carefully charted in advance. Here Poland stands on a far firmer footing than Romania, for example. A third is that Eastern Europeans who yearned and worked for religious freedom (in contrast to those who accommodated communist atheism) have been the bearers of the moral and spiritual fortunes that undergird a durable democracy; for them, religious freedom implied not simply freedom from God, but freedom for God (that is, the right to serve Him in good conscience).

Yet moral and religious developments, it was noted, are no less difficult to foresee than are other developments. What social scientist two generations ago would have foreseen the collapse of theological modernism or of pluralistic ecumenism and have predicted the resurgence of evangelical orthodoxy? What historian would a generation ago have foreseen either the rise of the Religious Left in Latin America or of the Religious Right in the United States?

Whether economists, historians, statesmen, or futurists, the most far-sighted scholars, it would appear, somehow turn out after all to be near-sighted. While we can assuredly study conditions and trends, engage in research, evaluate careful inquiry for its adequacy, weigh anticipated results, explore new possibilities

that illumine empirical data, we can neither decisively predict the future nor demonstrate cause-effect relationships. Factors are at work in history and society that are not comprehensible by empirical method.

V

THE FOREGOING EXCHANGE set me thinking about what the classic ancient philosophers and the early Christian apostles might have said about such concerns. Even the pagan philosophers Plato and Aristotle identified as life's most important intellectual priority what is now least and perhaps often only grudgingly mentioned, namely, the theologico-ethical dimension. For the Graeco-Roman idealists no less than for the Hebrew prophets and Christian apostles the sense and value of human life and the very possibility of a cohesive culture turned upon the logical priority of the eternal supernatural world to which humanity stands in a privileged relationship. Beyond that, what distinguished Judaism and Christianity—among other things—was their shared insistence on the transcendent Creator-God who takes a self-disclosing initiative in history, and their precision in expounding the nature and work and word of God. The Apostles' Creed is astonishingly more specific about supernatural realities than the metaphysics of Plato's *Republic*.

One plank in apostolic preaching strikes a dramatic point of contact with the current scholarly discussion of prediction and surprise, and the admission that our finite projections about the future are constantly vulnerable to sudden overthrow. An insistent emphasis of the Bible is that God alone decides and knows the far future, and that human beings know it only to the extent that God reveals it. Over and against the notion that history is open-ended, and in line with the teaching of Jesus, the early Christians expected no continuing sequence of historical upward and downward swings or repetitive cycles, but stressed instead a linear view and an approaching climax and termination of

history. The final end of history, moreover, would come suddenly and unexpectedly, in striking contrast to conventional wisdom and general human prediction. "The day of the Lord," writes the Apostle Paul, "will come like a thief in the night" (1 Thess. 5:2, NIV). The Apostle Peter reiterates the warning: "In the last days scoffers . . . will say, . . . 'Ever since our fathers died everything goes on as it has since the beginning. . . .' But the day of the Lord will come like a thief" (2 Pet. 3:3ff., NIV).

New Testament Christianity also denied that the terminus of history will have the character of evolutionary utopia; what will be the case, rather, is that divine moral judgment will differentiate two strands of humanity and mark them for contrasting destinies.

In keeping with the incarnate and risen Lord's teaching, the early church centered the end-time in the personal return or second coming of Christ. To be sure, a number of current critical scholars called the Jesus Seminar hold that Jesus predicted neither an end to earthly history nor his personal return. But first-century Christian credal commitments do not derive from a majority vote of preselected skeptical modern scholars. There is no assurance, in fact, that critics comprising the Jesus Seminar would fully endorse doctrines that its own majority vote would attribute to him.

The Bible insists that God is the sovereign judge of history and that he alone will decide just when history has run its course and when divine judgment is to fall. Although comprehensive judgment will occur only at the end of all ends, Christianity insists also that the living God is even now judging the nations. God is saying something about present human history through the well-documented circumstance that every civilization, however pretentious, seems to move toward ruin and rubble.

More and more Western scholars concede that empirical observation has limits. They admit the possibility and even likeli-

hood of surprise through unexpected inversion of our inferences from past and present experience. Revision can suddenly become the order of the day. But they consider one surprise inadmissible, namely, a final termination of human history in divine moral judgment. Now and then the contemporary West may indeed assign ethical and spiritual forces some role in the turning-times of history. But—in deference to its present-day naturalistic stance—it considers inadmissible any ultimately decisive role for theologico-moral referents. Secular scholars concede their failure to forecast that Hitler, Stalin, and Mao would turn half the earth upside down. But they are self-assured that Jesus Christ will not finally and permanently turn it right side up.

