

Providence and Earthly Affairs: The Christian and The Study of History

by Gary Land

Seventh-day Adventist historians, particularly those who teach in the church's colleges and universities, face a dilemma. Although they have been trained in the critical method, which holds that historical interpretation must be based on carefully examined documentary evidence, church leaders¹ expect them to present a peculiarly Adventist view of the past, one that traces "the hand of God in history." These two approaches to history present a dilemma because they do not seem to go together. Documentary evidence reveals only what occurs within the space-time continuum and nothing of what occurs in the eternal or spiritual sphere.²

Attempts have been made to resolve this dilemma but success seems far from sight.³ One reason for this failure is that no distinction has been made between a philosophy of history—more properly in this case, a theology of history—and history. As Jacques Barzun has recently written, there are four criteria of history: "Narrative, Chronology, Concreteness, and Memorability."⁴ In contrast to these criteria, "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."⁵ The Christian theologian of history further differs from the philosopher in that he learns the patterns and meaning of history from God's revealed Word, which he takes on faith.

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These distinctions are exemplified by the fact that most of those who write about the ultimate meaning of history are either philosophers or theologians rather than historians.

To make these distinctions, however, does not necessarily mean that history and the theology of history have no relation to each other. But the two must be distinguished in order to understand their proper relation. Our failure to do this seems to have resulted in both a faulty theology of history and a faulty history.

Up to now, Adventist discussion of a theology of history has revolved around the problem of providence, or God's intervention in human affairs, and has put emphasis upon the selectivity of God's actions. Adventist historians have pointed to such events as the destruction of the Spanish Armada and the escape of the British at Dunkirk as examples of Divine intervention. However, emphasis on selectivity posits an almost deistic image of the relationship of the supernatural and the natural, one in which the world goes its course except at those special moments when God intervenes. Probably no Adventist historian consciously adheres to such an image, but the failure to distinguish between theology and history seems to have produced this view.

In contrast, the Bible presents a God who is both immanent and transcendent, who both created and sustains the world. This view is reflected in a number of Biblical passages: "He [Jesus] reflects the glory of God and bears the very stamp of his nature, upholding the universe by his word of power." (Hebrews 1:3) "He [Jesus] is before all things, and in him all things hold together." (Colossians 1:17) "In his hand is the life of every living thing and the breath of all mankind." (Job 12:10) "In him we live and

move and have our being.” (Acts 17:28) “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” (1 Corinthians 8:6)

This means that God is in all historical events, for it is only by his sustaining power that any event can take place. As one Old Testament scholar writes,

Basic to Israel’s faith is the conviction that God is not aloof from the world of daily affairs, or bound by an iron chain of cause-and-effect relations. The Israelites had a sense of the immediacy of God’s presence. They believed that any event—ordinary or extraordinary—could be a sign of his will and activity. To them an event was *wonderful* or *significant*, not because it abrogated a natural law, but because it testified to God’s presence and activity in their midst.⁶

If we understand this concept of God’s immanence in the world perhaps we can better understand what we mean when we speak of providence, or God’s unique actions in human affairs that give evidence of his transcendence. If it is through God’s creative and sustaining power that the world is maintained in existence, then a unique action of God is not a qualitatively different event. Richard H. Bube’s use of this idea in his discussion of miracles seems applicable to the concept of providence in history.

When miracles are recognized as a particular form in the outworking of God’s purpose in the world, when they are associated with the preaching of God’s Word, the spreading of the gospel of Jesus Christ, and the manifestation of God’s witness in the world, they become clearly distinguished from the world of magic and sorcery. Then it becomes clear that miracles are not arbitrary violations of natural law to impress the people involved, but that they are appropriate evidences of God’s free activity in making himself known.⁷

If this concept of God’s immanence and this parallel between miracle and providence are accepted, we can no longer speak of God’s “intervention” in history. (There would be no history at all without God’s active involvement.) We can more accurately say that God and his will are more fully revealed in some events than in others. The historian’s problem is not thereby

solved but we are perhaps coming to a deeper understanding of a theology of history.

Beyond this concept of immanence and transcendence, the Bible gives history a pattern. In its view, the key events are creation, the fall, the choosing of Israel, God’s fullest revelation in the person of Jesus Christ, God’s continuing revelation through the Christian Church and the Second Coming. This pattern which theology gives to history is the point of transition from the theologian of history to the historian.

The problem which Adventist discussions of a theology of history have posed for the historian is that in the confusion of theology and the study of history we have tried to identify specific events in which God has intervened. However, the theology of history presented here asserts that while God’s will is revealed more in some events than in others, God is involved in all events and hence there is no qualitative difference between the unique and the general. Furthermore, such a statement is theological

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rather than historical. As the noted biblical scholar G. Ernest Wright states regarding biblical interpretations of historical events,

Historical and archaeological research can uncover the factual background in ancient history. But the meaning, the interpretation, the faith which in the Bible is an integral part of the event itself—this no one can prove.⁸

Another Old Testament scholar, Bernhard W. Anderson, writes,

To be sure, the central testimony of the Biblical account concerns the revelation of God—but it is in the concrete affairs and relationships of people that God makes

himself known. No external historical study can demonstrate that the Exodus was an act of God; but to Israel this "political" event was the medium through which God's presence and purpose was disclosed.⁹

Another writer suggests that while the revelation is in the events, it is only recognized through interpretation inspired by the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ These statements make clear that interpretations of God's presence and action in history are of a different nature and have a different source from historical interpretation.

