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The Intellectual Origins of Ronald Reagan's Faith

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A number of people believed in this book from the very beginning.¹ Many in this room fall into that category, but two aren't here. One, who was absolutely crucial, is an editor in New York named Cal Morgan. The biggest problem I had with this book was trying to find a publisher. Cal Morgan saw the book and realized its potential right away.

Another person who championed the project from the very beginning was the late B. Kenneth Simon, who really would have wanted to be here today. Ken Simon was the first person to support the project. Ken was deeply impressed by the fact that the book, by focusing clearly on Reagan's faith and respecting Reagan's faith, showed an intellectual side of Reagan that has been greatly underestimated. In fact, I would like to dedicate this talk at the Heritage Foundation, a place which Ken loved so very much, to Ken Simon.

It has been 23 years since Ronald Wilson Reagan was inaugurated as the 40th President of the United States. During that time, innumerable books have been written on various aspects of Reagan—his political philosophy, his economic program, his trade policies, his Middle East policy, his attack on Soviet Communism, even his love letters to his wife. Yet, the single most important force in Ronald Reagan's life has been woefully neglected: his faith in God.

1. *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life* (New York: ReganBooks, HarperCollins, 2004).

Talking Points

- Although innumerable books have been written on various aspects of Ronald Reagan, the single most important force in his life has been woefully neglected: his faith in God.
- First and foremost in forming Reagan's spiritual values was his mother, Nelle Reagan, who insisted her boy go to church. History has overlooked the fact that the Great Communicator learned to speak in a church.
- Many books also contributed to Reagan's spiritual development. Two had a profound effect. The first was a novel Reagan read as a boy. *That Printer of Udell's* by Harold Bell Wright left him with "an abiding belief in the triumph of good over evil."
- The other was Whittaker Chambers's autobiography *Witness*, with its disturbing portrayal of the false religion of Communism. Reagan could recite passages from memory and often included them in his speeches.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
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History has aptly acknowledged Reagan's legendary sense of conviction. Americans never had to struggle to figure out where this man stood on any particular issue. And yet, while Reagan's key *political* beliefs remained consistent from the late 1940s onward, his *religious* beliefs were consistent even longer. The historical record abundantly reflects that Reagan was driven by those core political convictions. What the record has overlooked is that his core *religious* convictions carried him yet longer.

Where did he get his spiritual values? There were a number of influences. First and foremost was his mother, Nelle Reagan. I'm confident that had Nelle Reagan died in the winter of 1918–19—a near-victim of the devastating influenza epidemic that killed millions of healthy, middle-aged mothers around the world—Ronald Reagan very likely would not have become President. It was Nelle who insisted her boy go to church—a request he happily obliged—and it was in church that Reagan picked up not only those core beliefs and values, but also the intangibles so vital to his success: his confidence, his eternal optimism (which he called a “God-given optimism”), and even his ability to speak. Indeed, history has also overlooked the fact that the Great Communicator found his first audiences in a church. He learned to speak in a church.

Aside from Nelle, there were others who made their mark: Ben Cleaver, Lloyd Emmert, and the Waggoners. There were figures that dropped into the story momentarily, made a crucial difference in Reagan's life and career—and thus, history—and then exited the stage forever. Some were men like the Reverend Cleveland Kleihauer, whose rather extraordinary influence (at a Hollywood church in the 1940s), I address in the book.

My book, *God and Ronald Reagan*, speaks to all of these influences. Today, however, I'd like to briefly address the role of two books in shaping Reagan's faith.

