

MAKING CHRISTIAN MINDS: CARL HENRY AND CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Carl F. H. Henry (1913-2003) was one of the greatest theologians Evangelicalism has yet produced. He was multi-talented. At various points in his career he served as seminary professor, founding editor of *Christianity Today* (1956-1968), editor of several books, author of both popular and deeply scholarly works, college professor, and organizer of major conferences and consultations. He was persistent and determined in ministry. Possessed of a global vision for Christianity, he lectured in dozens of universities and seminaries around the world. With his wife, Helga, he was generous and hospitable. The visitor's log from their home, kept faithfully for over forty years, is quite full, and contains the signatures of dozens of well-known religious leaders. He had a capacious mind, one that applied every realm of reality to Christian truth. His God was not too small, nor was his Christianity. A quiet, reserved man, Henry nonetheless loved people, as his many encouraging letters to me and to dozens of other persons attest. He showed this love in part by being a consistent and kindly witness to the saving power of Jesus. For instance, I recall his asking my teenage daughter as they entered church together, "Have you opened your heart to Jesus?"

Henry had consistently high standards for Evangelical Christianity, because he was filled with wonder at the God we serve.

An adult convert, Henry never forgot what it was like to be lost spiritually and intellectually. His ministry sought to “remake the modern mind,” the title of one of his early books¹ and what was, to him at least, the obvious task the one living God has given to his people. Education was one tool he thought must be wielded in this remaking effort. He believed that, rightly used, education glorifies God and helps his kingdom come and his will be done, on earth as in heaven.

This essay will discuss some of Henry’s standards for Christian higher education. It will be a fairly informal piece, for it will reference Henry’s works, note personal conversations with Henry, and offer observations for education based on his writings. I will not interact with the growing body of secondary literature on the various aspects of Henry’s life and thought. I will argue, however, that Henry could see progress in Evangelical higher education during his lifetime, yet believed more could be done. Most of his comments on education remain relevant because they address core principles. One could offer a longer list, but I will focus on three items. First, I will discuss his contention that the purpose of a Christian college is to understand and teach reality. Second, I will examine his belief that Christian colleges should prepare students to engage culture through theology and action. Third, I will describe his opinions on the type of faculty members needed to form students for God’s kingdom.

TEACHING A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF REALITY: THE PURPOSE OF CHRISTIAN COLLEGES

Henry trained to be a theologian and a philosopher at Wheaton College (1935-1941), Northern Baptist Theological Seminary (1938-1942), and Boston University (1945-1949).² He developed this training to maturity while teaching theology at colleges and seminaries around the world.³ As a philosopher and theologian he constantly considered questions about truth and how truth shapes ethics. As a *Christian* philosopher and theologian, he sought always to know

and state how Christian truth explains reality. He did not consider a Christian worldview a subset of reality; he considered it the basis of reality. Therefore he did not think Christian colleges exist to teach some portion of reality or to teach reality that applies solely to their community. He thought they exist to express what is real and to examine how reality unfolds in every realm of human life. This reality is best seen through the three great themes he includes in the title of his most comprehensive work, *God, Revelation and Authority*.⁴ Because these concepts capture reality they must be the backbone of Christian colleges’ people, ethos and curriculum.

From his earliest theological writings Henry stressed that the living God of the Bible is the ground of reality.⁵ He never wavered in this belief. In long and short works he patiently explained that there is one God, the creator, judge, redeemer, and master of all that exists. This one God exists in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. His character is consistent and coherent. All things were made by him and for his glory. He sent his only son to die on the cross for the sins of the world, and then raised him from the dead to give eternal life to all who believe. God has included believers in his great redeeming work of freeing persons enslaved to sin. All human being will answer to this God at the end of time. Therefore, reality includes a creator, human sin, redemption, purposeful living, and a specific future. Henry knew how astonishing these ideas have been in the history of thought.

