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Reflections on Teaching Faith, Philosophy, and History

(Rough Draft)

Although the situation has changed somewhat in recent years, historians are notorious for their lack of interest, attention, and skepticism regarding theory. To a great extent this is a good thing, for our emphasis should be placed on the actions and thoughts of living human beings rather than some theoretical construct. As I once told a political science colleague, historians regard the historical process as too messy to be subsumed by theory. And yet we must recognize that even in our narratives we make theoretical assumptions about causation and our ability to determine what took place in the past. Furthermore, in our quieter moments most of us must wonder what all of these historical events add up to, indeed whether history as a whole has any meaning. Consequently, it behooves us to become aware of the degree to which we use theory, even if unspoken. And, as Christian historians who believe in a religion whose doctrines are to a large extent based upon events within history and define the meaning of the entire historical process, we should seek a fuller understanding of how our faith shapes our approach to our discipline. Because of this awareness, some of us have incorporated into our curricula courses on the philosophy of history or historiography that address these issues.

I have reached that time of life when I find myself increasingly reflecting on my own past. Part of that past has involved thinking about the relationship of my Christian faith to the practice of history and, in particular, my efforts over the past twenty-five years to communicate that thinking to my students. Today I want to share these reflections with you in three respects. First, I will describe briefly the development of my interest in this issue. Second, I will examine my efforts to translate my thinking into an effective class. And third, I will draw some conclusions that, hopefully, will be of use to you in your work with undergraduate students.

Interest in Philosophy of History

When I was a senior at Pacific Union College (PUC) I took a course in the philosophy of history from Dr. Walter Utt, for which I wrote a required paper expressing my own philosophy. I am sure that the paper did not amount to much but in the course of writing it I found in the tiny PUC bookstore a small volume by British philosopher W. H. Walsh entitled simply, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction*. I wish I could say that this volume had a deep impact on my thinking at the time, but I don't think that I understood much less appreciated much of what Walsh was talking about. But I had purchased the book and it waited for me until I was ready for it.

The following year I began graduate work in history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. In a seminar on Anglo-American intellectual history, Dr. Robert Kelley introduced me to the concept of the climate of opinion, which in general suggests that all intellectual activity takes place within an intellectual environment that

strongly influences the assumptions and outlooks of individual thinkers. I think that we explored this idea particularly through Karl Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia*. As I subsequently worked my way through various courses and extensive reading lists during the next couple of years, I was continually faced with the question of why historians interpreted the same events in varied ways. Some of this variety of interpretation arose, of course, because new sources provided information not available to earlier scholars. But most historical disagreement appeared to occur for different reasons. I think that it was when Richard Hofstadter published *The Progressive Historians* that I began to make the connection that historians, just as other thinkers, worked within a climate of opinion that shaped their views of history. Additional books that I read dealing with historiography, including two books by Robert Allen Skotheim, *American Intellectual History and Historians* and an edited collection *Historians and The Climate of Opinion*, further confirmed this view.

Although I did not give it a great deal of attention at the time, I sensed that this understanding that historical interpretation reflected certain fundamental assumptions of the historian had implications for a Christian understanding of history. I had long felt uncomfortable with the idea that we could somehow identify specific acts of God in the historical process, i.e. the providential view of history, and was looking for a viable alternative. Somewhere along the way I remembered that Walsh had talked about why historians disagreed with one another and pulled his book off of my shelf. I was struck with his (now) clear analysis of differences in historical interpretation. Basically, he argued that varying interpretations arise from individual or group prejudices, which he believed were controllable, differing theories of historical causation, which were not

controllable and were ultimately grounded in the historians underlying philosophy. He concluded that historians would never reach agreement on historical issues unless they agreed on their underlying philosophy, which was highly unlikely. Putting Walsh's philosophical analysis together with the historiographical studies I had been reading, toward the end of my graduate student experience I began to conceptualize a Christian approach to history that emphasized fundamental assumptions of how the world worked. It seemed to me that if it was legitimate for a Marxist, a laissez-faire capitalist, or a Freudian to approach history from their various perspectives, it should also be legitimate for a Christian to draw upon his faith perspective as he or she interpreted history.

