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HISTORY: THE CHRISTIAN'S TRUE ENDOWMENT

Historiography and the Lordship of Christ

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“History,” if by that word we mean the simple past, is everywhere, and, is the story of everything. We live in a society that hinges its functionality on the reality and discoverability of the past. The law, economics, science, faith, family, medicine, and education become utterly redundant if history is non-existent or non-discoverable. Every basic operation in our world reinforces this reality and exemplifies the necessity of understanding the role of history in our lives and in everything else around us. This is observed when eyewitnesses are trusted to testify of past events in a court of law. Or when salaried citizens are mandated by their government to file an annual tax return that accurately reports previous earnings and legitimate deductions. Even the highly esteemed modern scientific method is entirely predicated on the uniformity of nature (that cause and effect can be observed, repeated, and reported in a closed experiment if all possible variables are controlled). All of this becomes entirely absurd if no immediate, or distant past exists, or if history is untraceable.

The discipline of historical study is premised on the very continuity of things present with things past. Everything that exists today does not have a moment-by-moment *ex nihilo* creation (notably taught by Augustine and Jonathan Edwards).¹ Instead, God’s initial creative work (*ex nihilo*) has given rise to his providential work of sustaining the created order. In other words, everything that exists today has a back story that informs its purpose, and value placing it in the meta-story of the past. Proving the existence of the past is beyond the scope of this paper, and, is outside the possibility of any plausible scientific methodology.² Nevertheless, our lives function as though the past is an inevitable reality that we are both students of, and beholden unto.

This paper will seek to explore what the study of the past is (i.e., that discipline of doing history), how history faithfully seeks to capture the past, and what possible consequences exist if done improperly. There are many species of historiography, each staking their claim as the most faithful to both reason and the past. The many different approaches to the discipline of historiography demonstrate that, like all philosophical endeavors, this one inevitably breeds disagreement. Carl Trueman spoke to the common factiousness of scholars and their schools of thought when he

¹ Edwards, "Things To Be Considered," Works, 6: 241-42.

² History cannot be subjected to any form of scientific methodology requiring propositions of truth that arise from reproducibility and replicability. See, *Reproducibility and Replicability in Science*. United States: National Academies Press, 2019.

remarked that “There is an old adage among historians that no event in history is so certain that, sooner or later, somebody won’t come along and deny that it ever happened.”³ Arriving at anything resembling a consensus is even more problematic than merely deciding on the historicity of past events. Bruce Shelley quibbled regarding the taxonomy within the discipline itself, “history is like time. Everyone assumes he knows what the word means until he pauses to think about it.”⁴

What is true for all historians and historiographers is that, when it comes to reporting and retelling history, they are perpetually engaged in intentional redaction. There are no bare facts.⁵ There are no mere historians; there are only students of the past who produce a scant summary of their findings after immersing themselves in bygone eras. Historiographer John Pemble crudely describes this process as, “writing history is drinking an ocean and pissing a cupful.”⁶ Historians never succeed in disentangling themselves from the world they currently inhabit, even after fully baptizing themselves in the past. This is why in the process of reporting history, there can never be any ‘bare facts’ as every report of an objective “fact” is offered by a subjective person from a subjective viewpoint. For the most part, honest historians strive after an unbiased retelling of history; axiomatically, this striving diminishes in times of conflict.⁷

While these honest historians engage in the good fight for objectivity, they can never extricate themselves from the story they are telling. As a result, two very different problems arise in the discipline of historical study, both relating to this unavoidable subjectivity. Firstly, the historian is the ultimate redactionist of the stories they report. No historian claims to have successfully reported every verifiable fact they unearth from the primary sources. Summarizing is the historian's art, yet problematically, they remain the gatekeepers of how history is understood in their summarizing.⁸

³Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (United States: Crossway, 2010), 17.

⁴ Bruce Shelley, "The Meaning of History: Posing the Problem." *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society* 7 (1964): 101-110.

⁵ Robert S. Cohen, Thomas Schnelle, *Cognition and Fact: Materials on Ludwik Fleck* (Germany: Springer Netherlands, 2012), 201.

⁶ John Pemble, *Venice rediscovered* (United Kingdom: Clarendon Press, 1995), 19.

⁷ Evans, Richard J. *In Defense of History*. (United Kingdom: W.W. Norton, 2000), 25.

⁸ Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (United Kingdom: Harvard University Press, 2004), 104.

