

## **A BIBLICAL-CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO THE STUDY OF HISTORY**

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As Seventh-day Adventists we have been late coming to the general discussion of the integration of faith and learning and in the process have depended much on those in the Reformed tradition who pioneered this concept. Yet, because of our historicist approach to prophecy, we have long been interested in teaching history from a biblical perspective,<sup>1</sup> although we did not use the "integration" terminology or framework. That very interest in prophecy, however, has at the same time limited our understanding of how we might go about integrating our faith and the study of history, one result being that most Adventist historians have little interest in the issue.

Today, I want to discuss with you three elements. First, we will look at the biblical understanding of history as it appears in the Old and New Testaments. Second, we will examine the methodology of historical study because that suggests where the contact points for the integration of faith and history might lie. Finally, we will discuss some of the specific implications this integration might have for the way we write and teach history. From the list of participants that was given to me, I understand that none of you are historians. I hope, however, that you can look upon what we are doing today as a case study in the integration of faith and learning that may suggest ideas that could be pursued within your own disciplines.

### **The Biblical View of History**

Rather than arising from rational speculation, a scientific study of the past, or simply our experience of the passage of time, the Christian philosophy of history comes from our reading of the Bible, the common source from which all Christians, despite their theological differences, draw in developing their world view. Many Christians, beginning with Augustine, have written individual versions of the Christian view of history, but all start with the Bible.

The Bible does not present a philosophy of history as such, however. Instead it tells stories of the past. We work with these stories in an effort to analyze the understanding of history that lies behind them. While there are occasional theological comments on history and God's relation to it that appear in the poetry, prophecy, and epistles of the Bible, the historical sections provide most of the insight into history's nature. As we move from the concrete descriptions of historical events to the abstractions of the philosophy of history, we need to be careful that we do not lose sight of the fact that history is the story of people and, in the Biblical view, their encounter with God.

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<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Alonzo Trevier Jones, *The Great Empires of Prophecy, from Babylon to the Fall of Rome* (Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1898).

In seeking to understand the Christian philosophy of history it is useful to approach the Old and New Testaments separately, for the latter builds on and reinterprets the former. History was extremely important to the Old Testament Jews, for it was the medium through which God revealed himself. We learn of God through his actions rather than through propositions. Not surprisingly, George Ernest Wright calls the Old Testament *The Book of the God Who Acts*.<sup>2</sup>

This revelation takes place in relationship to humanity. The Creation story of Genesis one and two establishes the beginning point for the human story, for all humankind has its origins in Adam and Eve, whom God told to "be fruitful, and multiply and, replenish the earth, and subdue it" (Gen. 1:28). Although "God saw every thing that he had made, and behold, *it was very good*" (Gen. 1:31), soon what George Arthur Buttrick calls the "brokenness" of history enters the story,<sup>3</sup> as the first couple succumbs to the temptation to eat the fruit from the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" (Gen. 2-3). Subsequent history thereby, in the Old Testament view, becomes a story of redemption. God acts within time to bring about the redemption of the people he loves. "The Jews superimposed upon the solar and mesel rhythms ... the recollection of God's actions in previous history," says Paul Merkley. "Thus they affirm their confidence in the redeeming purpose of God in the present and in the future."<sup>4</sup>

God's redemptive acts, as David Bebbington states, take place within the poles of judgment and mercy.<sup>5</sup> Examples of judgment are familiar to us. Genesis tells the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, "Then the Lord said, 'Because the outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is great and their sin is very grave, I will go down to see whether they have done altogether according to the outcry which has come to me; and if not, I will know.'" And later we learn, "Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone, and fire from the Lord out of heaven." (Gen. 18:20-21, 19:24) In the book of II Kings we read, "In the twenty-third year of Joash the son of Ahaziah, King of Judah, Jehoahaz the son of Jehu began to reign over Israel in Samaria, and he reigned seventeen years. He did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and followed the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, which he made Israel to sin; he did not depart from them. And the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he gave them continually into the hand of Hazael king of Syria and into the hand of Benhadad the son of Hazael." (II kings 13:1-3)

But God acts mercifully. Bebbington points out that "divine acts of mercy ... were not so much rewards for doing right as the result of Yahweh's disposition to bless the undeserving if only they would trust him."<sup>6</sup> When Jacob returns to his home he says, "I am not worthy of the least of all the steadfast love and all the faithfulness which thou has shown to thy servant!" (Gen. 32:9). Some of God's actions revealed both judgment and mercy at the same time, as when the delivery of the Israelites from Egypt served as both a judgment on the Egyptians and a merciful release for the Children of Israel (Ex.12-13). Ultimately, the Old Testament presents history as a

<sup>2</sup> G. Ernest Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God.- Christian Scholarship Interprets the Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> George Arthur Buttrick, *Christ and History* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1963), 22.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Merkley, *The Greek and Hebrew Origins of our Idea of History*, Toronto Studies in Theology, vol. 32 (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1987), 93-94.

<sup>5</sup> D. W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian View* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 44-45.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

morally and spiritually significant process under God's control. Thus we have catalogues of sacred events such as appear in Psalm 136.