VI

THE SECULAR WEST has relinquished universally valid religious truth, and in so doing it also unwittingly forfeits all objective truth and good. Not only does it thereby nominate itself as a prime candidate for the final judgment that Hebrew-Christian revelational religion affirms, but also it deprives itself of the regenerative and redemptive powers of presently available grace. In addition, it disqualifies itself from a determinative role in the inter-religious dialogue of our lifetime.

The irony of this situation is exposed by recent international furor over Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses* (1989) in which he allegedly reflected adversely on the purity of Muhammad and on his mission as Allah's exclusive prophet. The Iranian Ayatolla Ruholla Khomeini consequently called for Islamic murder of Rushdie on the ground of blasphemy. Whatever might be said about the propriety or impropriety of that religious perception, Shi'ite fundamentalists voiced a basic concern over religious truth, and were unashamed to do so. Some of the West's political spokesmen may have private faith, but they consider it inappropriate to confess Christ before men in any way that

exerts significant claims in the public arena.

The great nations of the West challenged Khomeini's thunderbolts against freedom of expression. They deplored the appeal for violence as an inappropriate response to criticism of Islamic theology. But no Western leader invoked freedom of expression, let alone religious liberty, to tribute an alternative to Muslim claims. The point is not that the political arena is the proper forum for the adjudication of metaphysical disputes. It is rather that valid theological claims are not irrelevant to the political arena as even Pontius Pilate was unexpectedly reminded on Resurrection morning.

It was indeed morally imperative that the freedom issue be raised—freedom both of expression and of religious preference. This was particularly important because Muslims have repeatedly sought to tone down United Nations religious freedom guarantees and because radical Koranic religion frequently relies on violence to extend its power. Islamic clerics still threaten Muslim converts to Christianity with death or harm. The freedom issue is therefore undeniably of crucial importance.

But if truth is irrelevant then not even religious freedom remains a compelling cognitive consideration. Religious liberty is not a self-validating principle. It is implicit in the Christian view that no significance attaches to a coerced religious commitment and in the view that civil government is not to arbitrate theological differences.

With an eye on Soviet ambitions in the oil-rich Persian Gulf, the West has routinely cultivated Sunni Muslim countries—they comprise 90 percent of Islam—especially Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Several of these nations—not least of all Saudi Arabia and Turkey—have a long history of religious restriction and repression. Even Afghanistan, where American aid to resistance forces hastened the withdrawal of Soviet troops, currently seems to provide

Muslim Afghans with a fresh opportunity to persecute ex-Muslim Christians.

When the 46-member Islamic Conference Organization met in Saudi Arabia last year, it joined in condemning Rushdie for blasphemy and called for a bookstore boycott, although it halted short of encouraging the Khomeini-sponsored murder of Rushdie. But sensitivity to world image momentarily got the better of truth-concerns when, in opening the Islam conference, Saudi Arabia's King Fahd referred pointedly to "our tolerant religion" and when an associate identified "respect for each other's beliefs" as a cornerstone of international relationships. Yet most Muslim governments in attendance, as *The Economist* of London commented, have "no particular tender concern for the principle of freedom of expression"; many, in fact, scorn it as license.

The main fact is that, contrary to the secular West, the Islamic world refuses to forego universal religious truth-claims. It insists, moreover, not just on some vague "truth" of "religion-in-general" but on the comprehensively valid truth of Koranic religion. The West's intellectual establishment has neither mind nor heart for ultimate religious truth; its intellectual elite has given up on universally valid truth in religion. Its loss of God is in fact the loss of abiding good and enduring truth. The most relevant observation mustered by humanists concerning Rushdie's book is that tolerance ought to preclude insulting people's religious beliefs.

The point is not that government officials should use their political platform to promote religious preferences (that was Khomeini's basic error as an official spokesman for Muslim religion), or that they should applaud violence or counter-violence in response to blasphemy.

But nobody in the West prominent either in the academic world, in the media world, or in the corporate world—let alone the political arena—ventured to say: "We are as concerned for the honor of Christianity as Khomeini is for the honor of Islam; indeed, we are as concerned and

even more concerned for the messianity of Jesus Christ than he is for the singular role of Muhammad. But we reflect that honor by preserving religious freedom rather than by coercing religious confession, and we extend the claims of Christianity not by violence but by love and justice."

