

# Teacher of the Church: The Adventist Historian

**The study of history is a form of vicarious experience. It offers us the chance to augment our own wisdom with the experience of past generations.**

**S**ome time ago, I talked on the telephone with one of my former students, who was pursuing graduate studies in history. We discussed his classes, and soon our conversation focused on the purpose of history. I was surprised to hear him say that the old standards of histor-

ical scholarship, such as objectivity and the quest for truth, were no longer valid. Since objectivity was not really possible, and truth was at best relative, he argued, why pretend that we knew? Portrayals and interpretation of historical phenomena were necessarily subjective, and therefore mythical in nature. Knowledge was culture-specific, as were ethical and moral codes. Welcome, he might have added, to the amazing world of postmodernism.

Postmodernism has indeed entered into the historical discipline. Though none of my former students now in graduate school seems to have bought into it as fully as this one did, they have all encountered it. At first blush, it might appear that the new history is more open and tolerant, claiming, as does Hayden White, one of its major spokesmen, that we are “free to conceive ‘history’ as we please, just as we are free to make of it what we will.”<sup>21</sup> Yet, my former student seemed to have little patience for historians like me who clung to what he considered discredited ideals and outdated narrative history.

from the study of the past cannot be applied to other situations; (2) right and wrong are relative and tied to culture; and (3) an understanding of human nature, the search for historical truth, and meaning in history are no longer our goal? And why,” I wondered aloud, “should we do painstaking critical research, testing, and historical discourse and debate if we are not seeking to come closer to truth?”

## **The Purpose of History and Its Place in the Curriculum<sup>2</sup>**

If historians themselves are no longer sure of the purpose of history and its place in education, is it any wonder that our society, our educational leaders, and our students are not? That is why, at the start of my introductory history course, I make a point of telling my students what they can expect to get out of history. I begin by arguing that all knowledge and thinking are based on the memory of past experience. From infancy, our *personal* experiences are augmented by the experiences of others—parents, siblings, friends, and teachers—in the form of guidance and advice. Not all experiences are safe to repeat, and we may not live at a time when we can benefit from them. That each of us has survived childhood testifies that we can learn from the experience of others.

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**BY ROLAND BLAICH**

# Through history, my students learn how human beings have learned and made progress.

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This ability to vicariously appropriate the experience of others, to benefit from it, and to synthesize it all into wisdom and judgment sets us apart from other species. It also distinguishes wise people from fools. In fact, the study of history is a form of vicarious experience. It offers us the chance to augment our own wisdom with the experience of past generations.

Civilization, I tell my students, is the composite achievement of many generations. It is possible only when a generation builds on the experience of previous ones. Experience is worthless if it is not remembered and appreciated. A society that believes it can enjoy the fruits of civilization, while neglecting the historical processes that brought them forth, and which lives only for the "future," will soon have little left. Such fundamental elements of civilization as the legal state or rule of law, civil liberties, and religious liberty are not very secure if they rest solely on the strength of paper documents. They cannot endure unless the attitudes, the values, and the spirit behind those principles are embraced by every new generation. But how can they be embraced unless they are understood? How can they be understood unless the new generation has grown up, as it were, with the generations of its fathers, unless it has participated in their growing pains and grappled with their problems, as is done in historical studies? Only then is the new generation truly heir, only then can it appreciate the benefits it enjoys, and understand its responsibilities as steward of a sacred inheritance that it is entrusted to maintain, continue, and pass on.

History is also the key to identity. Suppose we wake up one morning and discover that we have lost our memory. We do not recognize anything or anybody in the room. We cannot remember how we got here or what we are doing here. We do not know who we are. Along with our memory, we

have lost our sense of direction, our purpose of being, our sense of identity. What does it mean to be a human being? What does it mean to be a Protestant and an Adventist Christian? The key is found in history.

**T**hrough history, my students learn how human beings have learned and made progress. They do this by questioning in a responsible way. I want them to understand that past achievements occurred only because some individuals questioned apparently self-evident truths, and because a few visionaries had visions of better societies. History thus liberates us from blind conservatism, narrow dogmatism, prejudice, and bigotry. While it is true that some visions, when implemented, have turned into nightmares, still history has seen creative advances only when there was room for questioning and exploration. Had there been no questioning and no continuing search for truth, there would have been no Protestant Reformation and no Adventist movement. Commitment to the past does not have to be a barrier to progress. It can be its initiator.

On the other hand, my students can also expect to learn how—all too often and sometimes tragically so—we have *not* learned because we have refused to face ourselves in the critical mirror of history.

My students learn that most new knowledge is false, and thus become less apt to fall

## The Great Wall of China.

for every new "truth." They learn that at times, it is more prudent to keep what has withstood the test of time, and not jeopardize it by heedless experimentation. What has taken generations to build with great sacrifice, suffering, and courage is easily destroyed by clever people who are so uninformed about the past that they do not know that they are really addressing old, wrong questions in old, wrong ways.

