

# Integrating Faith and History

BY GARY LAND

**S**eventh-day Adventist academy and college faculty face daily the challenge of teaching their subjects from a Christian point of view. Church administrators and parents expect this, and it is a major justification for operating a parochial school system. But perhaps most importantly, integration of faith and learning gives expression to the belief that Christianity deals with the whole of life.

Fulfilling this goal can be difficult, since most of the resources in our disciplines are decidedly secular. Hence, we must continually re-examine the nature of Christian teaching in order to improve both our understanding and our practice.

When we try to “think Christianly” about any discipline, we must recognize that we are relating two different elements—our faith as expressed theologically and our chosen field of study. To integrate faith and learning successfully, we must understand clearly the nature of both. This will help us see the points of contact. The following discussion will explore these issues as they re-

late to history, but the discussion has implications for other disciplines as well.

## **Philosophy of History**

The philosophy—or theology—of history is a time-honored discipline, but

story, the philosopher tries to tell us about the meaning of events. Jacques Barzun has distinguished four criteria of history: “Narrative, Chronology, Concreteness, and Memorability.”<sup>1</sup> In contrast, James M. Connolly writes:

*The philosophers of history utilize the raw material of the historian, they direct their gaze upon the total process of history itself and seek to abstract from the process those laws or patterns that they feel give meaning to the process of history.*<sup>2</sup>

We are pursuing this latter function when we try to work out our philosophy of history. As Christians, our reflection on history’s meaning arises out of our biblical understanding. In that sense, our methodology differs from that of the secular philosopher, but the goal remains the same: a statement of history’s meaning.

This distinction is important. A philosophy of history, because of its abstract nature, does not necessarily apply to the teaching or writing of history. That does not imply a lack of connection between the two. Patrick Gardiner, for in-

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a different one from that of history. Rather than closely analyzing specific events, as does the historian, the philosopher of history tries to discern some overarching pattern of significance to human existence. Instead of telling a

stance, in commenting on the Marxist philosophy of history, makes an applicable point. He 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>3</sup>

### **The Christian Understanding of History**

Just as the worldview of Marxist historians guides them to give special attention to economic factors, just as behaviorist historians regard environmental influence of supreme importance, so Christian history teachers need to examine their own worldview to understand its suggestive power for the classroom. Because the discipline of history depends upon documentation, we cannot expect that all aspects of the Christian understanding of history can be directly applied to our teaching. However, Christian teachers will find that their worldview directs their attention to certain historical facts and gives them a framework for interpreting them. This is the direction in which we need to look in order to bridge the gap between a philosophy of history and history.

In the past, much Adventist discussion about a Christian approach to history has revolved around the issue of providence or God's intervention in human affairs. I can recall one of my college history teachers in the mid-1960s telling our class that a conference educational superintendent had requested a list of God's in-

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terventions in American history so that these could be taught in the schools! Except for those events explicitly identified in the Bible and Ellen White's writings, however, most Adventist history teachers have resisted such calls to identify God's activity in history, for they believe that such an effort is largely speculative. The supernatural aspect of the divine influence cannot—by definition—appear in the documentary evidence.

The Christian teacher must explain to students that God is active in history but

that when we move beyond revelation, our knowledge becomes limited. We believe God works in history today as He did in biblical times, but only when we meet Him in eternity will He reveal fully what we now see through a glass darkly.

While providence is certainly an important element in the Christian understanding of history, it is not the only one. Other aspects—because they are more closely tied to historical evidence—may be more fruitful for the classroom. As C. T. McIntire writes:

*Christian historiography refers not simply to history written by Christians, nor to historical studies of the church and theology, but to an historiography which itself examines the history of peoples, societal structures and institutions, ideas, mores, and patterns of life, according to the sorts of insights and values provided by a Christian view of people, society, norms, history, the world and the whole of created reality.*<sup>4</sup>

### **Application to Teaching**

An important element of a Christian philosophy of history is our understanding of human nature. As the writings of theologian Reinhold Niebuhr have made clear, the Bible presents human beings as free and yet limited. Because of their inability to accept their creatureliness, humans become prideful, seeking to take God's place. The Christian teacher must recognize, therefore, that human motives are mixed. Both benevolent and selfish forces are often present in our actions and the latter often destroy the former. In approaching 19th-century American abolitionism, for instance, the Christian historian can accept the possibility that a sincerely held moral-

ity motivated the reformers along with conscious or unconscious desires for power or control.