Secondly, historians cannot uncover and remedy every bias they bring to their reporting of history.⁹ They not only become the authority on which aspects of the story are disseminated but also on how the story is to be understood, interpreted, and applied. Thus, history reporting takes on a life of its own, incurably colored by the bias of the historian who first reported it. Of course, it is customary that other historians discover and rectify some of the initial historian/s' biases, and this process will continue *ad Infinitum*. Peer review remains the last bastion of credibility within the discipline of history.¹⁰ Yet, no story will ever be told in a vacuum, without some shading and tincturing by the historians themselves. As John Fea summarizes, "In the end, all historians are revisionists."¹¹

This reality has caused some to propose that if the discipline of history cannot be reduced to empirical science, then it must be redundant and inherently misleading. Historians concede that their discipline is not a 'science' in the contemporary use of the word. Fea confessed this much when he wrote, "History is not an exact science. Historians will never reach anything close to a modern certainty about everything that happened in a bygone era."¹² This is not to say that history is anti-science or unscientific. Quite the opposite is true. One scientist hyperbolized, "history is the greatest experiment ever conducted. It is like an examination of thinking conducted over ten million replications, at ten million sites, and through ten million time points."¹³ Nevertheless, historians have never reached a consensus as to how 'scientific' their discipline is. Edward Jenks, writing for the Independent Review in 1904, articulated a view of the science of history that was popular for his age differentiating how the discipline of historical study can be both a science but not scientific "the collection of facts, the weighing of evidence as to what events happened, are in some sense scientific; but not so the discovery of the causes and effects of these events."¹⁴

Historians must exercise caution to prevent getting carried away by speculations that their discipline equates to other scientific discoveries predicated on empirical methodology. Richard Evans,

⁹ Baruch Halpern, *The First Historians: The Hebrew Bible and History* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 139.

¹⁰ Antoon De Baets. *Responsible History* (United Kingdom: Berghahn Books, 2009), 37.

¹¹ Fea, John. *Why Study History?: Reflecting on the Importance of the Past*. (Baker Academic, 2013), 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 22.

¹³ Michael J. Ireland, *Critical Thinking and Scientific Reasoning* (Australia: Pressbooks, 2021), 7.

¹⁴ Jenks Edwards "The Latest View of history" *The Living Age*. (United States: Living Age Company, 1904), 196

taking the French revolution of 1789 as his example, issues this caution to all historians, encouraging them to understand and appreciate the lack of empirical methodology in their discipline.

“Nobody was ever going to unravel scientifically the mental processes of twenty million Frenchmen during the Revolution of 1789. Nor could interpretations of this event be arrived at by a mere process of induction. The causes and effects of the Revolution could never be known scientifically like the causes and effects of some chemical reaction, nor could they be grounded on discoverable laws like the law of gravity or the second law of thermodynamics.”¹⁵

Regardless of history’s ascientific properties, the discipline remains inevitable and inescapable. Should the postmodern theorist claim that history “as a possible object of reference” is a discipline best relegated to history, they will never successfully disconnect reality and present experience from history.¹⁶ Embedded in the postmodernist’s claim that the study of history ought to be abandoned to the past, stands as a shocking admission about the reality and importance of history “as a possible object of reference.” This remains the persistent criticism of postmodern theories of reality, language, history, and philosophy. They borrow capital from worldviews that they seek to undermine and leverage this capital to build structures of sand.¹⁷

The history of history

It would be a mistake to think that the history of studying history is monolithic. Trueman expounds on the variations existing within the discipline:

“If we were to look back over the history of history itself, we would see that the discipline (if we can use the singular) cannot be represented by any single explanatory scheme but has exhibited dramatic variations in both content and complexity over the years.”¹⁸

Historically, the treatment of individual histories, particularly from one culture to another, varies drastically.¹⁹ Pre-modern western historiographies contrasted with the ancient Chinese, Greeks, Mesopotamians, etc., all betray a profound miscellany of methodologies, intentions, and cultural applications. Moreover, modern historiography emerged alongside the secular, rational, and

¹⁵ Richard J. Evans, *In Defense of History* (United Kingdom: W.W. Norton, 2000), 21.