## Learning to Be Human

Moreover, during the course of study, my students can expect to gain a better un-

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### Roman Colosseum, Italy.

derstanding of what it means to be human. All history—whether it be the history of Stalinism, imperialism, or the papacy; whether of Argentina, Adventism, or South Africa—offers role models. Each story contains heroes and villains. When we examine them closely, we are likely to find that there is some of both in each, and we may recognize human traits that we encounter every day. And if we have eyes to see, we may catch a glimpse of ourselves here and there. The contradictions and faults we see in others may open our eyes to our own, and foster humility and intellectual charity.

From their study of history, my students may learn that certain basic principles of

morality never change, that there is a real distinction between right and wrong, and that evil means have never truly served a righteous cause. Opinions and manners change, and part of what is regarded as “truth” does change with every generation. However, the basic components of honor, good faith, justice, and honesty have remained the same. They have always been part of the gold standard of human decency. And treachery, deceit, and murder have always been evil.

Finally, I expect my students to develop what I call historical-mindedness—the habit of seeing everything in historical perspective. Everything is tied to a historical context from which it derives its meaning and significance. And as they see their own values and self-evident truths in historical context, they may learn to distinguish between what is essential, what is relative and variable, and what is mere fad.

For generations, history has formed the center of civic education, and biographies have been valued for their role in developing character. This is still true today.

### The Historian in History

The first task of the historian is the quest for historical truth. This is accomplished through research, publication, and dialogue. But these are only means to a higher purpose. For too many historians, their discipline becomes a means to serve their own interests. The purpose of history is, it would seem, to equip people to be historians who

can research and publish, so that other historians can read and know! Somehow, historians who write for the general public are not considered academically respectable. While perhaps resulting in a more actively researching discipline, the application of the publish-or-perish principle has caused historians to neglect their ultimate responsibility, which is to teach. History does not belong to historians; it belongs to the people.

Since history belongs to the people, it must be presented in ways that are appealing to the public. The worst enemies of history are those who leave their students with the impression that history is only facts, names, and dates. In its best tradition, history has always been storytelling. The historian pauses at times to bring a moment of tranquility to the drama, to reflect, to explain and analyze the story. The historian personally enters the story and invites the student to come along. This is when history becomes lived experience and when it offers enlightenment, meaning, and wisdom.

### Bringing History to Life

To tell a story well, to bring history to life and make it real, the teacher must have experienced history for himself or herself. I have often watched with amazement as guest lecturers hold my students spellbound by accounts of their own experience of recent history. Some of these speakers were not even very articulate, yet they made history become real.

For most of us, the only way to experience the history we teach is by working extensively with original sources. Only in this way do we get a “feel” for the times and the actors in history and acquire a sense of the immediacy of experience. This is the kind of involvement and enthusiasm to which our students will respond. And only thus do we gain the intuition to give history meaning.

It is not history that teaches; it is historians. Good history not only reveals history; it also reveals the author. History will come alive only if we step into it. Objectivity in the pursuit of truth does not preclude us from taking a stand after all things have been considered. How could a human being be impartial about the Holocaust?

As I seek to bring history to life in my teaching, I find myself pinned between two walls—the history textbook and time. The

problem with today's textbooks is that they tend to eliminate meta-discourse. Publishers in contemporary multicultural America produce texts that are value-neutral, lacking reflection or judgment. To avoid offending anyone, they tend to gloss over significant episodes or ignore them entirely. The offense, instead, is against truth. I have noticed, for example, that some texts no longer feature much information on certain aspects of the medieval church, such as the Inquisition or the corruption of Renaissance popes.

### Helping Students Experience History

Good history is never abstract. Yet the necessity to cover the sweeping course of history leaves the teacher little time to study role models in depth. There is no time to reflect, to probe, or to grasp the complexity of a decision or an issue. And there is no time to experience history. And so there is no chance for our students to grow convictions, which can only come from experience. This robs history of its benefits and its purpose.

I have long refused to cave in to time pressure. Instead, I *make* time for in-depth study of certain issues, episodes, and actors in history. For example, I want my students to experience the drama of the Protestant Reformation, feel the pulse of the age, and grapple with the problems that were debated then. Above all, I want them to experience history where it is most real, to meet the individual actors. And I want them to see them not only as reformers, but also as human beings. A good biography or two supplements the text. Martin Luther's is a fascinating story of one of the most significant figures in history, a man at times almost superhuman in his courage and his accomplishments, and yet a human being who made tragic mistakes. My students will, I hope, come away with admiration for a great man, but without unrealistic expectations of church leaders.