According to the Old Testament, God acts "not in isolated incidents, but throughout the whole story"<sup>7</sup> as he moves history toward a goal. Although some have argued that the Old Testament presents a cyclical or--alternatively--a "rhythmic" view of history, primarily because of its repetitive festivals,<sup>8</sup> most scholars believe that it posits a linear view, that history is moving upon a line--though not always straight--from a beginning to an appointed end. History therefore carries meaning because God works within time to accomplish his purposes. As John Drane writes,

Life [in the Old Testament] is not just a meaningless cycle of empty existence. It has a beginning and an end, and events happen not in a haphazard sequence but as part of a great design that in turn is based on the character of God himself. And this God is encountered by his people in the ordinary events of everyday life, and not through tortuous intellectual debate.<sup>9</sup>

History proceeds, in this view, through a series of significant events, each of which involves a promise. The Lord tells Abraham, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing." (Gen. 12:1,2) Then at the Exodus God promises the Israelites the land of Canaan, telling Joshua after the death of Moses that ... every place that the sole of your foot will tread upon I have given to you, as I promised to Moses." (Joshua 1:3) Later David learns, "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure for ever and ever; your throne shall be established for ever." (2 Sam. 7:16) Finally, during the exile God tells Jeremiah, "For behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will restore the fortunes of my people, Israel and Judah, says the Lord, and I will bring them back to the land which I gave to their fathers, and they shall take possession of it." (Jer. 30:3)

But God's promises also bring great responsibilities, for they are part of a covenantal relationship. His desires for his people and promises to them depend upon their own response. "History for Israel cannot be separated from covenant faithfulness," observes J. G. Millar. "Success cannot be achieved without it. Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow, wherever the nation finds itself--in the land or outside it--a simple decision faces Israel: to live for Yahweh or not--to move further into the land with Yahweh, or to go back to Egypt. There can be no standing still."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>7</sup> John Drane, *Introducing the Old Testament* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1987),211.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Mircea Eliade, *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return*, trans. Willard R. Trask, Harper Torchbooks: The Bollingen Library (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954; New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1959), 58-62; and Thorleif Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with Greek*, trans. Jules L. Moreau (SCM Press Ltd., 1960; New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1970),133-37.

<sup>9</sup> Drane, *Introducing*, 211-212.

<sup>10</sup> J. G. Millar, "Living at the Place of Decision: Time and Place in the Framework of Deuteronomy," in J. G. McConville and J. G. Millar, *Time and Place in Deuteronomy, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, Supplement Series 179 (1994), 88.

Similarly, Simon J. DeVries states that the Old Testament Jew belongs to the world of universality but, in personalistic relation to his covenant God, he belongs more importantly to the world of unique events, the succession of opportunities ("days") that make him aware of an ever imminent responsibility to respond to the new crisis of God's address. It is this dialogue and interaction between a transcendent but infinitely concerned Deity and a finite but eminently responsible humanity that creates the Bible's most special contribution to mankind's continuing effort to apprehend the meaning of historical existence.<sup>11</sup>

After military defeat and exile to Babylon, when it seemed that fulfillment of God's promises was far away, a sense of crisis emerged among the Jews. History's goal became apocalyptic, as they looked for a messiah to bring deliverance from their oppression through a cataclysmic event. Daniel writes, "At that time shall arise Michael, the great prince who has charge of your people. And there shall be a time of trouble, such as never has been since there was a nation till that time; but at that time your people shall be delivered, every one whose name shall be found written in the book" (Dan. 12: 1). God's promises would be fulfilled, but only through the means of fire and brimstone.

The New Testament received this heritage of understanding God as one who acts in judgment and mercy and whose promises will ultimately be fulfilled when the messiah comes. But the New Testament writers reinterpreted this Old Testament view through the person of Jesus. Matthew, first of all, traces Jesus' lineage back to Abraham and then applies the suffering servant of Isaiah 53 to Jesus (Mat. 8:17). In another catalogue of sacred events, the author of Hebrews explains why the promise to the Old Testament people was not fulfilled, "And all these, though well attested by their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had foreseen something better for us, that apart from us they could not be made perfect" (Heb. 11:39-40). And that something better is, of course, Jesus, "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). As Merkley puts it,

Christian faith centers upon the story of the birth, the life, the death, the resurrection and the ascension of Jesus of Nazareth. It declares that these events accomplish the purpose for which God entered into His covenant with Abraham. Christianity lays claim to the theory of history, which follows from Judaism's understanding of the meaning of Abram/Abraham's decision.<sup>12</sup>

Christ entered into the historical process, taking on flesh, suffering its brokenness, judging it, redeeming it. In dying on the cross Christ experienced the evil that makes history's meaning seem so ambiguous, crying out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matt. 27:46). But three days later he rose from the grave, thereby bringing light to the apparent

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<sup>11</sup> Simon J. DeVries, *Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow: Time and History in the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 349-50.

<sup>12</sup> Merkley, *Greek and Hebrew Origins*, 200.

darkness. "But now is Christ risen from the dead, *and* become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man *came* death, by man *came* also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive" (I Cor. 15:20-22).

Hence, the linchpin of history, the central event around which everything else revolves is the first Advent of Christ. Of all the interventions of God in the historical process, this is the most important. Christopher Dawson writes, "The doctrine of the Incarnation which is the central doctrine of the Christian faith is also the center of history, and thus it is natural and appropriate that our traditional Christian history is framed in a chronological system which takes the year of the incarnation as its point of reference and reckons its annals backwards and forwards from this fixed center."<sup>13</sup>

The first Advent, however, is not simply a past event, for in the New Testament Christ's kingdom is both now and not yet. Christ introduced elements of his future kingdom into the present life of human beings. In John 14:15-17 he tells the disciples that he will leave a Counselor with them until he returns. Judgment and eternal life are a present as well as future reality: "He who believes in him is not condemned; he who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only son of God" (John 3:18). "The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life" (John 6:63).