Up to this point I had not tried to develop these ideas in a formal way. After my arrival at Andrews University, where I taught a graduate course in historical methodology in which we had opportunities to read and discuss the nature of historical thinking, I was asked to make a presentation to our local chapter of Phi Alpha Theta. In the paper that I prepared for the group, I questioned the viability of the providentialist approach to history for the historian and sketched the outlines of an alternative that focused on Christian understandings of human nature, Christian moral judgment, and Christian recognition of innate human spirituality. I suggested that these perspectives would shape a history that was similar to secular approaches in methodology but would have different emphases and interpretations.

Over the next several years, several evangelical historians, including George Marsden and D. W. Bebbington, published books and essays that pursued a similar line of thought. By the mid-1980s a small body of literature had developed on the subject of Christian historiography and philosophy of history, most significantly C. T. McIntire's

anthology, *God, History, and Historians*, which drew from a wide range of Christian thinkers. I, therefore, concluded that the time had come to launch a course that would systematically and explicitly involve students in thinking about the relationship of their Christian faith to the discipline of history. I talked with my department chair, Gerald Herdman, and, together with the rest of the department, we decided to introduce a new required course into our curriculum. Borrowing from Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian whose ideas had influenced me considerably, I proposed that we call the course "Faith and History." Since the mid-1980s all Andrews University history majors have passed through this course.

Teaching Faith and History

For the first two or three years that we offered this course, I co-taught it with Cedric Ward; after Cedric left Andrews it became a single-teacher class. From the beginning we have organized the class around discussion of readings with the goal of introducing students to the major ideas in the historical development of philosophy of history as well as contemporary Christian thinking about the issues involved. I believed that it was important to demonstrate to students that such issues as the role of world view or fundamental assumptions was an issue in the discipline before discussing its implications for a Christian approach to history. I wanted students to recognize that in discussing the relationship of faith and history that we were dealing with issues that had resonance throughout the discipline.

Because books on philosophy of history tend to go out of print rather quickly and my belief that I should change books periodically so that I do not get into a rut, I have used a variety of books over the years. In the beginning I coupled D. W. Bebbington's *Patterns in History* with C. T. McIntire's *God, History and Historians*.¹ Bebbington provided an excellent overview of the major speculative philosophies of history that helped students place a Christian understanding within the larger context of other philosophies and briefly examined analytical philosophy of history. Written in simple language, Bebbington's volume was accessible to undergraduate students and provided a good entry point to the subject.

In contrast, McIntire's book was a collection of essays taken from a wide range of twentieth-century Christian thinkers addressing the Christian meaning of the historical process, the internal structures or patterns of historical activity, and the Christian practice of history. To say the least, this volume presented a challenge to students. For most of them, including the theology students who took the class, this was the first time that they had ever read any substantive theology. And the variety of viewpoints ranging from the Paul Tillich to Herman Dooyeweerd forced them to encounter concepts foreign to their Adventist environment. Most of our class discussion focused on helping the students understand what the authors were saying rather than critically evaluating their arguments and assessing what could be learned from them. Not surprisingly, students found the writing of historians Herbert Butterfield, Arthur S. Link, and E. Harris Harbison, each of whom discussed what it meant to be a Christian historian, much more meaningful than

¹ D. W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian View* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1979); C. T. McIntire, ed., *God, History, and Historians: Modern Christian Views of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

that of theologians Wolfhart Pannenberg or Emil Brunner. McIntire's book certainly stretched the students but may have been too difficult to actually impact their thinking.

As Bebbington and McIntire have gone out of print, I have used several other books in a variety of combinations. Colin Brown's *History & Faith* examined the challenges that the historical method poses for faith, particularly for the New Testament accounts of Jesus's miracles and his resurrection. This volume usefully brought the Bible and history together in a manner that undergraduate students could understand. In contrast to Brown's "personal" approach to exploring the issues, Ronald H. Nash's *Christian Faith & Historical Understanding* took a more theoretical approach to the same issues that, while not difficult, students found dull and overly structured.²

Two anthologies edited by evangelical historians have been largely appreciated by students, for historians tend to speak a more concrete language than theologians and philosophers. C. T. McIntire's and Ronald A. Wells's *History and Historical Understanding* included essays by Martin Marty, George Marsden, and Robert T. Handy that examined the Christian practice of history. Similarly, Well's *History and the Christian Historian* presented theoretical essays on Christian perspectives by Marsden as well as Shirley A. Mullen and philosopher C. Stephen Evans. But it also examined the actual practice of Christian historiography, with contributions from Margaret Lamberts Bendroth, Mark Noll, and Robert P. Swierenga, among others. Again, the more concrete and less theoretical the essays, the more students understood and appreciated them. Not

