



Historical Revisionism: A Biblical Perspective

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Historical Revisionism: A Biblical Perspective

In 1987 two best-selling books changed the way Americans think about history. Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*¹ and E. D. Hirsch Jr.'s *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know*² called the country's attention to the frightening lack of historical understanding among its allegedly educated citizens.³ Soon numerous studies, formal and informal, highlighted the problem.⁴ Newspapers reported surveys that demonstrated historical ignorance.⁵ Even Jay Leno made money off the phenomenon.⁶

The Controversy

Not surprisingly, the years since 1987 have seen constant battles over the history textbooks to be used in America's public schools.⁷ Some of the most well-publicized dust-ups have involved an unacceptable level of egregious historical errors in textbooks,⁸ for

which blame has been assigned largely to changes in the processes for publishing textbooks⁹—which changes, it is often alleged, have resulted from the industry's attempt to keep up with unreasonable expectations of revision cycles.¹⁰

But the problem of factual errors is not really at the heart of the controversy behind textbook selection. Factual errors are a problem, of course, but competent editors, given appropriate time and resources, can find them and correct them. The real controversy in textbook selection is not over *facts* but over the *interpretation* of those facts.¹¹ How will the textbook view the events of history? What events and persons will it decide to include? What trends will it emphasize or de-emphasize? What sense of progress or meaning will it find in the historical events? And most importantly, how will it decide what is good or evil, desirable or undesirable?¹²

The battle is currently being waged on two fronts. The most immediate is in textbook selection committees where states¹³ determine which textbooks

¹ <http://www.amazon.com/Closing-American-Mind-Allan-Bloom/dp/0671657151>

² <http://www.amazon.com/Cultural-Literacy-Every-American-Needs/dp/0394758439>

³ These were not the first in the field. In 1979 Frances FitzGerald's *America Revised* lambasted the quality of history textbooks. <http://www.amazon.com/America-Revised-Frances-Fitzgerald/dp/039474439X>

⁴ As one example, see "Losing America's Memory: Historical Illiteracy in the 21st Century" at <http://www.econ.berkeley.edu/users/webfac/czelusta/acta.pdf>. It summarizes a 1999 study on p. 2.

⁵ <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/07/12/magazine/sunday-observer-relevant-ignorance.html?src=pm>; <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=JKIDAAAIAIAJ&sjid=964MAAAIAIAJ&pg=6464,428943&dq=survey+students+history+ignorant&hl=en>; <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=a0xPAAAIAIAJ&sjid=TAMEAAAIAIAJ&pg=6073,5693647&dq=survey+students+history+ignorant&hl=en>; <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=Y39RAAAAIAIAJ&sjid=SAgEAAAIAIAJ&pg=4881,4975597&dq=survey+students+history+ignorant&hl=en>

⁶ Leno's "Jaywalking" series on the Tonight Show, which featured street interviews with historically ignorant people, became a regular feature. See, for example, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FH73yIUtho4> and the regular spinoff "Battle of the Jaywalk All-Stars" (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFyYJ0uNb5Q&playnext=1&list=PL38DE08FB77E93F44>).

⁷ Not that there were no animated discussions on the topic before that year. But public interest in the problem was heightened by the two best sellers.

⁸ There have been numerous cases of textbooks with egregious errors. See, for example, <http://www.christianvssecular.com>

http://www.christianvssecular.com/textbook_trap/history_errors.htm; <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/curriculum/the-rich-irony-in-virginias-hi.html>.

⁹ <http://www.christianvssecular.com/authors/>; http://www.christianvssecular.com/authors/no_author.htm

¹⁰ Arthur Woodward and Kathleen Carter Nagel, "Old Wine in New Bottles: An Analysis of Changes in Elementary Social Studies Textbooks from Old to New Edition," *Book Research Quarterly* 3 (Winter 1987–88), 22.

¹¹ In 1995 James Loewen criticized history textbooks primarily from the left in his book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*. His criticisms involved not factual errors but what he viewed as errors of emphasis and of inclusion and exclusion. A similar example is Ray Raphael's *Founding Myths: Stories That Hide Our Patriotic Past* (2004). Whether one agrees with these authors' political positions or not, historical controversy erupts primarily on the issue of interpretation of the facts rather than the facts themselves.

¹² One educator has noted that the importance of textbooks is not so much that they determine what the students will learn by reading but that they determine what the teacher, particularly the novice teacher, will teach. Kyle Ward, "The Missing Key to the Texas History Textbook Debate," <http://hnn.us/articles/127976.html>.

