

# *History Through the Eyes of Faith*

By Ronald A. Wells

## **CHAPTER ONE:**

### ***AN INVITATION TO HISTORY: A CHRISTIAN CALLING***

This is a Christian book. By Christian I mean that a Christian wrote it primarily for Christians. Nonbelievers are welcome to listen to the discussion to follow, and they may even benefit from it. But, this work assumes that Christianity--both as personal faith and as worldview--is normatively correct. We will enter into no apologetics in this book, in that we will not try to defend or to explain the worth of Christian commitment. While that may be a valid exercise, it will not be done here.

This is a history book. History is the study of humans and time, indeed, of humans changing over time. Furthermore, history is the memory of the stories about people changing over a time span. In a certain sense, history would not be possible if it were not for the telling of it. Like Lord Berkeley's notional trees falling in the forest (if trees fell with no one to hear them, he asked, would there be any sound?), history untold is not history at all and, technically, may not even exist. History, therefore, is vital to our human existence. To have no story is, almost, to have no life. People suffering from amnesia can live and function, but they lead pitiable lives because they have lost contact with their own story. When societies and cultures lose contact with their own stories, they are also pitiable.

This is a Christian history book. Christians, in the view of this book, should have a considerable interest in history precisely because they are people of a story. While Christianity surely has a personal element, it is never, strictly speaking, personal. Despite their individuality, Christians find their true identity firmly rooted in a collectivity: We are not alone in this life but members one of another. The kingdom, as we say in the language of faith, has come, is present, and is yet to come. And our collective membership in that kingdom rests on a common affirmation of a story. Christians are Christians not solely because they made a "decision for Christ" but because they became "members incorporate" of Christ's Body. If anybody, then, should be interested in history, Christians should.

This is a Western Christian history book. Western denotes that civilization that is distinct from, say, those found in Africa, south Asia, and east Asia. I accept that even the terms are difficult (West of what? East of what?). But we use the term herein as men and women in Western civilization itself have used it. We will talk about that self-consciously different civilization that began in what we now call the "Middle East" (indeed, in the "middle" of what?), whose story encompasses Europe and the Americas (as well as those other outposts overseas where Westerners migrated). There may be some justification for saying that Christianity is an "Eastern" religion, like all the main religions of the world. But it has been associated with Western culture ever since the Jewish missionaries made

it so successful among the Greeks and the Romans. Yet, and this should be an important clue to the argument of this book, while Christianity has long been associated with Western civilization, it would be wrong to identify it with Western civilization. Still, it is important for Christians to sort out the story of Western civilization because the readers of this book are, and the culture in which they live is, surely Western. A visit to Calcutta or Tokyo will remind them of this.

This is an honest Western Christian history book. Honest means more than merely telling the truth in factual terms but also telling the truth in all its ambiguity and complexity. Honest history differs from ideological history, in which the story comes "out right," according to the writer's values. While history is usable in understanding ourselves, if we approach history mainly to find a "usable past" with which to support an ideology or to advance a program, then we have not really studied history. There are some times when "our side" does the wrong thing and "their side" the right. Sometimes Christians embarrass us and non-Christians attract us. As Christians we "see through a glass darkly," and it does no good to deny that. Knowing the "author of truth" gives us an advantage in knowing truth over our secular neighbors, but it does not insure that we know the truth, which surely exists in the mind of God but comes ambiguously to us. Once in a while we experience moments of clarity, and for these we are grateful. But, since the images remain blurred, we should practice the Christian virtue of humility in what we claim to know and to have "right" in our historical perspectives.

This leads us to the most difficult question of all in deciding what difference it makes for a Christian to study history: Should Christians study God or humankind? Before we can answer that question directly, we must make a few preliminary points. As stated above, the book assumes the validity of Christianity as personal faith and as worldview; hence we seek an integration of that faith commitment with historical study. By historical study, we mean no special definition, unique to Christians, but that definition common to all people who study history. Christians study the same discipline as persons of any faith or of none. Because we believe in the coherence of truth, we want to have the broadest discussion of all reality with all persons interested in serious inquiry. Christians, therefore, should not try to redefine history.