These foretastes of the Kingdom shall come into their fullness with Christ's second coming, the goal toward which history is moving, according to the New Testament. At Christ's ascension, the angels tell the disciples that "this same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1: 11). In time Peter applied apocalyptic imagery to this future event, "But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up." And, "But according to his promise we wait for new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Peter 3: 10, 13).

The New Testament understanding of history, which provides the basis for all future Christian interpretations, presents--as with the Old Testament--a God who acts in judgment and mercy. But the pattern that emerges from these actions is now punctuated by the first and second advents. All God's other actions must be understood within the context of these interventions. In the words of Emil Brunner,

The historical time-process leads somewhere. The line of time is no longer a circle, but a straight line, with a beginning, a middle and an end. This is so because--if I may use a simile--God Himself has entered this circular time at a certain point, and with His whole weight of eternity has stretched out this time-circle and given the time-line a beginning and an end, and so a direction. By this incarnation or 'intemporation' of the word of God, time has been charged with an

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<sup>13</sup> Christopher Dawson, "The Christian View of History," in *God, History, and Historians: Modern Christian Views of History*, ed. C. T. McIntire (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 31.

immense intensity. It has become, as we have said, the time of waiting, of decision and probation.<sup>14</sup>

### **Historical Methodology**

To perceive how this biblical understanding of history might affect the way we write and teach about the past, we need to know something about historical methodology. A brief description might go something like this. The historian does not deal directly with the past. Rather, he uses those things that are left by the past, usually called documents or primary sources. While this term normally refers to written materials--letters, diaries, newspaper accounts, tax records, and birth and death certificates, for instance--it also includes physical objects such as coins, eating utensils, and buildings. Over time historians have developed principles or rules for using these sources.

Clearly, there are many events that do not leave any documentary evidence. For instance, I doubt that there is a record anywhere that documents that each of us brushed our teeth this morning. Just as clearly, many documents have disappeared over time--fire, floods, and wars have consumed countless documents while the cleaning out of basements, attics, and offices have probably destroyed nearly as much. Thus we can conclude that the materials available to the historian document only a small fraction of the past and that knowledge of the rest is simply unavailable to us.

Despite the incompleteness of the documentary record, the historian cannot usually include all of the information contained in all of the documents in his historical account; the data would overwhelm his readers. Therefore, the historian must select from the available materials that information that appears most representative of the past. Thus what appears in history books is a partial representation of a partial record, and the record is only the "leavings" of the past, not the past itself.

Furthermore, the historian does not simply take information out of the documents. He critically analyses those documents, testing whether they are genuine and whether any changes--revisions, additions, or deletions--have been made to them and determining such things as the date of writing or authorship. For an example of such work, recall, for instance, that in your Bibles there are frequent notes telling us that certain passages are not found in the oldest manuscripts. After going through this process of analyzing the general validity of the document, an activity called "external criticism," the historian then evaluates the information in the document, comparing it with information in other documents and making judgments of what appears credible. In handling written material, for instance, the historian examines, among other things, the proximity in time between when the document was written and when the event it recorded took place, the author's expertise and closeness to the event, and the author's intentions in writing the document. The historian then compares one document with another as she seeks to determine what really happened. This process is called "internal criticism." It is readily apparent

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<sup>14</sup> Emil Brunner, "The Problem of Time," in *Ibid.*, 87.

that the facts that the historian comes up with are not just gathered as we might pick up stones from a beach, but are the products of critical inquiry.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, the historian must determine the meaning of her facts, their relationship with other facts. This is the process of interpretation and is the point where the greatest disagreements occur among historians. In the words of one scholar,

The essence of historical enquiry is *selection--of* 'relevant' sources, of 'historical' facts and of 'significant' interpretations. At every stage both the direction and the destination of the enquiry are determined as much by the enquirer as by the data. Clearly, the rigid segregation of fact and value demanded by the Positivists is unworkable in history. In this sense, historical knowledge is not, and cannot be 'objective' (that is, empirically derived in its entirety from the object of the enquiry). This does not mean, as skeptics might suppose, that it is therefore arbitrary or illusory. But it does follow that the assumptions and attitudes of historians themselves have to be carefully assessed before we can come to any conclusion about the real status of historical knowledge.<sup>16</sup>

It is apparent, therefore, that historians have different assumptions and attitudes that shape the questions they ask, the relative importance they give to particular sources and facts, and the interpretation they make of their findings. In his book *Philosophy of History: An Introduction.*, W. H. Walsh describes the factors that cause historians to interpret history in different ways. First, there are one's own personal biases, those things that arise out of individual experience.<sup>17</sup> For example, a teacher I once worked with did not like Frenchmen because his father had told him stories of bad experiences with the French during World War 1. As a result, my colleague had difficulty maintaining objectivity when he dealt with the French in his history classes. At a second level are group prejudices, those views that we pick up from our own societies.<sup>18</sup> When I was growing up in the 1950s, for instance, there was considerable anti-Catholicism among Seventh-day Adventists, which of course rubbed off on the young people. Also, all of us reflect to some degree the nationalism of our own countries, which in turn affects our attitudes toward other countries. These prejudices, which we acquire from our social groups, then may make their way into our history.