Intellectual Influences

It is interesting that for a man not considered an intellectual, two *authors* were fundamental to influencing Reagan's most intimate thoughts. Ronald Reagan's two favorite books—not coincidentally—both happened to have a profound effect on him spiritually. One was a 1903 book titled *That Printer of Udell's*, by a minister-novelist named Harold Bell Wright. The other was by Whittaker Chambers, who, in 1952, penned his book, *Witness*. (Actually, Reagan also cited the Bible as one of his favorite books. He called it “the greatest message ever written.” This was because—at least in part—he believed its words were of “Divine inspiration.” Of this, he “never had any doubt.”²)

To be sure, Wright and Chambers were not the only intellectual influences on Reagan. He read C.S. Lewis, from whom he even borrowed apologetics. He was especially drawn to conservative intellectuals who converted from atheism/agnosticism to an anti-communist Christianity—figures that remarked upon the relationship (or lack thereof) between God, freedom, and communism. These were thinkers like Malcolm Muggeridge, Wilhelm Roepke, and Frank Meyer. Reagan also devoured the work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and he greatly respected the lesser known writings of an attorney named Laurence W. Beilenson.³ (Beilenson and Reagan carried on a longtime relationship, exchanging ideas in numerous letters.⁴)

Today, I'd like to briefly focus on the influence of Wright and Chambers.

That Printer of Udell's

As an adult, Ronald Reagan was asked his favorite book as a child growing up in Dixon, Illinois, in the 1920s. He said the book that “made a lasting impression on me at about the age of 11 or 12, mainly because of the goodness of the principal character,” was one “I'm sure you never heard of.”⁵ The book

2. Jerry Griswold, “I'm a sucker for hero worship,” *The New York Times Book Review*, August 30, 1981, p. 11. Also see: Ronald Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast,” February 3, 1983; and a 1967 Reagan letter published in Kiron Skinner, Martin Anderson, and Annelise Anderson, *Reagan: A Life in Letters* (New York: The Free Press, 2003), p. 276.
3. Laurence W. Beilenson, *The Treaty Trap: A History of the Performance of Political Treaties by the United States & European Nations* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1969).
4. This lasted throughout the White House years. Of the many people with whom Reagan exchanged letters as President, Beilenson was among the most frequent.

was *That Printer of Udell's: A Story of the Middle West*, written by Harold Bell Wright in 1903.⁶

He also mentioned this work in his memoirs when speaking of his “heroes.” He called *Udell's* a “wonderful book about a devout itinerant Christian,” which “made such an impact on me that I decided to join my mother’s church.”⁷ In a letter he wrote from the White House to Harold Bell Wright’s daughter-in-law, he added:

It is true that your father-in-law’s book, indeed books, played a definite part in my growing-up years. When I was only ten or eleven years old, I picked up Harold Bell Wright’s book, *That Printer of Udell's* [Reagan’s underline for emphasis]... and read it from cover to cover....

That book ... had an impact I shall always remember. After reading it and thinking about it for a few days, I went to my mother and told her I wanted to declare my faith and be baptized. We attended the Christian Church in Dixon, and I was baptized several days after finishing the book.

The term, “role model,” was not a familiar term in that time and place. But I realize I found a role model in that traveling printer whom Harold Bell Wright had brought to life. He set me on a course I’ve tried to follow even unto this day. I shall always be grateful.⁸ [Again, Reagan’s underline.]

Udell's first words are “O God, take ker o’ Dick!” This was the final plea of the broken-hearted, dying mother of the novel’s protagonist, Dick Walker. Little Dickie’s mother was a committed Christian who suffered at the hands of a horrible creature—an alcoholic, abusive spouse. In the opening scene, Dick’s mom succumbs as his father lies passed out on the floor in a drunken stupor.

Young Dick escapes. He immediately runs away from home, and eventually becomes a tramp in Boyd City. No one will hire him, including the Christians he appeals to in a brave, moving moment when he wanders into a church, attracted by the music, words, and warmth his late mom had described to him. The young vagabond goes inside for inspiration and guidance. He knows from what his mother taught him that this is a good place—a place of refuge and stability that he can count on. Like Reagan, Dick’s mom conditioned him to find comfort in God. At church—with God—he found an anchor.