¹³ The most influential textbook adoption states are Texas and California because of the size of their student populations and thus sales potential for textbook publishers. As most publishers seek to gain access to these markets, smaller states tend to follow the larger states' decisions out of market necessity. The decisions of the Texas committee tend to

schools may purchase with state funds. Since for public schools there is no practical source of funding other than the government, the committee's decision determines which textbooks may be used in the schools.

The larger battle, however, is in history standards committees, which determine the specific historical material that the students will be expected to learn.¹⁴ What will a successful student of history know when he finishes his K–12 education? What will he be able to do? What attitudes will he evidence? How will he make his decisions? As the standards committee makes these determinations, it is setting the course for future textbook development since textbook publishers will seek to conform to the standards and thereby raise the likelihood that a given state will adopt their text(s).

An Example

The recent battle in Texas serves as one example of the passions and the stakes in the controversy. On March 12, 2010, the Texas State Board of Education, in a split decision, adopted social studies standards that were considerably more conservative than the previous ones.¹⁵ For example, the board called for more mention of America's religious heritage and more emphasis on capitalism in economics textbooks.¹⁶ One conservative board member described

receive more attention from the mainstream media, probably because Texas tends to be more politically conservative, and thus more controversial, than California, in the thinking of the media decision makers.

¹⁴ For a summary of the various states U.S. history standards, sponsored by the conservative Fordham Institute, see <http://www.edexcellence.net/publications-issues/publications/the-state-of-state-us.html>. The authors of this study define standards as “the substantive guidelines for determining what a state intends (or at least hopes) its young people will know when they complete various grade levels . . . a reasonable and acceptable minimum level of content expectations.” Interestingly, the same authors commented, “Twenty-eight states rated a D or an F, and the average grade was a D.” They find, surprisingly to most Americans, that only one state—South Carolina—got an A on all rated factors. <http://hnn.us/articles/136874.html>.

¹⁵ James C. McKinley Jr., “Texas Conservatives Win Curriculum Change,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2010. <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html>. After a legislatively mandated period of public review, the new standards were finally adopted on May 21, 2010. The detailed changes to the standards are available online at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/index2.aspx?id=3643>. A more readable version, but without the changes highlighted, is at <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/rules/tac/chapter113/index.html>.

¹⁶ <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB124753078523935615.html>

the changes as “world class,”¹⁷ while a liberal member of the board characterized them as a “rewriting” of American history.¹⁸ In the Texas system these standards will drive curriculum development for the next ten years; consequently, the succeeding months saw outcries by liberal groups¹⁹ and statements of support from conservatives.²⁰ To complicate the matter, a significant conservative group opined that the board had gone too far,²¹ and some observers found considerable fault on both sides.²²

What Are We Fighting Over?

At the heart of the controversy is what the study of history is all about. History is not simply the reciting of a series of events in chronological order or the memorization of lists of facts. A historian seeks to discover the *meaning* of history—to identify causes and effects,²³ trends, and bases for success or failure. That means that he has to *interpret* the events as well as *describe* them. And more fundamentally, he has to *define* success and failure; he has to base his telling of the story on a moral foundation.²⁴

¹⁷ <http://www.chron.com/disp/story.mpl/metropolitan/6910429.html>

¹⁸ <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/03/13/education/13texas.html>

¹⁹ For example, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2010/03/13/texas-textbook-massacre-u_n_498003.html#s73765&title=Thomas_Jefferson_Whos.

²⁰ http://www.educationnews.org/ed_reports/91601.html; <http://www.juststatethefacts.com/>; <http://www.onenews-now.com/Education/Default.aspx?id=1036124>; <http://www.freerepublic.com/focus/f-news/2469838/posts#comment>

²¹ <http://hnn.us/articles/124806.html>. The Fordham Institute, generally regarded as conservative, lambasted the new Texas standards, giving them a “D”: http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2011/20110216_SOSHS/SOSS_USHistory_Texas.pdf. The conservative Liberty Foundation responded to that report here: <http://texaslegislativeupdate.files.wordpress.com/2011/02/fordhaminst-vstexas.pdf>.

²² <http://www.historytextbooks.org/texas.htm>

²³ Incidentally, the centrality of cause and effect in the study of history presupposes that at some point the study is presented chronologically. One must know, for example, that the Renaissance preceded the Reformation in order to deduce that it helped cause it. It's noteworthy that much modern teaching of history is done thematically, allegedly so that it will be more interesting. Thematic study is of course a legitimate enterprise, but without the chronological foundation, it will lead to simple guessing about causes, a highly subjective, biased approach rather than a more disciplined one.

