BOOK REVIEWS

Theodore Dwight Woolsey, by George A. King, S. J.

Reviewed by
JOHN V. THORNTON*

This book, authored by Rev. George A. King, S.J., has been aptly described by Prof. Frank Freidel of Harvard as a "sympathetic and systematic estimate of Woolsey's writings." Father King's aim was not to write an autobiography of Theodore Dwight Woolsey. His work does not, and does not purport to, tell very much of the personal life of the late, great president of Yale. We learn not primarily of Woolsey the man but rather of the ideas which were expounded in his writings and interviews. Thus it is that the volume bears the expressive subtitle, "His Political and Social Ideas." We may perhaps hope that some day Father King will tell us of Woolsey's private life. If the combination of scholarly research and splendid writing ability which were brought to bear on this study of Woolsey's intellect were applied to an analysis of Woolsey's heart and spirit, the result would be a book to rival, if not exceed, the excellence of the present one.

Woolsey lived one of those long, energetic, and productive lives which appear to have been characteristic of his century. His life spanned an era of great change during which this country grew from a recently emancipated agricultural colony into a vast industrial empire. Born in New York City in 1801, in the first year of the presidency of Thomas Jefferson, Woolsey died in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1889 during the presidency of Benjamin Harrison. A great-grandson of Jonathan Edwards, the famed New England divine and scholar, and a nephew of Timothy Dwight, a minister and president of Yale, Woolsey came into the world with a rich inheritance of the clerical and academic, and he added mightily to that double heritage in the course of his almost ninety years on this earth. Nor did he in any sense neglect the family side of life. In 1833 he married Elizabeth Martha Salisbury, and their union was blessed with nine children, including the noted Theodore Salisbury Woolsey, who won a substantial reputation in his own right in the field of international law. After the death of his first wife, Woolsey married Sarah Sears Prichard in 1854 and had four children by her.

Woolsey's more than half century of teaching at Yale commenced in 1823 when he accepted a tutorship, while at the same time continuing his studies for the Congregationalist ministry, to which he was later ordained. During his first fifteen or twenty

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1 Preface, p. ix.
2 Woolsey was not formally ordained to the ministry until he became president of Yale. Up until 1899, when the selection of President Arthur Twining Hadley broke the tradition, the presidency of Yale was regarded as a pastoral office, and ordination in the Congregationalist ministry was a prerequisite to holding the position.
years at Yale, Woolsey taught the classics and did his job so well that he emerged as a leading Greek scholar. Then, in 1846, Yale, at that time the largest college in America with some 400 students, called him to its presidency. Upon accepting this position, Woolsey retired from the chair of Greek literature and entered upon the teaching of history and political science, fields in which comparatively little had previously been done in American colleges. After 1853, he narrowed his concentration to international law and became a recognized authority in that field. He was not, incidentally, a lawyer, although, many years before, he had read law for a year in the Philadelphia law office of a relative.

Woolsey remained as president of Yale until 1871 when, upon reaching the biblical age of three score and ten, he resigned. His contributions to society by no means ended with retirement, however. He had never been a mere academician, and, indeed, as early as 1825, had been a co-founder of the Antislavery Association. Retirement by no means quenched the fires of his abundant energy. After 1871 he continued as a member of the Yale Corporation and as a lecturer on international legal problems at the Yale Law School, and, until past the age of eighty, served as chairman of the Board for the Revision of the New Testament, in addition to engaging in numerous other activities. Indeed, up to the year before his death, he was active and quite hale and hearty. He died on July 1, 1889, still mentally alert and with complete faith in God, saying: "My work is done, and I am ready. God bless you all and God bless dear old Yale."3

Woolsey's views in various fields are not without significance for our time. It might be noted, for example, that, although he was an early and determined opponent of slavery, he favored gradual freedom for the negro, and insisted that the South should be persuaded by legal means as to the error of its ways. Unlike extremists such as William Lloyd Garrison and John Brown, Woolsey wished to avoid mutual recrimination between the factions so that intellect rather than emotion could resolve the problem. As it turned out, of course, the views of Woolsey and other moderates on both sides of the Mason-Dixon line did not prevail, and a bloody civil conflict, rather than intellectual discourse, was the final arbiter of the slavery question. Perhaps there is a lesson in all this for the nation today in dealing with the problem of integration of the races in the public schools and elsewhere.

Woolsey's opinions on communism are also of considerable import in today's world. In analyzing the nature and forecasting the effects of the communist system, Woolsey proved both a shrewd observer and a capable prophet. Thus, only some thirty years after The Communist Manifesto was published, and long before communism had attained any political power in the world, Woolsey declared:

> The communistic theories are built on the tyranny of society over its members. No authority in despotical states over their subjects goes so far; no authority in states of the antique pattern could have crushed individual rights to an equal degree. Liberty is destroyed, that equality of condition may take its place. Equality of rights is divorced, as far as it exists, from personal freedom.4

In the sphere of relations between church and state, Woolsey similarly had things to say which have value for the present generation. He believed that the state should protect religion, and even that the establishment of a state church was permissible, provided

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3 P. 269.