Walsh argues, however, that these biases are ultimately controllable. Because of their visible and somewhat superficial nature we can become aware of them in relatively easy fashion and thereby are in a position to eliminate them, largely if not completely, from our writing and teaching. And, when we read or hear a historian who has not eliminated these factors, we can identify them and in a sense bracket them out when we evaluate his historical presentation.

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<sup>15</sup> A classic work on historical methodology is Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, 51 ed. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1992).

<sup>16</sup> Tosh, *Pursuit of History*, 142.

<sup>17</sup> W. H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction*, rev. ed., Harper Torchbooks (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1967; New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 99-100.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-101.

But at a third and deeper level are theories of historical causation.<sup>19</sup> These theories provide the intellectual framework for the historian's study of history. Unlike the role of personal and group bias, which as we have seen might be controlled to a considerable degree, the historical account would not have any meaningful structure if it did not arise out of this interpretive groundwork. Marxist historians, for instance, understand history in terms of modes of production and class structures that would be virtually impossible to separate from their account of the historical facts. Similarly, a Freudian historian examines individual biographies in terms of the early childhood experiences of his subject. Again, it would be difficult to separate the Freudianism from the biographical account and have anything more than the raw bits of biographical data.

But, Walsh points out, historians adopt these theories of historical interpretation because of fundamental assumptions, namely their underlying moral and metaphysical beliefs. He states "that historians approach the past each with his own philosophical ideas, and that this has a decisive effect on the way they interpret it. If I am right, differences between historians are in the last resort differences of philosophies, and whether we can resolve them depends on whether we can resolve philosophical conflicts."<sup>20</sup> He goes on to illustrate his point by saying,

I must certainly put aside, so far as I can, the moral and metaphysical preconceptions of my own time. But I cannot escape, if I am to make any sense of my material, making some general judgments about human nature, and in these I shall find my own views constantly cropping up. I shall find myself involuntarily shocked by this event and pleased by that, unconsciously seeing this action as reasonable and that as the reverse. And however much I tell myself to eschew my own prejudices and concentrate on understanding what actually happened, I shall not succeed in carrying out the injunction to the letter, since understanding itself is not a passive process but involves the judging of evidence by principles whose truth is independently assumed.<sup>21</sup>

### **Implications for Christian Historians**

This recognition that one's basic assumptions, underlying philosophy, world view, or whatever we wish to call it, strongly shapes our historical interpretation has important implications for Christian historians. When a positivist approach to history reigned supreme in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries, there was no room for discussing a "Christian approach to history," for it was assumed that all historians who followed the same methodology and pursued that methodology equally well would reach similar conclusions. Now we are aware that feminists, Marxists, post-colonialists (to name some of the prominent contemporary schools of thought), and others each will approach history in their own way, reaching varying conclusions that arise out of their differing assumptions. As Christians we also have a world view that shapes the questions we ask, the relative importance we give to evidence and facts, and

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 101-03.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 104-05.

the judgments we make. It seems clear that a Christian approach to history is both justifiable and necessary. In fact, if our Christianity is more than superficial it is probably impossible to avoid writing history from a Christian perspective. But just as other groups debate the content and implications of their theory, so do we need to examine our assumptions and ask how they might influence the teaching and writing of history.

In pursuing this task, however, we must realize that our world view does not provide predetermined answers to historical questions, for the evidence constrains us. We dialogue with it from our Christian perspective but we must honor that evidence by using it with care and recognizing that it is the foundation of all our historical accounts. The Bible gives us the framework within which we work, but our interpretations are no better than the evidence upon which they rest. We know that the Christian understanding of history did not result from research. Rather it grew out of the historical experience of the Jewish and Christian communities as they responded to God. We are their heirs, people who have found this heritage meaningful spiritually and intellectually, even if we cannot ultimately prove its truth. Although, in our view, the evidence drawn from many facets of our experience fits with and confirms our belief, ultimately Christianity is a matter of faith. As Kenneth Scott Latourette told the American Historical Association in 1948,

The historian, be he Christian or non-Christian, may not know whether God will fully triumph within history. He cannot conclusively demonstrate the validity of the Christian understanding of history. Yet he can establish a strong probability for the dependability of its insights. That is the most, which can be expected of human reason in any of the realms of knowledge.<sup>22</sup>

When we seek as teachers and writers of history to apply Christian insights to our discipline, we approach our work with a recognition that our knowledge of both God and history is limited but that understanding will grow as we pursue our study of the past. The dialogue that we carry on with the evidence we discover is a two-way street, for our understanding of the ways of God will be informed by what we find in the historical record just as our Christian perspective will inform our understanding of history. We will continue working with the conviction that the past is meaningful, even if we cannot always discern that meaning, and that it is in the hands of God, even when we cannot see him.

### **The Providence of God**

Possibly the most problematic aspect of the Christian view of history for the working historian is the doctrine of God's providence. As we have seen, it is clear that the Bible reveals God as one who controls the historical process, at times intervening to bring about his purposes. Some have taken this concept to mean that the primary task of the Christian historian is to

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<sup>22</sup> Kenneth Scott Latourette, "The Christian Understanding of History," in *God, History, and Historians*, ed. McIntire, 66.

discover God's interventions in history. I recall one of my undergraduate history teachers telling us that a conference educational superintendent had written to him asking for a list of God's interventions in American history so that they could be taught to academy students. Although I do not know how my teacher responded, I am doubtful that he produced such a list. Modern Christian historians, including those who are Adventist, have been reluctant to assert that they have found "God's hand in history."