To him, this fundamental belief in God means that Christians have the privilege of knowing, accepting, and sharing the source of all reality. It also means that polytheists, adherents of naturalistic views of the universe’s origins and purpose, and followers of non-Trinitarian world religions need the reality Christians profess. Christian colleges therefore have the opportunity to give their students an introduction to the universe’s unifying person and his purposes. At the very least they must offer their students a basic orientation to intellectual engagement with the essentials of knowing God. They will preferably do so in all disciplines, using all relevant resource material, since the whole earth belongs to God and all truth, properly defined, comes from God.⁶

Yet for Henry, the Bible is the essential resource for knowing and serving the self-revealing God. He certainly believed in the importance of general revelation in nature. But he was passionately committed to the necessity of special revelation in the Bible, since he thought the creator must speak graciously and understandably to human creatures if they are to know God personally. Because he believed in the coherent and good character of God, Henry affirmed that God's word written shares that coherence and goodness. In the first volume of *God, Revelation and Authority* he claims, "The very fact of disclosure by the one living God assures the comprehensive unity of divine revelation."⁷ God's revealed word in the Bible carries the same type of comprehensive unity that God's own character displays. Furthermore, he states that the Bible speaks with a unified voice about God, for "the Old Testament prophets speak in conscious unity with the Mosaic revelation, which in turn presupposes the patriarchal, and that the New Testament speaks in conscious unity with the Old."⁸ This unified word speaks conclusively and finally to all who will hear and believe. It speaks primarily about salvation through faith, yet also speaks authoritatively about aspects of history, literature, and science. In a later volume in *God, Revelation and Authority* Henry argued in great detail his belief that this written word is completely trustworthy, or inerrant. He also asserted that this claim does not contradict reason, for it coincides with historical evidence if one truly understands the living God of the Bible.⁹

Clearly, Henry thought that Christian colleges ought always to hold a high view of the Bible. Indeed, he considered a high view of scripture essential to teaching students the most correct manner of understanding God, the ground of reality and truth. He writes, "For an evangelical campus, belief in the centrality of the self-revealing God, the singular divine incarnation of Jesus Christ, and the Bible as the norm of Christian truth must be not merely one characteristic among many others, but the unmistakable comprehensive and integrating fact."¹⁰ He does not think Scripture alone sufficient for a college curriculum, however, for the Bible describes and encourages thinking about nature, literature, government, and a host of

other issues.¹¹ Nonetheless, an insufficient view of the Bible will lead to confusion at other points. One can build on the Bible, but no other *foundation* is secure for those who wish to know reality as perfectly as is humanly possible.

Henry believed that God's authority was perhaps the most important aspect of the integration of faith and learning across all walks of life. If anything, he stressed the authority of the Bible in Christian personal and public ethics¹² more than its inspiration. This is in keeping with the Bible's own emphases. After all, the Bible calls people to obedience repeatedly, even as it explains that God himself lives in his people to make obedience possible. God gives spiritual gifts to people to use in various ways. God also gives them diverse opportunities in various professions to use those gifts. Henry embraced and embodied these principles.

For instance, he believed that God called him to discipleship and obedience, not to a particular way or place or way of being a minister. He did not consider his work as a pastor or theologian more important to God than his work as a newspaperman or as editor of *Christianity Today*. More than once he affirmed to me his wife's efforts as a homemaker and educator as Christian service. He spoke of his gratitude for his daughter's vocation as a university professor, and he voiced his belief that his son's work as college teacher, state legislator, and United States Congressman was kingdom discipleship. There was no question in his mind that each member of his family was obedient to Christ. He thought all of them could apply the truth of God's person, God's word, and God's will in their vocations. For him, then, authority required and instilled obedience to the God of truth and to the word of truth.