Western political leaders who have not defaulted to humanism might well have maintained a discreet silence about religious truth because of the wholly proper conviction that even Christians should not use the power of the sword to promote and inculcate religious truth. But publishers, merchants, and academicians were not under such restriction; there was no principal need for silence about the significance of Jesus Christ. In actuality, their verbal protest against Khomeini seemed to be predicated on the notion that any claim to possess religious truth is arrogant. Their silence about Christ in a radically humanistic age is an invitation to those who affirm religious truth—but who may misidentify it—to try to fill an abysmal vacuum.

A society that abandons transcendent truth and right has less stability than a society that insists on them, even if the validity of this or that particular religious claim may be in high debate. A world that seriously wrestles the Hebrew view, and the Christian view, and the Muslim view, in so doing refuses to nullify the ultimate concerns. Whether Yahweh is merely an ancient critical reconstruction, whether Jesus of Nazareth is the Christ, and whether Muhammad is the Prophet are questions avoided today because of secular humanism's reduction of religious truth merely to internal psychological significance, and no less because of radical Islam's intolerance of rational consistency as a test of religious truth, and charismatic Protestantism's elevation of experience over cognitive considerations.

Every world religion has its unique interpretation of the facts of existence, its own way of accounting for nature and history, its own explanation of man and of final outcomes. Buddhists espouse succes-

sively appearing and disappearing world-ages. The Hindu theory of reincarnation assigns many successive bodies to the one soul. Stoics postulated world-cycles which, when reabsorbed into primal fire, then reduplicated whatever had gone before. Today some frontier philosophers of science speculate anew about comprehensive cosmic chaos. Secular humanism reduces all views (except its own) to culture-conditioned preference.

Evangelical Christianity insists that religious liberty is the overarching human freedom that simultaneously shelters all other legitimate liberties. It bonds religious liberty confidently with the universal truth-claim of biblical Christianity. Under that canopy evangelical orthodoxy has often numerically outpaced officially established religion and a state church. It has no need of a politically-entrenched ecclesiasticism, be it a Jewish state (Israel), a Shi'ite state (Iran), or a Sunni state (Saudi Arabia).

VII

THE GOD of the Bible is the self-declared Sovereign Creator and the God of truth. He is more than simply truthful in his deeds and judgments; he is the very ground of truth. All truth is God's truth. Truth is what God thinks. In this sense, all truth is revelatory truth. All treasures of wisdom and knowledge, the Apostle Paul writes, are hidden in Christ, the eternal Logos.

Christianity resists the modern reconceptualization of truth as merely the product of perpetually revisable scientific empiricism. It does not dispute a proper role for tentative human inferences based on limited experiential data, but it clearly distinguishes between opinion, theory and truth. Christianity does not promote spiritual truth as a truth different in kind from what permanently valid truth means elsewhere. Its metaphysical and moral affirmations belong to the same logical universe as does all universal truth. Its historical claims involve the same history as do other legitimate historical statements.

That Jesus of Nazareth was crucified under the Roman procurator Pontius Pilate belongs to the same category of events as that Julius Caesar was murdered by a company of assassins including Brutus. The truth of the Gospel is not some vague veracity that escapes universal truth-conditions. The neo-orthodox notion that Hebrew-Christian "truth" differs wholly in kind from Graeco-Roman truth is a recent modern misconception. Christianity does not teach that its message is true because one personally subscribes to it, or even because it is reliable; rather, Christianity holds that the message is reliable because it is objectively true. The New Testament conception of truth connects it at once with both rational revelation and public reason.

Today even major encyclopedias carry articles on "Christianity" that wholly evade the question of truth in religion. *The Abingdon Dictionary of Living Religions* (1981), in fact, discusses truth only in connection with nonbiblical religions. The word "truth" does not appear at all in the index to John Noss's *Man's Religions* (1964). Indeed, Noss tells us that Christianity is "not a retreat into ultimate truth, but a redemptive mission," as if the Christian mission is to be sealed off from universally valid truth claims.

Religion scholars readily grant Christianity's "uniqueness" and "universality"; some concede that Christianity is "highest" in the class of world religions. But many bypass the question of truth as if to pursue this concern would involve intolerance and pretense.

Current critical thinking avoids speaking of any one true religion, even when it portrays Christianity at its best. It resists representations of Scripture as "the Word of God written"; it disputes that Jesus Christ is singularly the Logos incarnate.

To be sure, absoluteness does not and cannot ultimately attach outwardly to Christianity as a religion. As a world faith Christianity has had fanatical and tragic chapters, not least of all ecclesiastical imperialism. One can attribute absolute-

ness at best only to the God of the Bible.