The reason for this reluctance lies in how we obtain knowledge of God's activity. Ellen G. White, who has profoundly shaped Adventist thinking, writes that

In the annals of human history the growth of nations, the rise and fall of empires, appear as dependent on the will and prowess of man. The shaping of events seems, to a great degree, to be determined by his power, ambition, or caprice. But in the word of God the curtain is drawn aside and we behold, behind, above, and through all the play and counterplay of human interests and power and passions, the agencies of the all-merciful One, silently, patiently working out the counsels of His own will.<sup>23</sup>

In other words, it is Scripture, which we accept as divinely inspired, that reveals God's activity in the historical process.

The problem for the historian is that once we move beyond New Testament times, the Bible gives little specific information regarding God's intervention in history. Even the prophecies do not necessarily refer to God's activity in human affairs, for what they foretell may simply be the result of human actions. Partly for this reason, Martin Luther referred to the "hiddenness of God." Commenting on Luther's views, noted church historian E. Harris Harbison writes that, "God both *reveals* and *conceals* Himself in history."<sup>24</sup> In this interpretation, the Christian maintains faith that God is active in history at the same time that he humbly realizes that human knowledge of this activity is limited.

This theme of finitude appears frequently in discussions of the Christian interpretation of history. George M. Marsden wrote while teaching at Calvin College that "all we do know is that God has worked in our history and is continuing to work, but outside of biblical revelation we do not know clearly his precise purposes in permitting particular historical developments."<sup>25</sup> Somewhat similarly, the British evangelical historian David Bebbington states that the Christian historian "must recognize his own limitations.... He lacks the inspiration that gave the biblical historians their special insight. The first lesson that the Christian historian must learn is humility."<sup>26</sup>

On the other side of the coin, so to speak, is the recognition that history is a discipline with recognized but limited goals. As discussed previously, historians develop their history

<sup>23</sup> Ellen G. White, *Education* (Oakland, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Co., 1903), 173.

<sup>24</sup> E. Harris Harbison, "The Marks of a Christian Historian," in *God, History, and Historians*, ed. McIntire, 339.

<sup>25</sup> George M. Marsden, "A Christian Perspective for the Teaching of History," in *A Christian View of History?* eds. George Marsden and Frank Roberts (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), 3 8.

<sup>26</sup> Bebbington, *Patterns*, 183.

through the critical evaluation of sources, evidence that is always produced by human rather than supernatural action. Although some of the individuals who produced these sources may state their belief that God has been active in a particular event or series of events, unless we accept that the writer of the source was divinely inspired the source itself only gives us information regarding the human side of the story. The noted scholar of American church history, Robert T. Handy, writes that

a church historian as believer can theologize about the church and can point to its hidden character, but as an historical scholar making use of a tested method, the church historian--like any historian--should stick to the observable data and cite the concrete evidence in narration, analysis, and interpretation.<sup>27</sup>

Writing in the same spirit, Bebbington says that the historian will slant her historical account to the expected audience. When writing for Christians or for those one wants to convince of the truth of Christianity, the historian may legitimately use a providential framework. But when writing for a secular audience such as the historical profession one would not appeal to providence.<sup>28</sup> Underlying this distinction is the recognition that sensitivity to God's activity in history arises out of faith, not from study of historical documents. Assertions that God has been at work can never rest on the kind of evidence used by historians. As Herbert Butterfield, one of the major historians of the twentieth century, suggests, we see God active in history because we sense that he acts in our own lives; our existential spiritual experience--informed by Scripture--provides us with the lenses through which we view historical events.<sup>29</sup>

I find Richard Bube's discussion of the relationship between scientific and religious explanations of natural phenomena helpful in looking at the function of the Christian doctrine of providence in historical understanding. He writes, "*There are many levels at which a given situation can be described. An exhaustive description on one level does not preclude meaningful descriptions on other levels.*"<sup>30</sup> For example, the sentence "I love you" can be described on the level of alphabet, phonetics, words, grammar, context, and ultimate content. It makes a world of difference whether we are simply analyzing the language or describing an actual person expressing the depth of their emotion to another individual. Within each level, the description can be exhaustive but it in no way detracts from or invalidates descriptions on other levels.

Similarly, the historian interprets the actions of man in terms of what the documentary evidence reveals through application of the critical method, but does not thereby invalidate theological statements about human actions. The historian interprets human actions according to the principles appropriate to the historical level of explanation, while the theologian interprets the same phenomena according to the principles appropriate to the theological level. As noted

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<sup>27</sup> Robert T. Handy, "Christian Faith and Historical Method: Contradiction, Compromise, or Tension?" in *History and Historical Understanding*, eds. C. T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), 86.

<sup>28</sup> Bebbington, *Patterns*, 186-87.

<sup>29</sup> Herbert Butterfield, "God in History," in *God, History, and Historians*, ed. McIntire, 201.