These beliefs are foundational to everything that happens at truly Christian colleges. Trustees, administrators, faculties and staffs that neglect or forget the ground of reality, the Bible's revealed truth, and the obedience of faith cannot fulfill their mission properly. Students who do not learn to value these basic, world-altering concepts are unable to take advantage of an education best situated to put them in touch with the one who made them, redeems them, instructs them, and fulfills them through meaningful work

prepared for them before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:1-2:10). Conversely, colleges that take their stand on these points, however fallibly, have the opportunity to offer and receive the highest and best form of education, whatever external appearances might seem to indicate.

ENGAGING CULTURE: STUDENTS READY TO PARTICIPATE IN AN EVANGELICAL DEMONSTRATION

There is much talk these days about evangelicals engaging culture. Although much of this talk is good, some of it appears to be slo-ganeering that will pass as quickly as it arose. Henry began urging conservative believers to become involved in every area of public and private life in the 1940s. His brief 1947 volume *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*¹³ has become a Christian classic. It remains in print, and it may well be Henry's best-known work. Yet this fine small book was but a beginning point for Henry. Perhaps the title of his 1971 volume *A Plea for an Evangelical Demonstration* best expresses his desire that evangelicals exhibit their faith in education, politics, industry, the family, the community, and the church. In this volume and in later works, he exhorted his readers to realize that Evangelicalism had been given sufficient time to mature. It was time for action.¹⁴

Because Christian colleges educate persons for many vocations, he thought these institutions have special potential for helping prepare believers for full-scale cultural engagement.¹⁵ This engagement includes cultural factors inside and outside Christian circles. It does not choose activism over theology, as he believed many twentieth-century liberal Christians seemed to do, or choose theology over action, as he thought some conservative Christians seemed to do. Rather, it fulfills the requirements of a fully obedient Christian theology.

As was noted above, Henry wanted Christian colleges to provide its students a robust introduction to Christian theology grounded in the Bible. From this grounding could grow further instruction in ethics and vocation. Always ambitious and forward thinking, he did not stop there. He advocated teaching students

opposing worldviews so they could understand, learn from, and critique them. Students will encounter these beliefs soon enough, he reasoned, so they should consider them in an environment of free and open evangelical inquiry.¹⁶ Only then could they deal with current issues completely fairly. Only then could they do their best work of integrating Christian faith and work and sharing Christ with others. He considered this educational process faith seeking understanding, as well as a means of preparing persons capable of carrying the implications of reality into arenas usually closed to or abandoned by Christians.

Besides this instruction, he thought colleges could show students how to shape the various professions to a Christian worldview for the purpose of an evangelical demonstration. To this end he mentored younger persons in Christian journalism through serving as editor of *Christianity Today*. When Henry was editor the magazine was housed in Washington, D.C. so its staff could press Christian claims at the center of American government. Henry saw no reason to retreat to safer venues. He wanted to demonstrate to believers of all ages that it was possible to grapple with the great ideas of the age in a Christian fashion.

I suspect that were he living today he would want to know how many Christian students are interning at CNN, Apple, and other information centers, and would want to know how believers were putting forward Christian truth claims in person, on television, and through the internet. He would have continued to have interest in students spending time learning about government firsthand, just as he would have wanted informed and interesting biblical expositors in pulpits. Such students would understand alternative points of view because of their grounding in competing worldviews. They would accept the responsibility of serving in any place God would choose. They would be liberated for service.

Henry's vision for these students presupposes good students seeking a truly Christian view of the world. Henry was himself this type of student. He was employed as a newspaper reporter when he was converted in 1933, so he already knew how to make a living, even in Depression-era America. He did not need college

to learn a profession. For him becoming a Christian required him to learn about his faith, which he instinctively grasped was reality. He writes, "After becoming a believer I wanted to learn more about the ultimately real world and a truly rewarding life, about human history and the role of science, and especially about the nature of God and his purpose for me and for the world."¹⁷ This desire led him "to seek a liberal arts education and to grasp the essentials of the Christian life-world view."¹⁸ He enrolled at Wheaton College in 1935 to fulfill this thirst for understanding, despite questioning the need for some of its rules and regulations.¹⁹ He pursued graduate studies for the same reasons. To my knowledge Henry did not write specifically about college admissions procedures, and I do not recall discussing this matter with him. Regardless, it seems to me that he would have advocated accepting capable, teachable students who understand that they will be shaped by the faculty, the college ethos, and the curriculum.