² Colin Brown, *History & faith: A Personal Exploration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, Academie Books, 1987); Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith & Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan/Dallas TX: Probe Ministries, 1984).

surprisingly, when my own *Teaching History* appeared, which was largely based on lectures that I gave in this course, I used this volume as well.³

While the essay collections always had some selections that students like, I chose a one single-author work that was simply too far over the student's heads. Robert Eric Frykenberg's *History & Belief*,⁴ even though written by an historian and widely praised as a substantive contribution to the discussion of the relationship of faith and history, expected its readers to be much better read in history, theology, and philosophy than were our students. At the end of our course the year that I used this volume, one student gave his copy to me, saying that he wanted nothing more to do with that book!

Contrasting with these more theoretical books, Steven J. Keillor's *This Rebellious House* presented a Christian interpretation of American history. To the surprise of most students, Keillor is critical of many aspects of American national behavior, believing that it stems from a rejection of God's purposes in favor of capitalism and national power. Keillor's frequently controversial interpretations stimulated discussion of both American history itself and the possible directions that a Christian interpretation of that history might take.⁵

In addition to these works that discussed Christian perspectives on history, I have also included "secular" books that provided the broad context of issues in the discipline. John Tosh's *The Pursuit of History*, a text written for undergraduates, offered an excellent discussion of current practices in the discipline as well as examining such issues as the

³ C. T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells, eds., *History and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1984); Ronald A. Wells, ed., *History and the Christian Historian* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998); Gary Land, *Teaching History: A Seventh-day Adventist Approach* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2000).

⁴ Robert Eric Frykenberg, *History & Belief: The foundations of Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans/The Institute for Advanced Christian Studies, 1996).

⁵ Steven J. Keillor, *This Rebellious House: American History & the Truth of Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

limits of historical knowledge and the use of theory. With postmodernism making its impact in the latter part of the twentieth century, I introduced students to a "traditionalists" response with Richard J. Evans' *In Defense of History* and a more receptive view with *Telling the Truth About History* by Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob. All of these works had the virtue of being readable introductions to and evaluations of current issues in the historical discipline and helped students understand that theoretical issues had practical implications.⁶

Another volume addressed contemporary historiographical issues in a unique way. Anna Green's and Kathleen Troup's *The Houses of History* combined introductory theoretical essays on such subjects as "Marxist historians" and "The Question of Narrative" with an historical essay exemplifying the theory. Students found this volume moderately difficult; although in this case it was sometimes the work of the various historians rather than the clearly written theoretical introductions that gave them trouble. When I assigned Elizabeth A. Clark's, *History, Theory, Text*, however, I once again as with the Frykenberg volume, had asked them to read something for which they were not prepared.⁷

During the past few years, in addition to my own book, I have used George Marsden's *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, which, surprisingly, students seem to have difficulty understanding. To provide the broader context, students read M. C. Lemon's *Philosophy of History*, which is written at a graduate student level but, with

⁶ John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History: Aims, Methods & New Directions in the Study of Modern History*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1991); Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth About History* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1994).

⁷ Anna Green and Kathleen Troup, eds., *The Houses of History: A Critical Reader in Twentieth-Century History and Theory* (Washington Square, NY: New York University Press, 1999); Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

adequate time for class discussion, is accessible to undergraduates. In contrast to any of the other books that I have used, Lemon's volume has the virtue of systematically examining the development of speculative philosophy of history and, though it does not address the development of critical philosophy of history it clearly lays out the issues. Even if they do not understand all the nuances of the positions discussed, students have a good understanding of both speculative and critical philosophy of history after reading this volume.⁸

Depending on the mix of books in any given class, I sought to "plug" holes through lectures on such subjects as the various speculative philosophies of history, aspects of the biblical and subsequent Christian view of history, the emergence of critical philosophy of history, postmodernism, and Seventh-day Adventist thinking about history. Also, for many years I have required the students to read two articles from *Fides et Historia*, the journal of the Conference on Faith and History, and two articles from *History & Theory*, the principal publication dealing with philosophy of history.⁹ And, because the various anthologies and other works by evangelical historians,¹⁰ have gone out of print and I believe that students need to be acquainted with the ideas in these works, in recent years I have asked students to read and write a critical review of one of these books.