<sup>30</sup> Richard H. Bube, *The Human Quest: A New Look at Science and the Christian Faith* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1971), 26. Emphasis in the original.

above, the historian and the theologian can be the same person simply playing different roles. But when writing as an historian, the scholar will be "cautious about identifying the divine interventions that he believes to take place in the historical process," Bebbington writes. "He does not so much see as glimpse them."<sup>31</sup>

Coming at the issue of providence from another direction, philosopher Scott Moore argues that it is not a good theory of causality because, among other things, it distracts us by raising such issues as free will and determinism and God's foreknowledge. Rather, he says, its value appears "as a cumulative conception of history.... I mean 'history' as the bearer and deliverer of our communal identity: reflection on who we are in the present, where we've come from in our past, and what we shall do in the future."<sup>32</sup> As such it will cause us to tell a "different story" about our history, but a story "which perhaps only members of the community will fully understand."<sup>33</sup> Although Moore's concept of the exact nature of this story is unclear (it might be described as a "testimony"), it is apparent that the story is quite different from what historians usually understand as history. Like the historians, this Christian philosopher sees little utility in the doctrine of providence as part of the historian's toolbox.

But in drawing attention to the limitations of the doctrine of providence for the working historian, I am not suggesting that the Christian understanding of history is thereby irrelevant. Recognition that all historical work is shaped by the basic assumptions or worldview of the historian should encourage us to think of its implications for the Christian historian. While our assumptions are unlikely to be completely different from the dominant views of our time, it is probable that they are different in significant ways. If Walsh and other analysts of historical knowledge are right, the degree to which our basic assumptions differ from those of our surrounding culture is the degree to which our history should be different.

These assumptions will arise out of our Biblical perspective on the world as it has interacted with our own experience. The more explicitly these elements have been consciously thought about the clearer they will be, although even the person who has not reflected on them will carry them as part of his or her mental framework for understanding everything. Where they have developed into an explicit or self-conscious philosophy these concepts will have the greatest impact upon our historical understanding.

Regarding the function of such a philosophy, Patrick Gardiner writes,

Theories of this kind may indeed be regarded in some respects as 'pointers' to types of historical material which may prove relevant to the understanding of a particular historical situation, from a certain angle and for certain purposes.... Their significance lies in their suggestive power, their directive importance."<sup>34</sup>

It appears to me that there are at least three distinctive basic assumptions--the Christian understanding of human nature, biblical moral judgment, and a sense that spiritual life is of

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<sup>31</sup> Bebbington, *Patterns*, 173.

<sup>32</sup> Scott H. Moore, "Christian History, Providence, and Michel Foucault," *Fides et Historia: Journal of the Conference on Faith and History*, 29 (Winter/Spring, 1997), 10.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>34</sup> Patrick Gardner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), 112.

utmost importance--that the Christian historian brings to his work that can function as the types of "pointers" that Gardiner notes. These assumptions guide us in determining what is important in the historical record and how to understand the human dimension of that record. We will be acting as historians, not theologians, and yet will produce a history that will be implicitly and perhaps explicitly Christian.

### **The Christian Understanding of Human Nature**

Our understanding of human nature will significantly affect our historical interpretation. Recall that Walsh used the concept of human nature to illustrate the role of basic assumptions. I have found the writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, an American Lutheran theologian, particularly helpful in explaining the Christian view of human beings and revealing its implications for understanding history.<sup>35</sup> The significant fact about people, according to Niebuhr, is that they are at the same time part of both the natural and spiritual worlds. Because they are creatures, humans are finite, subject to limited knowledge and limited perspectives. But because they are also spiritual beings, having self-consciousness, they have a certain freedom to rise above their physical and situational limitations.

This position of human beings as both in and above nature is, according to Niebuhr, the occasion for their sin. Through their spirit they realize what they ought to be and also the impossibility of attaining that goal because of their creatureliness. Thus they become anxious. If they would accept their finitude and place their trust in God, they would no longer be anxious. But this they will not or cannot do. The alternative is rebellion against God, the attempt to make something finite into something ultimate. This is humankind's sin, which expresses itself in several ways.

It is at this point that Niebuhr's discussion carries practical significance for the historian, as he outlines the four primary ways in which human beings seek to deny their situation as finite creatures. First, human beings rebel through pride of power. They seek to deny that humans are finite, only a small portion of the whole of existence, and as a result attempt through controlling others to maintain a security which is, in reality, impossible. Injustice, of course, almost invariably arises out of this will-to-power.

Second, humans manifest intellectual pride. They forget that they are part and parcel of the temporal process, that they can never gain complete transcendence over history. But yet they claim that they have complete knowledge, the truth, something that in reality they can never attain. As with the will-to-power, human beings, consciously or unconsciously, seek to obscure the fact that they have a limited view of the whole, that they cannot see truth as God sees it.

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<sup>35</sup> The following is drawn from Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, vol. 1: *Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1964), 150-264. Somewhat similar interpretations of human nature appear in Emil Brunner, *Man in Revolt: A Christian Anthropology*, trans. Olive Wyon (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947), 82-211; and Wolfhart Pannenberg, *What is Man? Contemporary Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. Duane A. Priebe (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1947).

Related to intellectual pride are moral and spiritual pride, the third and fourth of mankind's manifestation of sin which Niebuhr identifies. In both cases, an individual or group considers that its moral standards and understanding of God's will are absolute and therefore must be obeyed. People forget that they too are sinful human beings, despite their devotion to right living and to God. Often combined with the will-to-power, moral and spiritual pride frequently result in injustice and destructive behavior.

Niebuhr makes a final point that although these four manifestations of sin appear in individual level, they become more dangerous when individuals become part of a group. Because people constantly experience defeat in their individual attempts to make themselves supreme, they seek, often successfully, to lose their sense of finitude by identifying with a group. Although group pride is simply an extension of the pride and arrogance of the individual, it is all the more dangerous because it claims a certain authority over individuals and makes unconditioned demands upon them. Through their involvement and identification with the group, which is larger than the individual and thus offers a seeming security, human beings make their last effort to cast off their finitude. But, Niebuhr concludes, they forget that the group is also involved in the processes of history and thereby is also finite.

