

Are we made in the image of God or did we evolve from the slime? Chuck Colson interviewed

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- Christians have failed to contend for the first truth: that we are created by God. Much of the secular worldview stands on the premise that there is no Creator God. Those false assumptions cannot be challenged, unless we challenge the premise on which they are based.**
- Christians who wish to effect change should look to the past, Wilberforce and Burke can be role models for today**

The Christian Worldview

I had begun reading *How Now Shall We Live?* in the departure lounge of New Jersey's international airport before a return flight to London. I didn't put the book down until the Virgin 747's 'red eye' service touched down at Gatwick. Colson's book, written with Nancy Pearcey, challenges Christians to renew their minds and asks pointedly in its early pages: "*Is ultimate reality God or the cosmos? Has God spoken and revealed his truth to us, or is truth something we have to find, even invent, for ourselves? Is there a purpose to our lives, or are we cosmic accidents emerging from the slime?*"

As I peered out of the airline window at a most beautiful sunrise over the Atlantic beneath it was difficult to believe that there is anything other than divine genius behind nature. Colson argues that the fact that we are created is the first truth and a truth that Christians have often failed to contend for. So much of science and education teaches children that we are mere scientific processes, made up of physical substances; no more and no less. If this is believed then concepts such as sinfulness and accountability to our Creator for that sin are meaningless. If we believe that we have been created by God for a purpose then that changes our whole worldview. God challenges us not only to serve Him with our hearts but also our minds and that is the essence of Colson's book.

A prolific author Charles Colson went to prison after some unscrupulous dealings at the right hand of the disgraced President Nixon. Since then he formed Prison Fellowship Ministries and has befriended Jonathan Aitken following his time in jail. Aitken is now Colson's official biographer and has the task of recording the life of one of the towering figures of American evangelism. When Colson speaks he is listened to in churches and in corridors of power throughout America and beyond. Despite all of this he could not have been a more accommodating person to meet. There was no pretension and real gentleness in his manner. The only difficulty in interviewing him was that he was as interested in learning the latest news from Britain as in answering my questions!

I met Charles Colson at a weekend conference held in Chicago to explore the book's themes. I began by asking him how his book had been received by American evangelicals. He had been encouraged by its 300,000 sales, a good turnover given the nearly 600 closely argued pages of the book. Its message was certainly necessary, he argued. Research undertaken before the book's release had revealed staggering levels of ignorance amongst Americans who described themselves as born again. A fifth, for example, believed in reincarnation and two fifths thought that 'God helps those who help themselves' was a passage in the Bible. Worse than this, these 'born again' Christians seemed to be happy with their ignorance. Only 4% wanted help in understanding the Christian worldview and only 1 in 10 of the 40% of people who said they had a worldview could actually define it.

The book is now being studied throughout America in small group meetings, including groups within the US Congress. Colson was particularly encouraged that Mike Gerson, who had written for him, was now President Bush's leading speechwriter. In addition to the President having read *How Now Shall We Live?* Colson was confident that Bush understood, and was

living by, a Christian worldview. In his autobiography Bush had written: "I was humbled to learn that God sent His Son to die for a sinner like me. I was comforted to know that through the Son, I could find God's amazing grace, a grace that crosses every border, every barrier and is open to everyone. Through the love of Christ's life, I could understand the life changing powers of faith."

Christian Unity

One of Colson's major projects in recent years has been to deepen ties between America's evangelicals and Catholics. He wrote a major work *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* with Father Richard John Neuhaus. Neuhaus spoke at the Chicago conference's lunchtime plenary session and argued that abortion was the foundational issue. Neuhaus said: "The old political question is how ought we to order our life together. The questions of abortion, euthanasia, and our treatment of the radically handicapped, of the looming threats of eugenics, all of these questions touch on who is the "we." Who is the "we"? And how do we, as in the 1973 Roe vs. Wade decision, set up criteria by which we exclude from the human community those who possess what is, unquestionably and undoubtedly, human life. By what criteria do we exclude some by virtue of age or size or weakness or dependency without by the same criteria and measure excluding others who by virtue of their age or their size or their weakness or their dependency, aspire to the heart of public life?"

I asked Colson if he agreed with Neuhaus' analysis. Certainly, he replied. He argued that pro lifers needed the tactical skills of William Wilberforce to succeed in the task of eventually protecting every unborn child from the abortionist's needle. Wilberforce began his campaign against all human slavery with the narrower goal of ending the murderous slave trade. Colson believed that pro lifers must be similarly patient with current legislators. A Congressional ban on partial birth abortion or an ending of funding for international agencies that promote abortions were welcome starting points. In the meantime pro lifers should be building a 'culture of life' at the grassroots: increasing popular awareness about the consequences of an abortion culture and providing high quality support and care to women facing crisis pregnancies.

Crisis pregnancy counselling provided by churches is just one area of faith based provision that could benefit from the Bush administration's new White House Office dedicated to empowering what the President calls 'the armies of compassion'. Colson's book emphasises the church's responsibilities to the poor. In surrendering too much responsibility to the state for 'welfare', Colson argues that Christians have failed to provide needy people with the personal encouragement and moral challenge that true compassion requires. He admitted to some nervousness about the effect on church projects' doctrinal integrity of entanglement with government. He believed, however, that problems would largely be avoided if churches were careful and segregated, for example, government money from money needed for core gospel work. He pointed to the example of the Salvation Army that has worked with the government for much of its 130 year history in meeting the needs of the poor but which had never lost its evangelical edge. Colson's own Prison Fellowship ministries were now running prison wings in three US states and this had led to sharply reduced reoffending rates and healed relationships with families.

Lessons for Britain

My interview with Mr Colson was just three days after the 7th June General Election and I sought his advice for the Conservative Party. 'Persevere!' he charged and 'be hopeful'. He said that Conservative beliefs in authority, order, religion, and tradition (or inherited wisdom), since the time of Burke, were as relevant today to the ills facing western societies as when the Irish born philosopher first articulated his conservatism. Colson also underlined the importance of being led by people of integrity. People are yearning for leaders of character who can be trusted and respected. The John McCain phenomenon during the Republican primaries illustrated this.

Colson was also optimistic that Christian worldview thinking could take root in Britain. American Christians, he argued, falsely believe that they and even their country are living by

Christian standards and that is difficult to unpick. In contrast, Britain may be more open to the 'newness' of worldview thinking. After all, he said, you don't have to be a Christian to recognise the rightness of the Christian worldview. There is a hunger inside everyone for answers to the fundamental questions of **'who am I?', 'what is the purpose of my life?', 'where is the world going wrong?', and 'how can things be put right?'** *How Now Shall We Live?* examines a variety of philosophies' answers to these questions from politics to scientism to the New Age and finds them all wanting. He challenges Christians to test these philosophies to destruction, asking questions of them until their inherent weaknesses are exposed. Only Christianity, he says, can satisfy the thirsting of the human soul for truth.