The teacher might spend time, for example, on William Lloyd Garrison, showing that he so strongly opposed slavery that he willingly faced mobs determined to kill him. At the same time, however, Garrison's single-minded courage made it difficult for him to work with others, particularly when they opposed his tactics. Hence, virtually every organization he joined ended up being split between a Garrisonian and anti-Garrisonian wing, thereby undercutting the effectiveness of the abolitionist cause. In dealing with examples such as this, the teacher's conclusions will be guided by the evidence. However, viewing humanity as a complex mixture of good and evil will help guard against either too pessimistic or too optimistic an interpretation.

Likewise, the teacher can examine the culture of an entire society or age. Knowing that humanity's pride causes people to replace God with their own knowledge and ideals, the Christian teacher will study whether particular cultural manifestations such as the Enlightenment have fulfilled a religious function. In this case, the teacher can show how even a strong critic of Christianity such as Voltaire put in its place a rationalistic deism, to the point of even building a chapel in his old age. The instructor will also want to discover how Christians themselves have imbibed the ideals of the secular culture and mixed these concepts with their religion. Again, during the Enlightenment,

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many Christian thinkers, including Joseph Butler and David Hartley, developed rationalistic theologies that paralleled in many respects their more radical colleagues. Study of the religious function of cultural movements could also be applied to movements such as romanticism, Marxism, and existentialism.

The Christian moral standard offers a second major area for investigation. The personal morality demanded by the

Ten Commandments, while not giving us license to condemn others, may suggest possible clues as to the strengths and weaknesses of individuals and cultures. The admonishments of prophets can be used in the same way, sensitizing us to how a given society treats its politically and economically weak members. This morality further teaches us to regard all people as important, regardless of class, race, or creed.

Christian teachers who take this philosophy seriously will view things universally, avoiding the pitfalls of elitist, Western-dominated, present-minded history. They will teach history from

the "bottom up," seeking to view events from the perspective of the lower classes. At the same time, they must not allow themselves to lose sight of the individual in favor of the nameless masses.

One good way to work the "average" person into the teaching of 20th century history is to have students write their own family histories, looking in particular at the ways in which recent depressions and wars, and geographic and social mobility have affected their own families. Students can do most of the research for such a project through interviews with parents, grandparents, aunts, and uncles. Students usually find this an enjoyable and eye-opening experience. For Adventist students, it also provides insight into the religious history of their families.

Christian morality also offers a perspective for judging institutional and technical developments. It makes us aware that what is good for

one class may be bad for another and what offers material advancement may harm the environment, limit social justice, and destroy spiritual values. The impact of industrialism in the 19th and 20th centuries, for instance, gives both students and teachers much to reflect upon as they examine its positive and negative influences.

This last point leads to a third area. Christian teachers believe that God's principal activity is spiritual and that Christianity, however imperfect human practice of it seems to be, is the major embodiment of God's redemptive purpose on earth. Therefore, they will be particularly interested in spiritual factors—especially the role of the Christian church. Although—as noted earlier—there are limitations in using providence as an explanatory principle, the Christian instructor will examine the conditions that hinder or encourage the development of spirituality and the effects of spiritual forces, such as human religiosity, within the larger historical context.

Teachers can show the links between 19th-century evangelical Christianity and social reform in Great Britain and the United States, focusing on such individuals as William Wilberforce, William Gladstone, Phoebe Palmer, and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Teachers can also discuss what happens when the church fails in its mission; for example, southern Christians' defense of slavery prior to the American Civil War and the churches' accommodation to Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. The Christian church can thereby serve as a focal point of historical study as students examine its role as both a

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mover and a recipient of historical forces.

