



Is there a wrong side of history? Are Christians being left behind?

As our society becomes ever more secular, Christians are increasingly seen as relics of the past, resisting progress. In the key moral debates of the day, believers are told to get up to date.

This attitude stems from a view of history as a story of human progress and enlightenment. Some

say that developments of science and technology mean we don't need God. Others emphasise social progress and liberation from authority. Either way, Christians remaining faithful to the Bible are declared to be on 'the wrong side of history'.

But, of course, nothing could be further from the

truth. We can't understand the world we live in without appreciating what God has done, is doing and will do.

The Bible gives us the big picture of history, making sense of the world we live in. It explains where we came from, where we're going and everything in between.

"For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him."

COLOSSIANS 1:16

The progressive view of history

Many Eastern religions and philosophies say that history is cyclical, with endless repetition – or even that time is an illusion.

However, the dominant view in the West is that history is linear and progressive.

Christians can agree that the unfolding of events has a clear direction – the sovereign God is Lord of history.

But the progressive view makes mankind the agent of progress. And many define 'progress' as secularisation and the adoption of ever more

liberal moral values.

This progressive view of history groups together genuine social advance with the rejection of Christian values. Scientific development, the abolition of slavery and increased literacy are packaged with LGBT issues and abortion rights, as part of the unstoppable march of progress.

And since the promised goal of history

is seen as all important, a person's worth largely depends on how they align with the unfolding progress of history.

They are no longer seen as having the intrinsic dignity that belongs to

everyone created in the image of God. It is deeply dehumanising.

From here it's only a short step for governments to use the law to squash opposition, in the name of 'progress'.



THE END OF HISTORY?

In *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) Francis Fukuyama argued that liberal democracy is the pinnacle of human development. He said that Western democratic governments were "free from the 'contradictions' that characterised earlier forms of social organisation".¹

Fukuyama wrote his book amid optimism after the fall of the iron curtain. As well as great economic and scientific development, he noted "the appearance of democratic forces in parts of the world where they were never expected to exist, the instability of authoritarian forms of government, and the complete absence of coherent theoretical alternatives to liberal democracy".² In all these he traced the progress of history and its embodiment in the democratic state.³

Fukuyama suggested that this way of organising

society "represented the end point of human ideological evolution beyond which it was impossible to progress further".⁴ It marked the high point of centuries of development.⁵

But since Fukuyama wrote this, history has turned out to be much more complicated. Events have forced him to modify his thinking.⁶

The major claim of Fukuyama's book was answered by Samuel Huntington in *The Clash of Civilisations* (1996). He noted that all civilisations become "convinced that theirs is the final form of human society", such as the Roman Empire.

Huntington cautioned that when this happens decline soon follows. We should regard civilisation as "a night's shelter in the wilderness" rather than "the Promised Land" or "the goal of human endeavours".⁷

Huntington cites ways in which the West is declining, despite its seeming dominance. He identifies "moral decline, cultural suicide, and political disunity".⁸ These deep-rooted problems are seen in increasing antisocial behaviour and family breakdown, and a drop in work ethic and commitment to learning.⁹



Francis Fukuyama

SHUTTING DOWN DEBATE

Talk of 'the wrong side of history' is an assertion that the speaker is right, end of story. History has firmly decided what will happen, which is the same as what *should* happen. Trying to turn the tide is pointless and wrong.

This is a narrative that saps motivation for action and effectively closes the door to debate. It also becomes easier to dismiss contrary views without fair discussion or evaluation because they are 'anti-progress' and therefore immoral.



The progressive view is dangerous for civil liberties. When the state divides people into the right and wrong sides of history, important rights and freedoms can be set aside because society 'has moved on'.

For example, today's society rushes to celebrate personal choice on sexuality and abortion. In pursuit of this goal, socially conservative views are increasingly stigmatised and marginalised, and conscience protections in the workplace and parental freedoms in education are under threat.

EQUATING PROGRESS WITH SECULARISATION

Humanistic optimism

Fukuyama's optimism about human progress is not unique. There have been other historical periods in which an unwarranted belief in mankind's irresistible advance has been common, including before the First World War. Some who hold this belief

today are very hostile to Christianity. Steven Pinker claims, in his 2018 book

Enlightenment Now, that the world and human nature are constantly improving.