Much more, of course, could be said about human nature, but Niebuhr's analysis alerts us to some of the ways in which human beings manifest the struggle between good and evil that takes place deep in their souls. Ellen White writes that the human has "a perception of right, a desire for goodness" against which there works "an antagonistic power.... There is in his nature a bent to evil, a force which, unaided, he can not resist."<sup>36</sup> The consequences for the historical process are amply described in the words of Emil Brunner:

Since history has been in existence this has been its theme: the contrast between individualism and collectivism, freedom and authority, independence and submission, the predatory man and the herd-man. Every movement which aims at helping the individual to attain his rights ends in libertinism and the dissolution of community--the Athenians knew quite well why they gave Socrates the cup of hemlock; and every reaction which tries to assert community, authority, order, the whole over against the caprice and the egoism of the individual, ends in oppression, violence, and dull stupidity. The movements for freedom at first full of vitality at the outset, and splendid in their leaders, shatter community, and the movements for community, at first full of a deep sense of responsibility and of service, trample on the individual and his rights. It is not the observation of the processes of nature, but contemplation of this tragic element in human history, which is the school of pessimism, of despair of man, and of his destiny.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> White, *Education*, 29. Jack W. Provonsha, a Seventh-day Adventist theologian, uses language similar to that of Niebuhr in *God is with Us* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Assoc., 1974), 114-25.

<sup>37</sup> Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 183-84.

The Christian historian will approach his subject with no illusions regarding the perfectability of man, the inherent virtue of any particular group or individual, or the absolute rightness of any cause. She will be sensitive to the intertwined nature of good and evil, that good intentions are always mixed with self-interest, that results are always ambiguous, and that moral progress is an illusion. But such insights will not produce cynicism or despair, for the Christian historian also knows that these human beings, although weak and distorted, are God's creatures under his loving care who deserve, indeed require, sympathetic understanding, for the historian is also fallen, subject to the same insecurity and pride and in need of the same salvation as the rest of humanity.

### Christian Moral Judgment

The Christian moral standard offers a second major area in which a Christian understanding of history is suggestive for the teacher or researcher. But we must recognize that the issue of moral judgment has been a controversial one in the historical community. With the advent of scientific history in the late nineteenth century, many historians sought to eschew making moral evaluations of past individuals and actions. Reflecting this view, Christian historian Herbert Butterfield stated that, "the historian, whose art is a descriptive one, does not move in this world of moral ideas."<sup>38</sup>

But other historians have recognized that moral and value judgments are both inescapable and necessary. John Higham speaks of the historian actively engaging the past, exercising "a morally critical function with tentativeness and humility with a minimum of self-righteousness," and with a willingness to meet the past on equal terms."<sup>39</sup> Somewhat similarly, David Hackett Fischer condemns the "moralizing fallacy," referring to historians who cast moral judgments all over the place, but states that

every historian possesses a complex structure of value assumptions, which he cannot adjust to his empirical projects, and cannot keep out of his work. But he can adjust his project to his values in such a fashion as to neutralize or to control his moral preferences. The first step in that process would be to make his values as fully explicit, to himself and others, as possible. The second step would be to design a research problem in which his values allow an open end.<sup>40</sup>

These statements suggest that our moral perspective can be a useful tool of historical analysis, guiding the issues that we investigate and the explanations that we offer. The morality of the ten commandments, while not giving us license to condemn others, may suggest to us areas in which to look for possible clues as to the strengths and weaknesses of individuals,

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<sup>38</sup> H[erbert] Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History*, The Norton Library (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1965), 120.

<sup>39</sup> John Higham, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," *American Historical Review*, 47 (April 1962), reprinted in *The Historian and the Climate of Opinion*, ed. Robert Allen Skotheim (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Co., 1969), 205.

<sup>40</sup> David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, Harper Colophon Books, (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1970), 79.

groups, and cultures. While it serves no purpose to search simply identify liars, thieves, and adulterers, we can become sensitive to the possible negative effects of their behavior. At the same time, we can also look for the positive effects of honesty and commitment. Of course, we also need to be alert to the fact that dishonest people may do good things, or that persons of the highest personal integrity may be weak leaders, but again our moral sensitivity will cause us to ask why the mix of good and bad in a particular case produced these particular results.

The social morality of the prophets can be suggestive in the same way, sensitizing us to how a given society treats politically and economically weak members. This morality further teaches us to regard all people as important, regardless of gender, class, race, and creed. The Christian historian who takes this philosophy seriously will view things universally, avoiding the pitfalls of elitist, western-dominated, present-minded history. Christian historians should play a major role in the attempt to teach and write history from the bottom up, but at the same time because of their sense of the worth of individuals they should not allow themselves to lose sight of the individual in favor of the nameless masses. Furthermore, Christian morality offers a perspective by which to judge institutional and technical developments, making us aware of the fact that what is good for one class may be bad for another and that what offers material advancement may harm the environment, limit the possibilities of social justice, and destroy spiritual values.