This church scene is a pivotal part of the book. Here he learns about the church, himself, and “fake” versus “real,” or “practical,” Christianity. A practical Christian is one that would give Dick a job.⁹ And one such Christian does just that: A man named George Udell hires him as a printer, beginning for Dick somewhat of a Horatio Alger path to personal and spiritual improvement and fulfillment. Dick becomes a prominent player in the church and the community—a man of action.

That Printer of Udell's is an evangelical novel. Today, it might only find a spot in fiction sections of Christian bookstores. It features chapters with titles like “Philippians 4:8.” This section of the New Testament emphasizes the importance of prayer for “everything” and, in Christ’s words, exhorts Christians: “Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me – put it into practice.”¹⁰ Reagan himself would later say that the novel made him “a practical Christian.”¹¹

The novel’s clear lines of right and wrong left a mark on Dutch Reagan. More than fifty years after reading *Udell's*, he reminisced that it—and other books from his youth—left him with “an abiding belief in the triumph of good over evil.” These books, he said, contained “heroes who lived by

5. Reagan said this in 1977. Griswold, “I’m a sucker for hero worship,” p. 11.

6. Harold Bell Wright, *That Printer of Udell's* (New York: A. L. Burt Company Publishers, 1903).

7. Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 32.

8. A copy of the March 13, 1984, letter is on file at the Dixon Public Library.

9. Wright, *That Printer of Udell's*, pp. 29–33.

10. New International Version of New Testament.

11. Edmund Morris, *Dutch* (New York: Random House, 1999), p. 40.

standards of morality and fair play.”¹² There was no doubt about good and bad guys, and no moral equivalency.

The moral of the story takes shape as the new, improved Dick, now a printer at Udell’s, and on his way to becoming a “practical” Christian, conceives a plan to help save the wretched city. Just as Reagan came to believe that God had a plan for him, Dick Walker believed himself to be moved by God—even unwittingly at times—as part of a greater plan. In Dick’s case, it was a plan to do “Christ’s work in the city”—Boyd City, with its “low standard of morality.”¹³ (Like Reagan, too, Dick learned to speak in a chapel. The budding rhetorician was discovered as he honed his craft—in a church.)

Dick’s plan goes on to make a real difference. The city’s bums, burglars, and prostitutes find good work; bars are supplanted by reputable businesses, concerts replace burlesque shows. Churches, naturally, grow, as does attendance at colleges and high schools. Boyd City becomes a model—a kind of shining city—of how applied Christianity and common-sense solutions can make a difference. At one point, a traveling salesman peering out the window of a passing train is struck by the improvement; “I’m sure of one thing,” he mutters, “they were struck by good, common-sense business Christianity.”

Ultimately, Dick, a committed Christian, marries a brown-eyed girl named Amy Goodrich, with whom he is instantly smitten. She becomes his life partner. He is sent off to Washington, D.C., as a polished, elected representative from Boyd City. The last image we get of Dick is one that would have moistened Reagan’s eyes: kneeling in prayer before heading to Washington to change the world—the admiring Amy at his side. Dick is such a success that he can’t be confined to little Boyd City. He needs to make a difference in his country as a whole.

Upon finishing *Udell’s* final page, Reagan closed the book, and walked over to his mother. “I want to be like that man,” he exclaimed, referring to Dick, “and I want to be baptized.” The book changed his life.

Witness

Decades later, Ronald Reagan read another book that shook his foundations. Published by Random House in 1952, Whittaker Chambers’s *Witness* was, to Reagan, a mesmerizing source of information and affirmation.¹⁴ All of those interviewed for my book talk of how Reagan could recite passages from *Witness* verbatim. This is evident in speeches throughout his public life. There are copies of Reagan speeches in which he crossed out lines and inserted whole sections from *Witness*. These verbatim insertions were made from his outstanding memory.¹⁵

This audience today knows the Chambers story well: There’s no need to rehash it here. For those unaware, I’ll note briefly that Chambers, once an atheist and communist, accused Alger Hiss, a high-level State Department official, of being a Soviet spy.