Pinker says that we can solve the world's problems through "societal prosperity, wisely regulated markets, international governance, and investments in science and technology" – the "benevolent forces of modernity".¹⁰

He identifies 'progress' with secularisation and sees religious belief as the "most obvious" obstacle that must be overcome.¹¹

Sexual freedom

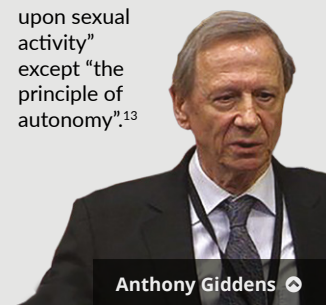
Anthony Giddens, academic and influential social

commentator, argued in *The Transformation of Intimacy* that the story of progress applies to sexual freedom as well as to form of government.¹²

He describes "sexual emancipation" as "sexual democracy". This means "'normal sexuality' is simply one type of life-style choice among others" and "no limits are set upon sexual activity" except "the principle of autonomy".¹³



Steven Pinker



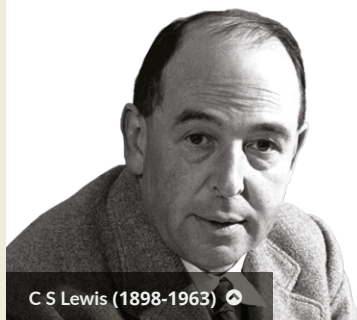
Anthony Giddens

Two Christian thinkers on history

C S LEWIS ON “CHRONOLOGICAL SNOBBERY”

C S Lewis attacked the progressive view as the belief “that any given generation is always in all respects wiser than all previous generations”.¹⁴

He compared this to saying “the whole world was wrong until the day before yesterday and now has suddenly become right”.¹⁵



C S Lewis (1898-1963)

“Believers in progress”, Lewis said, are right to note the progress of technology. But they “falsely infer a similar kind of supersession in such things as virtue and wisdom”.¹⁶

He famously labelled this kind of thinking “chronological snobbery”.¹⁷

It arrogantly presumes to judge all who have gone before and fails to recognise that our own day will inevitably have blind spots.

Lewis reminded us that “our own age is also ‘a period’”, which has “its own characteristic illusions”.¹⁸

He pointed out that these illusions “are likeliest to lurk in those widespread

assumptions which are so ingrained in the age that no one dares to attack or feels it necessary to defend them”.¹⁹

Using human history to define what is good is “wholly inimical to Christianity”, said Lewis. It forgets that God, not history, is the unchanging standard of what is good. It also fails to grasp that history itself is corrupted by sin.²⁰

Lewis also said that it “may be positively mischievous”. Claiming a particular scheme is “inevitable” may be used to “woo adherents or intimidate resistance”.²¹

HERBERT BUTTERFIELD AND THE DANGER OF DISTORTING HISTORY

Cambridge historian Professor Herbert Butterfield coined the phrase ‘the Whig view of history’ for the progressive approach.

He cautioned that understanding the past “is not so easy as it is sometimes made to appear”.²² Events in history are often complex, especially in their relationship to the present. But the Whig view ignores this.

Butterfield, a Christian, said historians of this persuasion spun a false account of British history to justify dramatic constitutional change. Although he agreed with their aims, he rejected the way they argued their case.

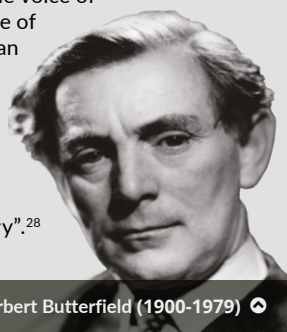
The Whig approach judges the past only in direct reference to our own day, “dividing the world into the friends and enemies of progress”.²³ Such historians seem to “believe that there is an unfolding logic in history”, a logic which is on their side and which “makes

them appear as co-operators with progress itself”.²⁴

Butterfield said that this method really produces “a gigantic optical illusion”.²⁵ It makes history speak with one voice and “ratify whatever conceptions we originally had”, giving rise to “absolute judgements that seem astonishingly self-evident”.²⁶