The historian, therefore, interprets history at a different level than the theologian. Richard H. Bube 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.*"¹¹ For example, the sentence "I love you" can be described on the level of alphabet, phonetics, words, grammar, context and ultimate content. Within each level, the description can be exhaustive but it in no way detracts from or invalidates descriptions on other levels.¹² 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 man's actions. The historian interprets man's actions according to the principles appropriate to the historical level, while the theologian interprets man's actions according to the principles appropriate to the theological level. It should also be recognized that the historian and the theologian can be the same person, yet he should make clear both to himself and to his audience the role he is playing.

Despite this distinction between levels of explanation, however, there is a point of contact between a historian's theology and his history. The preoccupation of Adventist historians with the theological level seems to have prevented them from being aware of the areas in which the Christian historian might make a unique contribution within the historical level of explanation.

Every historian approaches his subjects with presuppositions and values that shape his interests and judgments. As a result, written history is the product of a dialogue between the historian and his facts. Similarly, the Adventist historian approaches history with the firm belief

that the first Advent of Christ and the Christian religion are the most important events in the history of the world and the significance of all other events is measured by their relation to them. Furthermore, he gains from the Bible a view of man as a creature created in the image of God who rebelled from his maker and has since been characterized by a continual warfare between his noble and his sinful aspects. The idea of sin also carries with it a transcendent moral standard by which human actions are to be judged. These assumptions that the Adventist historian brings to his work are, though different in content, not different in kind from those of the non-Christian historian.¹³ The presuppositions of the Adventist may also differ from those of other Christians, perhaps most importantly in his views of the unitary nature of man and the significance of the Second Coming.

As a result, the Adventist historian may ask different questions of his material than would someone else.¹⁴ For example, in approaching a political reform movement he might be particularly interested in the interplay between sincere ideals and self-interest. Reinhold Niebuhr, a theologian whose books suggest many insights that the historian can apply to scholarly history, carries this approach even deeper when he speaks of the irony of American history. Our age is involved in irony because so many dreams of our nation have been so cruelly refuted by history.¹⁵ History when approached in this way becomes a witness to the truth of the Christian revelation concerning man's true nature and his only hope.

The Adventist historian will also be interested in what might be called patterns of significance. Siegfried Schwantes in *The Biblical Meaning of History* speaks of certain significant religious and political developments that prepared the way for Christianity.¹⁶ Although he moves back and forth without notice between the historical and theological levels of explanation, his ideas are suggestive, for the Adventist will be particularly interested in the way in which political and cultural events were related to Christ. One does not have to invoke the hand of God to understand how the movement of empires in the Mediterranean world created the conditions which surrounded the life of Christ.

In this sense, prophecy calls our attention to the significance of certain events rather than giving us a causative explanation.

It should also be recognized that cultural and social developments are just as important as political ones. Schwantes calls our attention to the significance of religious belief,¹⁷ an idea which may be fruitful if explored more fully. The

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Adventist historian will be particularly interested in what happens to man’s concepts of himself and his world as a result of both accepting and departing from Christian beliefs¹⁸ and how his beliefs affect his actions. Moral judgment also plays a role in historical interpretation, and though one must always be cautious in making such judgments,¹⁹ Christian morality is a suitable standard which perhaps can also be a tool in understanding human failure.

An approach to history such as suggested here will not be a Christian history in the sense of carrying a label on it. In terms of method, it should be the same as any other scholarly history. Yet because of the questions asked and the emphases made there will arise from it Christian implications. The great Christian apologist C. S. Lewis has made a statement regarding science that seems equally applicable to history.

What we want is not more little books about Christianity, but more little books by Christians on other subjects—with their Christianity latent. You can see this most easily if you look at it the other way round. Our Faith is not very likely to be shaken by any book on Hinduism. But, if, whenever we read an elementary book on Geology, Botany, Politics or Astronomy, we found that its implications were Hindu, that would shake us. It is not the books written in direct defense of Materialism that make the modern man a materialist; it

is the materialistic assumptions in all other books. In the same way, it is not books on Christianity that will really trouble him. But he would be troubled if, whenever he wanted a cheap popular introduction to some science, the best work on the market was always by a Christian.²⁰

What Lewis says regarding “cheap popular” introductions holds equally true for more ambitious scholarly endeavor.

If an Adventist historian should approach history in the manner suggested here, he might develop a fuller understanding of both history and theology. By carrying into his historical study biblical insights concerning man’s nature, morality, and the significance of certain events, he will find that the interplay between his presuppositions and the historical record produces rich intellectual and personal benefits. In other words, not only will certain theological presuppositions inform one’s historical understanding but the historical record will also inform one’s presuppositions.