Chambers’s succinct title, *Witness*, is clever. Yes, Chambers became famous as a witness in the Alger Hiss trial. But he was in fact a witness to so much more. A history professor could teach much of the 20th century through the life of Chambers. Yet, Chambers, in his autobiography, served as another kind of witness—to faith, to God, to Christ, as Christians understand the word “witness.” He ultimately saw himself as a witness in the religious manner. Chambers’s pilgrimage to Christianity is a thread throughout his autobiography.

In my book, I dedicate a full chapter to the many links between Chambers and Reagan. Here I’ll mention just a couple of examples.

In the foreword to *Witness*, Chambers states candidly: “I see in communism the focus of the concen-

12. Griswold, “I’m a sucker for hero worship,” p. 11.

13. See Wright, *That Printer of Udell’s*, pp. 118–119 and 206.

14. Whittaker Chambers, *Witness* (New York: Random House, 1952).

15. I have personally observed these speech copies from the presidency. On his memory: Reagan’s brother, Neil, remarked on Reagan’s memory a number of times. Michael Deaver, Ed Meese, Bill Clark, Martin Anderson, and others have noted his apparent photographic memory. Reagan staff faced an unusual problem: His memory was so good, that if staff fed Reagan incorrect statistics or information, they had a big problem ever purging them from his memory bank. Meese says Reagan had “pretty much” a photographic memory “for things he read, but not faces.” Interview with Ed Meese, November 23, 2001. Also see: Edwin Meese, *With Reagan* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1992), p. 26.

trated evil of our time.”¹⁶ This is hauntingly similar to Reagan’s “Evil Empire” speech some thirty years later, where Reagan called the USSR “the focus of evil in the modern world.” Chambers frequently employed the word “evil” to describe Soviet communism.¹⁷ “Communism is absolutely evil,” he declared in *Witness*.¹⁸

On page nine of *Witness*, one encounters a passage later featured in the “Evil Empire” speech, as well as in a lesser known, March 1981, Reagan speech to the faithful at the Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) Dinner. Speaking of communism, Chambers wrote, “It is not new. It is, in fact, man’s second oldest faith. Its promise was whispered in the first days of the Creation under the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: ‘Ye shall be as gods.’” He continued: “They [other ages past] have always been different versions of the same vision: The vision of God and man’s relationship to God. The Communist vision is the vision of Man without God. It is the vision of man’s displacing God as the creative intelligence of the world.”¹⁹ Similarly, Ronald Reagan liked to note:

Two visions of the world remain locked in dispute. The first believes all men are created equal by a loving God who has blessed us with freedom. Abraham Lincoln spoke for us.... The second vision believes that religion is opium for the masses. It believes that eternal principles like truth, liberty, and democracy have no meaning beyond the whim of the state. And Lenin spoke for them.²⁰

There are indeed many ways that Chambers’s work impacted Reagan. For instance, when and how did Chambers make the turn from atheist-commu-

nist to Christian-conservative? Reagan could provide that answer in a flash. A passage from *Witness* that he could quote off the top of his head was the one in which Chambers explained his heavenly shift.²¹ It moved Reagan, reflecting his perception of the chasm separating Christianity from communism. Here is the passage in Reagan’s words:

Chambers marked the beginning of his personal journey away from communism on the day that he was suddenly struck by the sight of his infant daughter’s ear as she sat there having breakfast. And then, he said, he realized that such intricacy, such precision could be no accident, no freak of nature. He said that while he didn’t know it at the time, in that moment, God—the finger of God had touched his forehead.²²

Reagan loved this ear anecdote. In the Presidential Handwriting File at the Reagan Library, I found a Speech Department draft of an address he gave to CPAC in February 1982. Reagan scratched out a sentence and quote from Chambers (placed by a speechwriter who knew Reagan liked Chambers) in favor of the ear passage.²³

Throughout his life, Chambers had a number of such meaningful encounters with nature, each time prompting him to momentarily consider God. One of these incidents occurred in his childhood: It is somewhat reminiscent of a deep experience that young Reagan had with a butterfly collection in the attic of his family’s rented home in Galesburg, Illinois. Chambers wrote of the occurrence in *Witness*:

One day [in my early childhood] I wondered off alone and found myself before a high hedge that I had never seen before. It was so tall that I could not see over it and so

16. Chambers, *Witness*, p. 8.

17. We see this word used throughout *Witness*. See pp. 81–85, especially, and p. 461, among others.

18. Chambers, *Witness*, p. 79.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

20. Reagan, “Remarks at a Ceremony Marking the Annual Observation of Captive Nations Week,” July 19, 1983.

21. Among other examples, see: Reagan, “Remarks at the Annual Convention of the National Association of Evangelicals,” Columbus, Ohio, March 6, 1984.

22. Reagan, “Remarks at Eureka College,” Eureka, Illinois, February 6, 1984.

23. See page 17 of draft located in PHE, PS, RRL, Box 3, Folder 57. Final text copy, which matches Reagan’s handwritten changes, is: Reagan, “Remarks at a Conservative Political Action Conference Dinner,” February 26, 1982.

thick that I could not see through it. But by lying flat against the ground, I wriggled between the privet stems.

I stood up, on the other side, in a field covered from end to end, as high as my head, with thistles in full bloom. Clinging to the purple flowers, hovering over them, or twittering and dipping in flight, were dozens of goldfinches—little golden yellow birds with black, contrasting wings and caps. They did not pay the slightest attention to me, as if they had never seen a boy before.

The sight was so unexpected, the beauty was so absolute, that I thought I could not stand it and held to the hedge for support. Out loud, I said: “God.” It was a simple statement, not an exclamation, of which I would then have been incapable. At that moment, which I remembered through all the years of my life as one of its highest moments, I was closer than I would be again for almost forty years to the intuition that alone could give meaning to my life—the intuition that God and beauty are one.²⁴

Why, then, did Chambers not become a religious believer earlier? The reasons are not entirely clear. But one is certain: When young Reagan had such experiences and entertained such notions, they were reaffirmed by a faith-nurturing mother; the saintly Nelle. Chambers’s deeply troubled mother did no such thing. She was a proud atheist who, on occasion, attacked any thought of God by her little boy. “My mother,” wrote Chambers, “belonged to a generation of intellectuals for whom the word God was already a little embarrassing.” God did not create the world, she instructed her child, “The world was formed by gasses cooling in space.”²⁵ While Nelle

fostered religious belief, Chambers’s mom summarily dismissed it.

Where They Differed

Alas, amidst all the likenesses, there is one monumental difference between Whittaker Chambers and Ronald Reagan. It had ramifications for everything they said and did. Chambers was a pessimist, whereas Reagan was the quintessential optimist. Each fully integrated that mindset into his Cold War thinking. Whereas the Cold War thinking of each man was grounded in his view of God, Reagan’s faith-based optimism made him optimistic about the Cold War’s end. Chambers, on the other hand, soberly feared that while he was joining the right side by rejecting communism, he was leaving “the winning side for the losing side.”²⁶

Reagan, however, did not feel that way. He believed the United States would win the battle against communism. He vowed his nation could defeat the USSR and win the Cold War. He trusted that communism was not the future. He was so certain of this that one day as President he would actually pursue a deliberate course to achieve that goal—to secure victory.

While Chambers influenced or affirmed Reagan’s thinking on communism, he did not affect Reagan’s thinking on the final destiny of communism, nor God’s role in it. Reagan foresaw Marxism’s fate as no better than the ash-heap of history. Though the two agreed on much, they diverged in their estimation of the final outcome. That minor divergence between two mere men would make a major difference in the world. And while the intellectual influences on Reagan’s faith and worldview were many, that unique cause and confidence was his own, from which he would not be deterred.

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24. Chambers, *Witness*, p. 117.

25. *Ibid.*, pp. 91 and 117.

26. Chambers, *Witness*, p. 25.