Some modern critics affirm "partial truths" in all religions, although even these "partial truths" are then as a class often treated as different in kind from universally valid truth. The term "partial truth" is itself ambiguous; sometimes it designates a mixture of valid and invalid propositions, or it suggests partisan and hence not objective claims. In the long run, to forfeit the truth-claims of Christianity is not only to forfeit Christianity's ultimate importance but also to foreclose Christianity's essential nature as truly redemptive revelation.

Largest and most widespread of the great world religions, Christianity has from the first been a missionary movement. Although the rapidly multiplying global population poses problems for all religions, the present coincidence of the missionary mandate with mass communication and space travel provides an unprecedented opportunity for world outreach. Ralph Winter of the U.S. Center for World Mission notes that in A.D. 40 there were 40,000 unreached non-Christians for each committed Christian believer. By 1900 the percentage was down to only 100 per evangelical believer. In January 1989 there were less than 10 non-Christians for each believer. In 50 countries mission strategists have projected an acceleration of world evangelization between now and A.D. 2000. Attention is shifting from expensive international conferences (Lausanne II in Manila was scheduled at a cost of \$8 million) to cooperation and coordination in regional and national outreach.

Protestant ecumenism has so much idealized the mega-church and its socio-political impact that the biblical narrative seems painfully irrelevant when it depicts Jesus conversing along with Nicodemus or with the woman at the well, or even Paul's solitary conversion on the Damascus Road. Yet some 66 million evangelicals comprise the so-called "born again" movement in the United States that attests a remarkable current virility of Christianity

in the secular Anglo-Saxon West. Christian churches are growing even in communist lands, except in heavily restricted Albania and North Korea. In Africa the number of Christians has multiplied from 5 million to 200 million; in Nigeria the church has quadrupled in 20 years. Even in Asia, where the unreached are more numerous, spiritual gains in South Korea and on mainland China indicate a notable turning of the tide.

Protestant Reformers launched the modern era of theological development by renewed emphasis on basic apostolic doctrines, notably the authority of Scripture and justification by faith alone in Christ's salvific work. Major present-day denominations whose main agenda item is church unity or social activism continue to fragment. In recent decades the Roman Catholic Church has ventured a biblical movement that involves interest in evangelism also.

Especially among the laity—whether Catholic, charismatic, or traditional evangelical—there is growing awareness that the secular world must not be permitted to set the Christian agenda. The New Testament church's marching orders were given by the Risen Lord Himself. This underscores the conviction that humanity's deepest need remains forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God through Christ's mediatorial work.

The rescue of Western culture from moral shame and possible ruination is not the church's prime duty. Christianity will not be a failure if Anglo-Saxon civilization collapses in hideous disgrace. It is not a transformation of social and cultural institutions that ultimately decides the success of the Christian mission in fallen history. Ancient Roman culture was not rescued; it toppled under its own weaknesses. The ethical fortunes of that age were carried forward by what the proud Roman nobility could only have viewed as a motley assembly of peculiar enthusiasts. The Apostle Paul himself conceded that in the

world's eyes not many were wise, mighty, or noble (I Cor. 1:26). But they loved God, lived honorable lives, and exercised compassion in a cruel and barbaric society. They responded to their neighbor's needs and reflected new spiritual life from Christ the risen Lord. Roman society meanwhile sank into oblivion; its ruins remain even today for tourists to see. But Christians knew themselves to be "more than conquerors" (Rom. 8:37). The Middle Ages were to yield a new culture in which art, literature, music, philosophy, and all else found a new center in the God and Father of Jesus Christ.

Today it is not Christianity that is being judged but rather so-called modernity. The choice is not between an ancient religion and modern science; it is between spiritual good news and no good news at all. In local communities, where residents know redeemed sinners for what they once were and now are, the life and the activity of believers continue to speak eloquently. It is still the case, moreover, as in the past, that virtually all enduring humanitarian movements take their rise in the biblical heritage. However much critics may try to discredit Christianity's claims, in each successive generation they manifest by their divergences a crisis of critical authority more than a crisis of biblical authority. Each generation buries its critics; the Bible—speaking now in over 1,500 languages—outlasts them all. Christianity's best days are not only in the far distant past; they lie ahead as well. If human history disintegrates, the Decalogue will remain; if civilization crumbles, Christ will tower above the ruins. The Kingdom of God is not composed of mortar and mammon; its life is true life, its love is true love, its goodness is truly good, and its righteousness, truly righteous. Only people of God now and in the age to come have the best of both worlds.

—Carl F. H. Henry