From this probably overly long description of my course, it is apparent that rather than presenting students with a fully formed and structured philosophy of my own,

⁸ George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); M. C. Lemon, *Philosophy of History: A Guide for Students* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

⁹ Because *Fides et Historia* publishes articles on both church history and Christian perspectives on history, I ask students to choose their articles from a list of items in the latter category that I have compiled. Students are free to choose any articles they wish, exclusive of book reviews, from *History & Theory*.

¹⁰ Brown, *History & Faith*; George Marsden and Frank Roberts, eds., *A Christian View of History?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1975); McIntire and Wells, eds., *History and Historical Understanding*; Nash, *Christian Faith & Historical Understanding*; Wells, ed, *History and the Christian Historian*.

through assigned reading and lectures I have sought to expose students to the development of the philosophical issues historically and the variety of responses by contemporary historians, both Christian and otherwise, to them. By acquainting them with these matters in an explicit way, it has been my hope to stimulate students to think more critically about the nature of historical knowledge and what it means to be a Christian historian. But beyond these purposes, I have sought to provide students with the resources to begin the process of putting together their own philosophy of history.

You will notice that I just stated that I want students to "begin the process of putting together their own philosophy of history." When I first started teaching this course I was more ambitious. As with the class that I had taken at PUC, during the first few years of my own course, I required students to write a ten to twelve page paper on their own philosophy of history. My goal was to have students synthesize the ideas that they were reading and discussing in class into their own philosophy. I discovered, however, that at best their use of these concepts was superficial and at worst confused. The papers revealed little depth of thought or struggle with the issues involved.

After a few years, despite my best efforts to help the students write better papers, I concluded that one quarter or one semester (we changed to the semester system in the fall of 2000), was simply too little time for students to digest the ideas they were studying and pull them together into their own personal view. I, therefore, shifted the assignment, asking them to develop a research paper on an individual Christian philosopher/theologian of history or a Christian historian or on a specific problem in the Christian understanding of history. With only a couple of exceptions, students have chosen the former alternative, writing papers on such individuals as Augustine, Joachim

of Fiore, Christopher Dawson, Herbert Butterfield, Kenneth Scott LaTourette, and George Marsden. The few students who have chosen a problem have written about the matter of moral judgment with the exception of one individual who was heading to the seminary who focused on the use of the Bible in understanding history. Although the quality of the papers has, of course, varied greatly, in general these papers have been much better than the more theoretical ones I assigned earlier.

Some Reflections

Having taught Faith and History for nearly twenty-five years and having used these many books and read numerous book reviews, article reports, and term papers, what have I learned that might be of use to others? First of all, one must have moderate expectations of what can be achieved in a single semester. Students in Adventist schools have little or no background in philosophy and thus are meeting up with questions about epistemology—a brand new term for most of them—and its implications for the first time. It takes time to help them understand the significance of questioning what an historian means when he or she asserts that something is a "fact" or that one thing "caused" another. They tend to be naturally inclined toward empiricism and getting them to think critically about their assumption that history is simply a matter of finding out and/or learning "what happened" can be difficult. Furthermore, like most historians they have little interest in theoretical questions, whether having to do with the nature of historical knowledge or the meaning of the past as a whole. They would much rather be

reading about the American revolt against Great Britain or the Holocaust than Hegel's dialectic or Hayden White's theory of historical narrative.

Also, we must recognize that students (as well as some Christian historians) are frequently skeptical of claims that there can be a "Christian perspective" on history. This skepticism arises in part from their empirical bent but also, I believe, out of their tendency to separate the spiritual from the intellectual. Few students seem to consider the possibility that their faith might affect the way they think about "non-religious" or "secular" matters. Because of this mind-set, it is very important, as I have stated previously, to demonstrate that the discipline itself has and is wrestling with epistemological problems before one introduces possible ways in which one's Christian faith might impact one's approach to history. Consequently, rather than expecting students to experience revolutionary changes in their thinking within the short time of a semester, we should nurture them in developing a more complex understanding of historical knowledge and its relationship to faith that will serve as a foundation for their future intellectual development.

