

A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF HISTORY

by George M. Marsden, University of Notre Dame

In the second edition of his influential intellectual history of *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, the wise historian George Marsden comments on his view of history as a Christian:

The awareness that God acts in history in ways that we can only know in the context of our culturally determined experience should be central to a Christian understanding of history.

Yet the Christian must not lose sight of the premise that, just as in the Incarnation Christ's humanity does not compromise his divinity, so the reality of God's other work in history, going well beyond what we might explain as natural phenomena, is not compromised by the fact that it is culturally defined.

The history of Christianity reveals a perplexing mixture of divine and human factors. As Richard Lovelace has said, this history, when viewed without a proper awareness of the spiritual factors involved, "is as confusing as a football game in which half the players are invisible."

The present work, an analysis of cultural influences on religious belief, is a study of things visible. As such it must necessarily reflect more than a little sympathy with the modern mode of explanation in terms of natural historical causation.

Yet it would be a mistake to assume that such sympathy is incompatible with, or even antagonistic to, a view of history in which God as revealed in Scripture is the dominant force, and in which other unseen spiritual forces are contending.

I find that a Christian view of history is clarified if one considers reality as more or less like the world portrayed in the works of J. R. R. Tolkien.

We live in the midst of contests between great and mysterious spiritual forces, which we understand only imperfectly and whose true dimensions we only occasionally glimpse.

Yet, frail as we are, we do play a role in this history, on the side either of the powers of light or of the powers of darkness.

It is crucially important then, that, by God's grace, we keep our wits about us and discern the vast difference between the real forces of good and the powers of darkness disguised as angels of light.

—George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 259-260.

George Marsden is professor of history emeritus at the University of Notre Dame. This was posted on the Evangelical History section of the Gospel Coalition site on September 27, 2017.