For more than half a century, the world has been fascinated by the Holocaust. Much of the historical literature describes Hitler as a demon or psychopath, and the Holocaust as a manifestation of German cultural character. By writing about *them*, historians have let us off the hook. Since we are not early 20th-century Germans, there is nothing for us in the story. These historians, it seems to

me, have done us a disservice. For the history of others—even of the most outlandish people, or those from a very distant past—is also our own history if it tells us something about the human condition. The Holocaust holds our attention *not* because it was the work of a group of psychopaths, but, to use Christopher Browning's phrase, because it was the work of "ordinary men."<sup>3</sup> Our fascination with Hitler and Nazism endures precisely because, as Andrew Chandler put it, "so much of our own self-understanding as moral, social, and political beings is drawn together in its issues."<sup>4</sup>

### Holocaust Studies in the Curriculum

Holocaust studies deserve a prominent place in our curriculum. Regrettably, at most Christian colleges, there seems to be little enthusiasm to include it.<sup>5</sup> The Holocaust is not just a Jewish, but also a Christian tragedy. For the Christian Church, our own included, failed to heed the most basic of our Lord's commandments: to love our neighbor as ourselves. What we do is what we are. Our study of the Holocaust expands our understanding of the human capacity for good and evil and offers invaluable insights into human behavior. "What was it," I ask my students, "that caused some people to resist while others were indifferent, collaborated, or themselves committed the most outrageous crimes

without evident qualms of conscience? Why did so few resist?" Individual case studies offer fascinating opportunities to explore the complex relationship between specific personal experience and abstract moral principles.

No one can study the Holocaust or the Great Terror under Stalin and avoid a personal identity crisis out of which spirituality can grow, through which one is touched by others' pain. From recent history, the Holocaust offers an abundance of readily available and irrefutable evidence about the human condition. It compels us to confront the most profound questions about human nature and about God. My students' experience of the Holocaust may well be for them not only a time of enlightenment, but also a time of personal shaking and of firming of character. If so, history has served its purpose.

### Our Responsibility to the Church

The ultimate role of the historian is to teach. Until recently, Adventist historians have for the most part ignored the history of their church. The identity crisis our church has been experiencing may well be a consequence of that neglect. And still for many Adventist historians, denominational history is an undesirable option. Some consider it not "real history," as one academically respected colleague once expressed it. Some

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## History . . . liberates us from blind conservatism, narrow dogmatism, prejudice, and bigotry.

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have decided that it is not possible to study Adventist history using critical research. Others prefer to avoid the hazards associated with it. While specialization allows some to avoid it, the discipline as a whole cannot escape its responsibility toward Adventist history.

Nor must Adventist historians allow postmodernist influences to diminish their sense of mission to the church or their zeal in the quest for truth. We do not need postmodernists to tell us about problems with objectivity and the tentative nature of historical truth. It is one thing, it seems to me, to be realistic and humble about our human failings as historians, and quite another to abandon objectivity and the pursuit of truth as ideals that guide us. Adventist history must not become history as it *should* have been or, as Stalin once put it, "politics projected into the past."

The Adventist historian must teach the church. When I was in Germany researching the history of our church during the Third Reich, I was asked by some of my Adventist friends, "Roland, why are you doing this? Why rake up the past? Let it lie; we all make mistakes. Adventists are a forward-looking people." How sad to be so ignorant of the purpose of history! We are what we do, and history must help us to see ourselves as we really are. As individual Christians and also

as a corporate body, we do well to pause periodically, look at ourselves in the mirror, and ask: How did we do?

As Adventist Christians, we have already faced up to the truth that we are sinners, redeemed by a gracious God. Our human tendency is to prefer what gives us comfort. Yet, as it is in everyday life, so it is in history: We stand to learn the most from our mistakes. To consider them is painful, but not to consider is to perpetuate them. Truth does not need to be protected; it stands on its own merits, and it will prevail. There is much about the historical experience of the Christian Church that we, the Adventist Church, must learn soon if we do not want to repeat the tragic story of other church bodies.

**W**hile Adventist historians must serve the church, they must not be subservient to its administrative establishment. Adventist historians hold a key to the identity of our church, and they must not relinquish it to people whose agenda leads them to use history as a means to promote their own causes. These people are sure they know the truth before they do the research and use the "history proof-text method" to substantiate it. The task of the historian is to establish

and preserve truth, not perpetuate myths; it is to enlighten, not indoctrinate. The Adventist historian must lead God's people into the present, as it were, so they can continue on constructively, using tradition *without being its prisoner*. The new generation must be free to rise to the challenge of its times. When the historian fails in this duty, he or she deserves to be taken to task. When the historian is chastised for commitment to duty, it is not the historian, but the purpose of history that is under attack. ✍

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2. For an outstanding essay on the purpose of history, I recommend Paul Gagnon, "Why Study History?" in *Atlantic Monthly* 262:5 (November 1988), pp. 43-66. Also, see Sam Winburg, "Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts," *Phi Delta Kappan* 80:7 (March 1999), pp. 488-499.
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