I begin the course by asking two questions: Why do we study history? And, what is history? The most common answer students give to the first question is that it teaches us "lessons." This response then leads me to the second question. What is this entity that is teaching us these lessons? As we unpack the term, they come to realize that in the English language "history" refers to both the events that have taken place in the past and our account or memory of those events. It does not take much analysis for them to realize that our accounts are a limited reflection or reconstruction of what has taken place in the past and, therefore, any lessons that we draw will have at least the same limitations

as our accounts. If the lessons we draw from history are limited and perhaps problematic, then we need to look at other or additional reasons for studying the past. Students are thereby pushed by the internal logic of their response to these questions to think about issues that they probably have not previously considered.

The distinction between history as all the events that have take place in the past and our account or memory of those events also leads effectively to the distinction between the two major types of philosophy of history, which sets up the structure of the major portion of the course. Speculative philosophy addresses the meaning of the past in its totality; in part we call it speculative because it extrapolates meaning from what we know about the past and extends it to those things that we do not know. At first, questions about the meaning of the totality of history may seem abstract to students, but I try to help them recognize that their sense of the meaning of their own lives is connected to their understanding of history as a whole. It is difficult to imagine, except perhaps in terms of Albert Camus's interpretation of the myth of Sisyphus, that one can find meaning in one's own life if history as a whole is meaningless. In any case, it is important for students to understand that speculative philosophy of history, even in its most abstract and complicated forms, is asking the question, where is history going? Recognizing this core question helps them better appreciate ancient Greek and Roman cyclical views as well as the more difficult and abstract philosophies of thinkers such as Vico and Hegel. In teaching about the views of these and other philosophers, I am not so much concerned that students gain in-depth knowledge about their theoretical systems as I am with helping them see that they are responding to a question humans have asked almost from the beginning of recorded time. Furthermore, when we discuss the biblical

views that emerged through the Old and New Testaments and were further developed by thinkers such as Augustine, they see that Christianity poses an answer, even if interpreted in a variety of ways, to the same fundamental question.

Understanding that critical (or analytical, as it is sometimes called) philosophy of history addresses the second definition of history, i.e. our account or memory of the past, also helps students see that it holds at least equal significance with speculative philosophy. Indeed, I try to help them understand why since the late nineteenth century scholars have lost interest in examining the meaning of the totality of the past in favor of analyzing how historians work and think. But I ask them to consider whether we actually can dispense with the question of where history is going. And, as we examine such critical issues as the nature of narrative, theories of causation, and conceptions of truth, we come back to the underlying assumptions or world views of the historians that shape their response to these matters. Even if extended discussions of the meaning of history have fallen out of favor among scholars, apparently they cannot write history without some conception of its total meaning. And that observation provides the basis for examining the ways in which one's Christian faith may shape his or her approach to historical scholarship.

I seek to bring these points to the fore through Socratic questioning based upon the reading that students have done prior to attending class. Of course, if the reading is beyond their understanding, as I have noted has happened a few times, then the questioning is largely fruitless. This observation leads to the obvious conclusion that a teacher needs to be very careful regarding the books and essays that he or she assigns to students. In my experience, students respond much more positively to those works that

use little or no jargon and, when they do talk about theory, illustrate that theory with examples from either the events of history or the work of historians. Even a book, such as Lemon's *Philosophy of History*, whose job it is to discuss theory, works best when it refers to individual thinkers who said specific things at particular times and places.

Students like best those assigned readings that demonstrate the practical implications of theory. I think that students have trouble with even a relatively simple work such as Marsden's *Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* because it is about scholarship in general rather than history in particular and therefore lacks a sufficient number of applied examples.

Finally, we come to the question of why a course such as this should be in the history curriculum. As humanities educators, it seems to me, we want to do more than train good technicians, in our case individuals who know lots of historical information and how to go about finding information not presently known. The humanities seek not only to know about but to better understand human beings and that understanding requires that we think about the meaning of both our process of acquiring knowledge and the knowledge itself. Furthermore, as Christian humanities educators we want our students to place their learning within a faith-informed context. A course that explicitly addresses the nature of the historical discipline and its relationship to the Christian faith introduces the student to the fundamental issues involved and, hopefully, starts them on a lifetime intellectual and faith journey. As teachers, we can give little more than a nudge for students to awaken from their philosophical slumbers and start that journey. But that nudge is vitally important; otherwise, they may never begin the trip.