In making these judgments, the Christian historian will reject the notion of cultural relativism, which posits that standards of one society cannot be used to judge another society. Whether the issue is Assyrian cruelty toward defeated peoples, Aztec human sacrifices, or chattel slavery in the United States, the Christian historian will always regard these as evil, morally unjustifiable acts and institutions. But in writing about them, he or she will not overtly condemn, but show their wrongness through accurate description of their horrors (i.e. numbers killed, methods used, reactions of those affected) and by analyzing how they might have contributed to the weakness of particular societies. For instance, in the three cases cited, the Assyrians were never able to effectively incorporate subject peoples into their empire because terror was their only method of rule; human sacrifice seems to have played a role in making Aztec society vulnerable to European invasion; and American slavery brought both a costly civil war and enduring social problems. Properly done, such writing and teaching will produce history that engages its audience on a moral level without either exemplifying or encouraging moral pontificating.

### **The Significance of the Spiritual**

Finally, believing that God's principal activity is spiritual, that human beings are spirit as well as flesh, and that Christianity, however imperfect human practice of it seems to be, is the major embodiment of God's redemptive purpose on earth, the Christian historian will be particularly interested in the role of spiritual factors and especially the role of the Christian church. He will examine the conditions that hinder or encourage the development of human religiosity within the larger historical context. The Christian church may serve as a focal point of historical study as the historian examines its role as both a mover and recipient of historical

forces, but she will also examine the spiritual and social role of non-Christian religions, for they as well grow out of the nature of man as a spiritual being.

Perhaps the best example of the role that Christian historians might play in drawing attention to the religious dimension of history is the effect that evangelical scholarship has had on the understanding of American history. "There is no doubt that scholarship on theologically conservative Americans--especially fundamentalists and evangelicals--would have drifted even deeper into the doldrums," writes Leo P. Ribuffo, if "[George] Marsden, [Mark] Noll, [Grant] Wacker, [D. G.] Hart, and their fellow Christian scholars had not written on the subject."<sup>41</sup> The challenge remains, however, to write and teach not only about people like ourselves-conservative Christians, but to extend our sensitivity to all manifestations of humanity's spiritual hunger, treating them seriously as crucial parts of the human story.

These three areas of human nature, morality, and the significance of the spiritual are only suggestive of what Christian understanding may hold for the working historian if we will examine it more fully and creatively. If we direct our thinking along lines such as these, we will, I believe, find ways as responsible teachers and writers of history to interpret "human life in the light of [our] Christian vision of that life, sorely distorted by sin, yet redeemed by Divine mercy, and healed by Divine grace, and called to the inheritance of an everlasting Kingdom."<sup>42</sup>

### **Responsibilities of the Christian Historian**

Having explored at some length the role of basic assumptions or presuppositions in the writing of history and specifically in the Christian writing of history, in closing we need to look at the responsibilities of the Christian historian. To say that absolute objectivity is impossible, that all of our historical knowledge is shaped by our basic assumptions, is not to say that anything goes, that we may write history any way that we wish. Although some contemporary theory suggests otherwise, I believe that historians can establish some approximation of a reality that exists independent of their own minds.

If such is the case, all of us as historians must base our assertions on the documentary record and must be able to reasonably defend our critical evaluation of that record and the information contained therein. We must be able to show how the facts that we have chosen adequately represent that record and understandably fit together in our interpretation. As has been frequently said, history is the product of a dialogue between the historian and her documents and all aspects of that dialogue are open to critical inspection.

To illustrate, unlike the novelist who has the freedom to change the order of events or create new characters to introduce into a historical setting, the historian must be able to document the events that he describes and the time in which they took place. Where most disagreements occur among historians is in the significance that they give to particular facts and

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<sup>41</sup> Leo P. Ribuffo, "Afterword: Cultural Shouting Matches and the Academic Study of American Religious History," in *Religious Advocacy and American History*, eds. Bruce Kuklick and D. G. Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997), 229.

<sup>42</sup> Georges Florovsky, "The Predicament of the Christian Historian," in McIntire, ed., *God, History, and Historians*, 43 8.

the relationships that they see between these facts. Yet even though these judgments arise, as we have seen, from the basic assumptions of the historian, they must be defensible in terms of the documentary record. Although some scholars have argued that the contemporary use of theory has resulted in forcing facts into a predetermined pattern,<sup>43</sup> I believe that the Christian view, while sensitizing us to elements of the past, must work in conjunction with the evidence. Just as our Christian viewpoint makes us aware of and helps us understand the evidence that we find, so does the evidence interact with that Christian world-view, modifying it in the direction of greater realism about the actual world. The possibility of revision of our views is nothing to be afraid of, for the actual world is God's world. The endeavor to understand the truth of humankind's past is a serious task that demands honesty, perseverance, and humility, as well as critical thinking, qualities that enable us to grapple with the deepest dimensions of the human experience.

E. Harris Harbison states that "the Christian who is also a historian ... will be known neither by any fully-rounded 'philosophy of history' which is the necessary outcome of his Christi& belief, nor by the amount of time he spends talking or writing about Christianity. He will be known by his *attitude toward history*, the quality of his concern about it, the sense of reverence anti responsibility with which he approaches his subject."<sup>44</sup> After all, we must remember that in the Christian view God came to earth to enter into the historical process as a man. If history is important enough for God to enter into time and space, surely it is a subject that calls for our utmost effort to both take the evidence seriously and examine that evidence "Christianly" as we seek truth.

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<sup>43</sup> For example, Keith Windschuttle states that "ethnohistorians of the Pacific ... have given primacy to their theory and have then tried to make the evidence fit into its all-encompassing mould." See, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (New York: The Free Press, 1996), 89.

<sup>44</sup> Harbison, "Marks," 353.