4 P. 218.
that the non-members of that church were
allowed the free exercise of their worship.\textsuperscript{\textdollar}5
He was, furthermore, of the opinion that
bible reading and school prayers were ap-
propriate in the public schools. If minority
groups, such as Catholics, did not wish to
have their children present at such readings
and prayers (which Woolsey apparently
assumed would be from a Protestant, or a
composite Protestant-Catholic, text), their
children could absent themselves during
such exercises and their priests visit the
school at some other appropriate time to
impart religious instruction. Woolsey, then,
envisioned a kind of “released time” pro-
gram although, under his scheme, religious
instruction would take place within the
schoolhouse — a method which, in recent
years, has been held unconstitutional by the
Supreme Court in the \textit{McCollum} case.\textsuperscript{\textdollar}6
I might point out, incidentally, in connection
with this mention of the \textit{McCollum} case,
that Father King's discussion of the legal
aspects of the problem of religion and the
schools seems to be a little too abbreviated
and thus somewhat inaccurate in its charac-
terization of the impact of the decisions of
the United States Supreme Court. While it
is doubtless true, as Father King says, that
the holding in \textit{McCollum} was a “dangerous
decision,”\textsuperscript{\textdollar}7 it seems to me that Father King
should have pointed out that \textit{McCollum}'s
practical effect was somewhat curtailed by
the later ruling in \textit{Zorach v. Clauson} to the
effect that “released time” programs of the
New York type, wherein public school chil-
dren are released from their classes for re-
ligious instruction off the premises, are
constitutionally unobjectionable.\textsuperscript{\textdollar}8
The \textit{Zorach} case is not mentioned in the book,
which, in my judgment, makes this portion
of it somewhat misleading.
This is a picayune flaw, however, in what
otherwise impresses me as a top-notch piece
of work. Father King is especially to be
commended for the crisp, easy-to-under-
stand manner in which he writes.\textsuperscript{\textdollar}9
Woolsey's own writing style was sometimes ponderous
and obscure, but Father King's clear and
incisive approach presents the essence of
Woolsey's thoughts in a most readable fash-
ion. I particularly enjoyed his analysis of
Woolsey as a proponent of the natural law.

Although Woolsey abandoned the term
“natural law” and substituted the phrase
“doctrine of rights,” he was, as Father King
makes clear, an ardent believer in basic nat-
ural law concepts. Thus, in his writings on
international law, he expressed the view that
the rights of man and the rights of states
originated in God and that international law
could claim validity only in so far as it was
a manifestation or particularization of the
natural law. To Woolsey there was an ob-
jective standard of justice and equity to
which positive law must look for true
guidance. As he put it:

\begin{quote}
In order to protect the individual mem-
bers of human society from one another,
and to make just society possible, the Crea-
tor of man has implanted in his nature cer-
tain conceptions which we call rights, to
which in every case obligations correspond.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{\textdollar}5 \textit{Pp.} 166, 191. Indeed the Congregationalist was
the established church of Connecticut, supported
by public taxation, at the time Woolsey began his
studies at Yale. \textit{P.} 166 n. 42.
\textsuperscript{\textdollar}6 \textit{McCollum v. Board of Educ.}, \textit{333 U.S.} 203
(1948).
\textsuperscript{\textdollar}7 \textit{P.} 258.
\textsuperscript{\textdollar}8 \textit{343 U.S.} 306 (1952).
\textsuperscript{\textdollar}9 A virtue of the book which, while minor, is none-
theless worth mentioning, is the splendid index.
Its cross-referencing is so thorough that any point
which the reader desires to examine can be found
in a matter of a minute or two.
justice, and the ultimate standard with which
laws are compared, to ascertain whether
they are just or unjust.\textsuperscript{10}

One of Woolsey's more significant
achievements was a reasonably satisfactory
blending of the two opposing schools of
nineteenth century thought, the philosoph-
ical or natural law school, which was then
in popular disrepute, and the historical
school, which was then in the ascendancy.
The Yale president was a diligent student
of mankind's past life, but he always scru-
tinized the factual data of history with the
aid of the philosophic principles of the nat-
ural law. Thus, the major assumption of his
leading work, published in 1877 and en-
titled \textit{Political Science or The State Theo-
retically and Practically Considered}, is "the
personality and responsibility of man as
a free moral being."\textsuperscript{11} Furthermore, he
believed, as I indicated above, that the
state had a divine origin. The rights of the
state came not from power "renounced" or
bargained away by the people in some
pre-historic dawn—as Hobbes, Locke,
Rousseau and the other contractarians had
postulated—"but from the state's being, in
the natural order of things, God's method
of helping men towards a perfect life."\textsuperscript{12}
In short, "the state and its authority is from
God."\textsuperscript{13} Such views placed Woolsey at the
opposite pole from men like Machiavelli,
Hobbes, Hume, Bentham and Austin. In-
deed, the Yale scholar was one of the few
important political theorists of his time who
expounded such natural law doctrine, al-
though, surprisingly enough, there is no di-
rect evidence that he was familiar with the
writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. Whatever

\textsuperscript{10} P. 89.
\textsuperscript{11} P. 128.
\textsuperscript{12} P. 151.
\textsuperscript{13} P. 153.
many other public endeavors, he was called in to advise in the preparation of the American case in the arbitration of the *Alabama* claims with Britain in 1871 and 1872, and was a leading figure in the Independent Reform Conference of 1876, which had a great deal to do with uplifting national political morality after the abominations of the Grant regime. He was once offered but declined a post as Ambassador to the Court of St. James; he helped materially in establishing the humane policy of President Hayes towards the conquered South; and, in 1880, despite his advanced age, he was suggested, with apparent seriousness, by a leading reform newspaper as a candidate for the presidency. In addition to these manifold activities, Woolsey was an amateur poet and botanist, a founder of the New Englander and the New York Independent, an associate editor of the *Universal Cyclopedia*, a vice-president of the American Oriental Society, and a president of the American Home Missionary Society. In the breadth and fullness of his truly amazing life Woolsey set an example which might well be followed by modern university professors and administrators so many of whom seem totally oblivious to the obligation to serve their community, state, nation, and church. The demands of the scholar's life are oftentimes extensive but men like Woolsey prove that they are not so all-embracing as to preclude the rendition of important service elsewhere.
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