²⁴ The current popularity of relativism is only imaginary. Even people who assert that there are no absolutes do not live by that philosophy; they are unanimously

And that is at its core a religious task, a theological one.²⁵ It should be no surprise, then, that attempts to teach history in an allegedly nonreligious system are chaotic, with varying factions doing battle for their own perspectives.

In short, the controversy over history standards is a conflict of *worldviews*. On one side is naturalism that says that humans exist by random chance, that we are self-determiners, that we can define our own values, and that if we do it right, we can continue to evolve our social and governmental structures into utopias. On the other side—which, by the way, has far more adherents²⁶—is the Judeo-Christian view, based in English Common Law that drove the thinking of the American Founders.

Bringing the Bible to Bear

So what is a biblical worldview? How does it inform our study of history? And how much freedom does it give us in the setting of standards and the consequent selection of textbooks? A biblical worldview begins with the following concepts:

- There is a God, who is the Creator of all things.
- God’s will is the standard of right and wrong.
- God is telling a story in history; it has a beginning, middle, and end; and it makes sense.

quick to hold others to their own moral standards by “sticking up for their own rights.” It has often been observed that relativism is self-defeating, for the statement “There are no absolutes” is an absolute. <http://carm.org/discussion-logical-absolutes-proof-gods-existence>.

²⁵The New Atheists have strenuously objected to this characterization. Sam Harris, for example, argues that atheism can indeed find a moral and ethical standard. He proposes the reduction of human suffering. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004), 170–71. But his argument suffers from lack of authority. Is his discrimination against sadists moral? On what grounds? For further discussion of this concept, see <http://christian-apologetics.org/2011/william-lane-craig-vs-sam-harris-debate-audio/> and <http://www.scribd.com/doc/4531646/Arthur-Leff-Unspeakable-Ethics-Unnatural-Law>.

²⁶It’s interesting that after decades of aggressive evolutionary education in both the public schools and the popular media, most Americans still believe in special creation, to the frustration of the self-appointed intelligentsia. <http://www.answersingenesis.org/tj/v13/i2/teaching.asp>; <http://people-press.org/2005/09/28/reading-the-polls-on-evolution-and-creationism/>; <http://www.gallup.com/poll/114544/darwin-birthday-believe-evolution.aspx>; <http://www.cb-snews.com/stories/2005/10/22/opinion/polls/main965223.shtml>.

He is sovereign, working out his will in “the affairs of men and nations.”²⁷

- Humans are responsible for their decisions and actions. They are expected to think and behave in ways consistent with his moral absolutes, and they will be held to account.
- God has allowed human freedom and consequent sin.²⁸ Because He is sovereign, He is not threatened by deviations from His will.
- The greatest good is the glory of God. A key way for humans to demonstrate that glory is to reflect the image of God that they bear.
- As a revelation of God’s will and working, history should be interesting to those in His image. Teachers should present history with all the drama and personality that we find fascinating. We all love stories more than essays.

Within these boundaries, there is considerable flexibility in our study of history. We may see different trends at work, but we will agree that they are divinely directed. We may emphasize different actors on the stage for different reasons, but we will agree that they are in the image of God and also depraved. We may champion different political systems or cultural practices, but we will agree that they all are accountable to God and that the Scripture is the standard by which they must be judged. In his study of history, then, the Christian will be constantly updating and correcting—revising—his facts and even his interpretations, within the bounds laid down by Scripture.

Conclusion

The conclusion to all of this should be obvious. Because government-sponsored schools are constitutionally prohibited from espousing a particular theological viewpoint, they cannot teach history from a biblical worldview—or as a conservative Christian would say, truthfully. Because they are written primarily with government schools in

²⁷The theological term for this concept is *providence*, and specifically a subcategory of providence called *government*. A good survey of the concept appears in Charles Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*: <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/hodge/theology1.iv.xi.ii.html>.

²⁸There is considerable disagreement, of course, over the relationship between divine sovereignty and human will. It is beyond the scope of this discussion to engage that debate. Suffice it to say that God is indisputably sovereign and that He indisputably does not force complete conformity to His moral standards in the short term.

mind, secular textbooks cannot demonstrate the one great unifying truth of history: that it is a story that the Creator God is telling, a story that tells us much about both Him and us.

The battles over history standards will continue. Different factions will take the ascendancy of decision-making power and then lose it. But for Christian educators, curriculum will have to come from somewhere else.

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