A COMMUNITY OF MIND AND HEART: CHRISTIAN COLLEGE FACULTIES

Henry only taught undergraduate students for short periods of time during his teaching career. His main ministry was to seminarians. Yet near the end of his teaching life he spent three semesters during 1983-1984 lecturing and mentoring students and faculty at Hillsdale College. He enjoyed this experience immensely. In a 1997 conversation he told me that if he could start over again he might prefer to teach undergraduates, either at a Christian college or at a secular university. He felt his particular gifts might have been better utilized in those settings, though he did not regret teaching in seminaries. I think this may well be true, since his statements about faculty members seem to me to fit college teachers better than seminary instructors. He believed faculty members ought to embrace and understand Christian doctrine, master the subject matter of their teaching disciplines, and mentor students who will in turn live out the Christian world life-view.

Regardless of their disciplinary specialty, Henry expected Christian college teachers to be able to express the essential doc-

trines of the Christian faith and apply their disciplines to them.²⁰ He feared that too many teachers had an infantile understanding of theology because they had attended inept churches and/or because they had attended secular academic institutions that did not give them sufficient grounding in substantive Christian theology.²¹ Such persons might have a vibrant personal faith, yet they were not likely to be able to further Christian education through insights built on prior evangelical thought. Given this situation, he thought it all the more important that evangelical institutions educate gifted students effectively so that they would have a foundation for the integration of faith and learning with which to return to Christian colleges after graduate studies. I am not aware of him ever writing about faith and learning seminars for new teachers, but I suspect he would have supported them if they were necessary.

Henry seemed to take it for granted that colleges would hire only teachers well capable of instructing in their chosen fields. He also seemed to take it for granted that these teachers would be lifelong learners. He probably thought this way because of his own thirst for learning as an undergraduate and graduate student. He was also a lifelong learner, to say the least. He never stopped reading, engaging in vigorous dialogue, pushing the envelope of evangelical concern, or staying in contact with persons from whom he could learn. He never stopped trying to master Philosophy and Theology to the extent that he could, and he never ceased thinking and lecturing about how a distinctive Christian view of reality agrees with or challenges other points of view. I suspect he thought other teachers would have the same attitude.

According to Henry, the sort of teaching the faculty needs to do includes large group and one-on-one instruction. He believed in the importance of lectures, for he addressed hundred of classes and forums. At the same time, he regretted that he did not have more exposure to particularly good teachers in a face-to-face context in his own undergraduate program.²² He thought college students should have more exposure to primary sources in their chosen disciplines, and that they would need integrative seminars for such sources to be read and explained.²³ He enjoyed personal interaction

with teachers and students at Hillsdale College, and was grateful that at least one representative of each group came to Christ as a result of personal discussions.

There is no doubt that the type of teacher Henry envisioned thrives in a focused, personal, and residential environment. This sort of teacher is surrounded by thinking colleagues and willing students. As Henry summarizes, “Ideally a faculty is more than a cluster or cloister of academic colleagues who appreciate each other’s labors; it is a community of mind and heart that throbs with awareness of an intellectual heritage and that hungers for and thrives on broad cognitive communication and debate.”²⁴ A faculty that merely meets once a month for announcements and otherwise passes each other in the parking lot will not fulfill this ideal. A faculty spread thin between on-campus, extension center, and online teaching cannot do so either. He warned against Evangelical colleges and seminaries moving towards practice-oriented degrees and dependence on extension centers for the sake of public relations and funding.²⁵ He feared that forfeiting the primacy of intellectual concerns in the colleges would reduce Evangelical mission. I suspect it may also hamper the colleges’ ability to charge the necessary fees and raise sufficient funds. Time will tell, but a faculty like the one Henry describes may be the only type the public will support at the needed level.

