

BOOK REVIEW

of

Alvin J. Schmidt

Under the Influence: How Christianity Transformed Civilization,
Zondervan, 2001.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Over the years I have heard or read brief indications of the positive influence that Christianity has had on civilization. A booklet here, a chapter there, a footnote, a comment, etc. No doubt you have had a similar experience. The positive influence of Christianity almost seems obvious, doesn't it. Especially here in the United States of America, we know of the Christian roots of this country, and how we are blessed with freedom and prosperity such as never known before. Yet, I have wished for a full-length book on the subject. We have it in this book by Alvin Schmidt. Dr. Schmidt retired in 1999 as professor of sociology at Illinois College in Jacksonville, Illinois. This is a well-written and well-produced book. It includes over 60 illustrations, many of which are photographs. He also makes use of many summary tables. The book is also well documented, and includes a detailed index. It is enjoyable and informative to read, and also would serve well as a reference. Sometimes in this modern world, we tend to think that what other countries need, especially third world countries, is democracy. If only they will adopt a government similar to our own and have free elections then everything will go well for them. After reading this book one may have another opinion as to what they need. However, we need a word of caution. Schmidt does attempt to treat his subject with cool objectivity, although his bias does show through some. He deals frankly with the highs, and with the lows, of Christianity as its influence spread around the globe. Russell H. Seibert, professor of ancient history at Western Michigan University, writes the following at the end of his forward to this book: "In a climate of multiculturalism and its mandate to 'find the truths in all world religions,' it is hardly politically correct to say this, yet, after reading this book, I must: No other religion, philosophy, teaching, nation, movement – whatever – has so changed the world for the better as Christianity has done. Its shortcomings, clearly conceded by this author, are nevertheless heavily outweighed by its benefits to all mankind. You will relish these pages as they unveil these benefits."

The book has fifteen chapters: 1. People Transformed by Jesus Christ, 2. The Sanctification of Human Life, 3. Christianity Elevates Sexual Morality, 4. Women Receive Freedom and Dignity, 5. Charity and Compassion: Their Christian Connection, 6. Hospitals and Health Care: Their Christian Roots, 7. Christianity's Imprint on Education, 8. Labor and Economic Freedom Dignified, 9. Science: Its Christian Connections, 10. Liberty and Justice for All, 11. Slavery Abolished: A Christian Achievement, 12. Christianity's Stamp on Art and Architecture, 13. The Sound of Music: Its Christian Resonance, 14. Hallmarks of Literature: Their Christian Imprint, and 15. Additional Influence: Holidays, Words, Symbols, and Expressions. There is also a table of summary charts, a list of illustrations, and as indicated above a detailed index.

Frequently, Dr. Schmidt discusses the state of civilization of the Roman Empire, as that was the primary culture in which early Christianity found itself. What we frequently take for granted in the United States was not the case in Rome. And it is distressing to see, as Christianity loses its influence on Western society, how there seems to be a drift back to the pagan culture of Rome. For example, Schmidt writes that large families were rare in the Greco-Roman world in part due to the practice of infanticide. He also documents that this practice has been common in many other societies around the world. The early Christians considered this murder; they also considered abortion murder. Schmidt argues that it is even difficult to find anything in Greek or Roman literature that expresses any feelings of guilt about the practice. Early Christians not only condemned infanticide, but many who found abandoned babies took them into their own homes and adopted them. Schmidt claims that there are many examples of such taking place in early Christian writings. One of the first victories of Christianity in Roman civilization was when infanticide was outlawed in 374 A.D.

As suggested by the table of contents, Schmidt also argues for a strong Christian impact upon sexual morality, women's rights, charity, health care, education, labor, science, justice, the abolition of slavery, art, music, literature, etc. Only a couple more can be commented on here. It is no accident that many hospitals even today indicate a Christian connection, such as St. Francis, Wesley Medical Center, etc. As early as 325 at the Nicene Council, bishops were directed to establish a hospice in every city that had a cathedral. Schmidt writes that "whether it was establishing hospitals, creating mental institutions, professionalizing medical nursing, or founding the Red Cross, the teachings of Christ lie behind all these humanitarian achievements." He further indicates that the Greek culture had built no hospitals at all, and while Rome may have established military hospitals, none were ever established for the general populace.

Schmidt also argues that universal education, so much a part of modern society, grew from Christian roots. And, in terms of higher education: "From their monastic roots and through the nineteenth century, all universities were founded as Christian institutions, regardless of whether they taught law, theology, or medicine. Until well into the nineteenth century, even with the growth of scientific studies, Western universities and colleges 'almost always operated within theological boundaries.'"

This is a unique and valuable volume. If you have been looking for a source that pulls it all together, as I was, then this book is highly recommended to you.