Likewise, history teachers and their students can also analyze the development of freedom, studying its origins, growth, retreats, and effects, taking special note of its relationship with spirituality. The history of religious liberty is especially appropriate in this context. American history teachers can discuss Adventist experiences with Sunday laws and figures such as Uriah Smith, A. T. Jones, and Charles Longacre who led the fight against them. Out of such study new interpretive patterns may arise, perhaps even new ways of presenting history in a uniquely Christian way, while using the same kinds of evidence as other interpretations.

These three areas—human nature, morality, and the significance of the spiritual—are only suggestive of the possibilities of Christian philosophy for the history teacher. By directing our thinking along lines such as these, we will be able 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>3</sup> ✍

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#### **SUGGESTED READING**

**D. W. Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian View* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 211 pp., paper. Reprint, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Grand**

Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1991), 221 pages, paper.

An excellent introductory survey and critique of the major philosophies of history. Contains a 14-page annotated bibliography.

**Colin Brown**, *History and Faith: A Personal Exploration* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Academie Books, Zondervan Publishing House, 1987), 129 pages, paper.

A useful analysis of historical methodology and its relationship to the historical aspects of Christian belief.

**Langdon Gilkey**, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1976), 446 pages, hardbound.

A theological analysis of the major Christian philosophers of history by an American theologian. Quite difficult, but important.

**C. T. McIntire**, ed., *God, History, and Historians: An Anthology of Modern Christian Views of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 477 pages, paper.

An anthology of 20th-century writings by theologians, philosophers, and historians addressing both the meaning of history and historical methodology. Essential reading.

**C. T. McIntire** and **Ronald Wells**, *History and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1984), 144 pages, paper.

A collection of essays, mostly by historians, addressing the role of the Christian historian and the impact of historical methodology on faith.

**George Marsden** and **Frank Roberts**, eds., *A Christian View of History?* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 201 pages, paper.

A collection of essays, largely by Calvin College teachers. Most of the essays are practically rather than theoretically oriented. Contains an excellent bibliographical essay on "Christianity and History."

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Harriet Beecher Stowe

*Christian history teachers need to examine their own worldview to understand its suggestive power for the classroom.*

**Ronald H. Nash**, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House/Dallas, Texas: Probe Ministries International, 1984), 170 pages, paper.

A philosopher's examination of historical methodology, particularly as it relates to the historicity of Christ's resurrection.

**Siegfried J. Schwantes**, *The Biblical Meaning of History* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1970), 192 pages, paper.

A Seventh-day Adventist theologian's discussion of history's meaning, focusing on history as the story of freedom.

**George Edgar Shankel**, *God and Man in History* (Nashville, Tenn.: Southern Publishing Association, 1967), 268 pages, hardbound.

The first book-length effort at developing a philosophy of history by a Seventh-day Adventist.

**Roy Swanstrom**, *History in the Making: An Introduction to the Study of the Past* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1978), 137 pages, paper.

A fine little book written for the college freshman to introduce some of the questions that historical study raises for the Christian. Also explains why the Christian needs to take history seriously.

**Ronald A. Wells**, *History Through the Eyes of Faith* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1989), 262 pages, paper.

Rather than discussing theoretically how a Christian might approach history, the author attempts to interpret the history of western civilization "Christianly." Written as a supplement for western civilization courses.

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Jacques Barzun, "History: Her Muse and Her Doctors," *The American Historical Review* 72 (February 1972), p. 55.

2. James M. Connolly, *Human History and the Word of God: The Christian Meaning of History in Contemporary Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), p. 22.

3. Patrick L. Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), p. 112.

4. C. T. McIntyre, "The Ongoing Task of Christian Historiography," in *A Christian View of History?* George Marsden and Frank Roberts, eds. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975), p. 53.

5. George Florovsky, "The Predicament of the Christian Historian," in *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich*, W. Leibrecht, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1959), p. 166.