CONCLUSION

Henry’s proposals for Christian colleges are not for the faint of heart. They force educators to stand on firm principles. This is probably just as well, since the faint of heart may not matter much in the days ahead. We remain in a largely anti-intellectual environment in the United States, not just in Evangelicalism. Furthermore, it is hard to tell at this point in time if government programs will channel (with or without further funding) more students into colleges, if fewer people will be able to afford college, or if Christian colleges will be able to hold distinctive beliefs on key moral issues and retain access to government funding of students. Regardless of what happens, though, Henry’s program has the potential to save students

and faculty from vacuity. It has the potential to give administrators and trustees a program of substance that makes all their lonely and tiring efforts worthwhile. In short, it has the potential to make truth visible as it is carried by persons of Godly character representing all vocations to a world headed towards personal and corporate darkness.²⁶ It has the potential to remake minds in the image of Christ, the goal the apostle Paul set for all minds in Romans 12:1-2. Thus, it can justify the sort of strenuous effort and faith in Christ it will take to pursue the standards Henry set for himself and for others.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Carl F.H. Henry, *Remaking the Modern Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1946).
- 2 The best source of biographical material on Henry's is his autobiography, *Confessions of a Theologian* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1986).
- 3 Henry taught full-time at some point in his career in at least the following institutions: Northern Baptist Theological Seminary (1942-1947), Fuller Theological Seminary (1947-1956), Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary (1969-1974), and Hillsdale College (1983-84). He taught regularly at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School from 1974-1997, and he taught part-time at several colleges, such as Wheaton College and Gordon College. He also taught around the globe as Lecturer-at-Large for World Vision (1974-1983).
- 4 Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: Six Volumes* (1976-1983; reprint. Wheaton: Crossway, 1999).
- 5 See for instance Carl F. H. Henry, *Notes on the Doctrine of God* (Boston: W.A. Wilde, 1948).
- 6 See Carl F. H. Henry, *The God Who Shows Himself* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1966) 114.
- 7 Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: Vol. Two, God Who Speaks and Shows, Fifteen Theses, Part One* (1976; rpt. Wheaton: Crossway, 1999) 69.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 76.
- 9 See Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: Vol. Four, God Who Speaks and Shows, Fifteen Theses, Part Three* (1979; rpt. Wheaton: Crossway, 1999).
- 10 Carl F. H. Henry, *Gods of this Age or God of the Ages?* (ed. R. Albert Mohler, Jr.; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1994) 100.
- 11 *Ibid.*, 111; 113.
- 12 See Carl F. H. Henry, *Christian Personal Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957); *A Plea for an Evangelical Demonstration* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971); *The Christian Mindset in a Secular Society: Promoting Evangelical Renewal and National Righteousness* (Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1984); and *Twilight of a Great Civilization: The Drift Toward Neo-Paganism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1988).
- 13 Carl F. H. Henry, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1947). He describes the origins of this work in *Confessions*, 112-113.
- 14 See Henry, *A Plea for an Evangelical Demonstration*, 13-22.
- 15 *Ibid.*, 15.
- 16 Henry, *Gods of this Age*, 93-102.

- 17 Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority: Vol. One* (1976; rpt. Wheaton: Crossway, 1999), 9.
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 Henry, *Confessions*, 52.
- 20 See *Uneasy Conscience*, 70; *Confessions*, 65-67; and *Gods of this Age*, 100-101, 107.
- 21 See *Confessions*, 403.
- 22 Henry, *Gods of the Ages*, 107.
- 23 See Henry, *Twilight of a Great Civilization*, 94-96; *Gods of the Age*, 106-107.
- 24 Henry, *Gods of the Age*, 120.
- 25 Henry, *Confessions*, 399-400.
- 26 Henry, *The God Who Shows Himself*, 118-119.