It might be objected that this approach to history does not fit Ellen White’s statements in *Education*²¹ and therefore does not really help solve one of the problems of Adventist education. However, when the purpose of Mrs. White’s comments are understood and their historical context recognized there is no real contradiction.

Mrs. White was speaking of a theology of history which, as has been noted, is a different intellectual endeavor from history. Furthermore, the history courses taught in the Adventist colleges of her day, as witnessed by the textbooks used,²² were in reality courses in the theology of history and have little or no relation to the purposes and content of the academic history courses taught today. Adventist historians are now engaged in a different enterprise than the Adventist history teachers of 80 years ago. The teaching of history in non-Adventist schools has gone through a similar change.

Ellen White’s call for a theological approach to history is still legitimate, though, and should be carried out. Perhaps every world civilization course should include special attention given to a theology of history and every history major should take a course in the field, preferably

taught by both a historian and a theologian. In approaching the subject of a theology of history, the distinction between levels of explanation and the epistemological differences between a theology of history and history should be made clear. There would be no danger of a complete separation between the two fields, however, if Adventist historians began to approach academic history in the manner suggested here. The implications of history would raise questions which would lead the student to the different level of explanation given by a theology of history.

In essence, what is suggested here is that Adventists should shift the focus of their discussion of a theology of history. It should be recognized that the problems associated with the concepts of immanence, providence, free will and evil are essentially theological. When historians address these problems, they are taking on the mantle of the theologian, which is perhaps best left to the professional. The Adventist historian will be on firmer ground if he asks instead how his presuppositions can provide unique insights applicable to a professional, scholarly approach to history. The possibilities of such an approach need to be explored.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. College History Teachers' Council, "Report of Quadrennial, Theme: Towards a Philosophy of History," (Pacific Union College, August 6-10, 1962). George Edgar Shankel, *God and Man in History* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1967). Ronald L. Numbers, "In Defense of Secular History," *Spectrum*, I (Spring, 1969), 64-69. Siegfried J. Schwantes, *The Biblical Meaning of History* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1970). Gary M. Ross, "The Historiographical Work of Siegfried J. Schwantes," *Spectrum*, IV (Winter, 1972), 41-53. Comments, *Ibid*, 54-62.
4. Jacques Barzun, "History: Her Muse and Her Doctors," *The American Historical Review*, LXXII (February, 1972), 55.
5. James M. Connolly, *Human History and the Word of God: The Christian Meaning of History in Contemporary Thought* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1965), 22. This volume gives a good survey of contemporary theologies of history.
6. Bernhard W. Anderson, *Understanding the Old Testament* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1957), 43-4.
7. Richard H. Bube, *The Human Quest: A New Look at Science and the Christian Faith* (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1971), 116.
8. G. Ernest Wright and Reginald H. Fuller, *The Book of the Acts of God: Christian Scholarship Interprets the Bible* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1957), 22.
9. Anderson, 15.
10. J. V. Langmead Casserly, *Toward a Theology of History* (London: A. R. Mowbray & Co., Limited, 1965), 4-6.
11. Bube, 26. Emphasis in the original.
12. *Ibid.*, 29-35.
13. Essays discussing the relationship of a historian's presuppositions and his interpretation of history will be found in Robert Allen Skotheim, ed., *The Historian and the Climate of Opinion* (Reading: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1969) and Hans Meyerhoff, ed., *The Philosophy of History in Our Time: An Anthology* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1959), 87-224.
14. This approach is also suggested by Numbers, 67.
15. Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1962), 2. Niebuhr's discussion of the nature of man is very suggestive for the historian. See, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, Vol. 1, Human Nature* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941).
16. Schwantes, 63-118.
17. *Ibid.*
18. The approach, although not necessarily the conclusions, I am thinking of is illustrated by three non-scholarly works: Francis A. Schaeffer, *The God Who Is There* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968), 13-84. Francis A. Schaeffer, *Escape From Reason* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1968). H. R. Rookmaaker, *Modern Art and the Death of a Culture* (Downers Grove: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970).
19. The problem of moral judgment in historical interpretation is discussed by John Higham, "Beyond Consensus: The Historian as Moral Critic," *The American Historical Review*, LXVII (April, 1962), 609-625. Reprinted in Skotheim, 196-213. See also the essays in Meyerhoff, 225-290.
20. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*, ed., Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970), 93. It might also be noted that Lewis denies the possibility of a philosophy of history apart from revelation. See, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1967), 100-113.
21. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1942), 173-184.
22. For example, see Alonzo Trévier Jones, *The Great Empires of Prophecy: From the Fall of Babylon to the Fall of Rome* (Battle Creek: Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1898). Alonzo Trévier Jones, *Ecclesiastical Empire* (Battle Creek: Review and Herald Publishing Company, 1909). Emmett K. Vande Vere indicates that Jones' books were specially prepared for college history courses. See, *The Wisdom Seekers* (Nashville: Southern Publishing Association, 1972), 74.

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