Those who think this way claim almost divine authority: “the voice of posterity is the voice of God and the historian is the voice of posterity”.²⁷

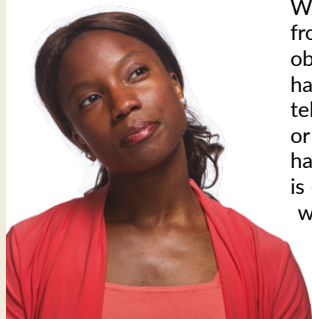
It is then possible to make moral judgements and “count them as the verdict of history”.²⁸



Herbert Butterfield (1900-1979)

Ways to question the progressive view

WHO DECIDES WHAT IS THE 'RIGHT' OR 'WRONG' SIDE OF HISTORY?



We can learn from the past, but observing what happened cannot tell us what is right or wrong. What has been – or what is – can't determine what *should* be. Value judgements aren't drawn

from history but applied to it through the historian's worldview.

For terms like 'right' and 'wrong' to have any meaning, we must look beyond history. God alone stands over history and is the

source of all moral authority.

Every human being is created in God's image with an inbuilt sense of right and wrong (the conscience). We are accountable to him, not the fads and fashions of history.

ARE THERE ANY TRENDS IN SOCIETY TODAY YOU DON'T LIKE?

If history is a story of progress, it must be morally suspect to stand against historical trends. But history is full of arcs and trajectories in the wrong direction. Think about racial segregation in America (pictured right), enthusiasm for eugenics in the early 20th century,

or reducing social mobility today. It is right to oppose such things, but we have no basis to do so at the time if 'history' defines what's right and wrong. We honour social reformers of the past precisely *because* they stood against the historical trends of their own day.



IS TOTAL 'SEXUAL FREEDOM' A GOOD THING?



While often hailed as a modern triumph, the sexual revolution has led to consequences that few would now endorse. In a hypersexualised society it is the most vulnerable who lose out. Rising family breakdown, child abuse, teenage anxiety and sexual assault scandals are symptoms of a society that has lost its sexual restraints.

IS TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS THE SAME AS MORAL PROGRESS?

Just because we are more technologically advanced does not mean we have reached greater maturity or heights of morality. The terrible wars and genocides of the last 100 years demonstrate that in many ways our society has moved backwards. Technology gives humanity increased capacity to do evil as well as good.



Looking to the future



ANTICIPATING CHRIST'S RETURN

History is all about the glory of God. All of the past, present and future is building towards Christ's glorious second coming and his eternal kingdom. This is the true goal of history and the great hope of every believer whatever their circumstances.

In Genesis 3 God said he would "crush" Satan through a descendent of Eve. That promise will be fully realised when Christ returns and every knee will bow before him (Philippians 2:10). The "earth and everything in it will be laid bare", and there will be "a new heaven and a new earth" (2 Peter 3:10, 13). Those who trust in Christ will enjoy everlasting life and those who reject him will suffer everlasting judgment (Daniel 12:2).

So even though at many times the visible church may suffer persecution, division or decay, Christ will ultimately build his church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it (Matthew 16:18).

Paul tells believers to "encourage one another" with the prospect of Christ's second coming (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Christians are on the right side of history: Christ's side.

TRUSTING THE LORD OF HISTORY

History ends according to God's plan because it is his story – displaying his power, wisdom and goodness. God sovereignly works in every generation, "sustaining all things by his powerful word" (Hebrews 1:3). He raises up and brings down kingdoms, while also giving all people "life and breath and everything else" (Acts 17:25).

While human beings are responsible for their actions, God overrules every step for his purposes. The twists and turns of history fall according to his design: "I, the LORD, do all these things" (Isaiah 45:7).

Because God works in history, we can be thankful for the blessings we receive through those who have gone before. Hebrews 11 encourages us with the examples of believers who lived by faith, whether in great success or in apparent defeat. Believers learn from the history of the church.

We don't know what the future holds for the church in the UK, as society becomes more hostile to Christianity. But history is never out of control. God works "all things... for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

"that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow"

PHILIPPIANS 2:10

References available at christian.org.uk/wsoh-ref



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