¹⁶ Perez Zagorin, “History, the Referent, and Narrative: Reflections on Postmodernism Now” *History and Theory* 38, no. 1 (1999): 1–24. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2505313>, p. 1

¹⁷ Polina Herchanivska, “Overcoming the modern socio-cultural crisis-From postmodern to post-postmodern: Theoretical aspects” *International Journal of Criminology and Sociology* no. 10 (2021): 745-752

¹⁸ Carl R. Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (United States: Crossway, 2010), 70.

¹⁹ John Burrow, *A History of Histories* (United Kingdom: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2008), 16.

progressive characteristics of the Enlightenment.²⁰ This contrasts drastically with the moralizing historiographies of the European Middle Ages. Of the latter, past events were predominantly retold as a means of curbing some form of moral turpitude yet the former, post-enlightenment historiography, “especially eschews the impulse to be morally edifying” in its attempt to convey objective truth.²¹

History as recapturing the past

This present moment of reality in which our ontology is fixed exists on a continuum. It moves in an apparently linear fashion out of the past, through the present, and presses into the future. Despite our finitude preventing us from inhabiting either the past or the future, experience informs us that we cannot successfully experience our present in isolation of either. We are hardwired to believe that our memories of past events are inestimably formative for who we are in the present and what we will experience in the future. Furthermore, we are hardwired to believe that the past’s influence is not exhausted in the current moment, but that all future moments will look back upon this very moment as the past. In other words, we cannot help but be convinced of our past’s relevance for the here and now. When this present “now” slips into the past, it will continue exerting its influence on all future moments. Because our ontology is fixed on this continuum, we will never escape the abovementioned experience. Because our ontology is fixed on this continuum, we will never escape the cumbersomeness of describing this experience. We will always understand the past as uniquely important to our present human identity, experience, and future. Furthermore, the past’s constant influence on the now and all future “nows” produces the urge to understand the discipline of history and retell our stories.

Subsequently, a careful distinction should be made. The ontological past itself, for all its influence on the present, is not history. In the words of Trueman, only the remembered past becomes history. “History is not the same as the past. It is rather a re-presentation of the past, or, in the phrase of John Lukacs, it is ‘remembered past, with all of the contingency and limitations that such implies.’”²²

²⁰ Roy Porter, *Enlightenment: Britain and the Creation of the Modern World* (United Kingdom: Allen Lane, 2000), 23.

²¹ Hayden White. “The Narrativization of Real Events.” *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 4 (1981): 793–98, p. 796

²² Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History*, 69.

Historiography as anthropology

The value of storytelling is essential to the human experience. It may be the one unifying feature of humanity's experience. Indigenous peoples inhabiting every extremity of the globe have this in common, they have codified aspects of their history, morality, and superstitions within a culture of storytelling.²³ Of course, the more primitive cultures enjoy blended stories containing elements of history, myth, morals, and entertainment, being in stark contrast to anything resembling Rankean precision.²⁴ When historians engage in their discipline, they continue a tradition that has endured as far back as our species. Trueman remarked that “the heart of history was telling stories that explained the past.”²⁵ As soon as one moment succeeds another in our experience, we are compelled to revisit it in our memories and reanimate it in our stories. Discovering moments beyond the memory's reach entails doing historical research. People record their memories as oral history, literary history, and history in song and art. Future generations will discover these and seek to understand them in their natural context, synthesize them, and then report them afresh.

History, then, is the cross-stitch of civilization. It binds everything together. It unites people groups and connects the present with the near and distant past. No matter how scientifically tenuous this may be, the past once existed as a present ontological reality. Subsequently, the past enjoys a continuing existence in truncated form. This is foundational to civilization itself. Earlier, we proposed that storytelling is quintessentially human. Primitive cultures, however, do not routinely formulate rigorous historiographies. Nevertheless, the story remains the essence of what unites us all. This demonstrates an incurably human impulse. Humans seek to perpetually confer teleological value on current momentary existence. Cumbrously stated, the present moment, in our estimation, is always greater than the moment afforded its existence. This results from experience, and our understanding that while the present moment instantaneously transmutes into the past, this is not a transference into meaninglessness.

²³ T. Huber, *Storied Inquiries in International Landscapes: An Anthology of Educational Research* (United States: Information Age Pub., 2010), 171

²⁴ Sparks argued that “only in ancient Greece and ancient Israel did true history writing emerge in antiquity.” p. 233

²⁵ Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History*, 14.

Historiography's limitations

Every historian acknowledges the inescapable reality that the vast majority of the past is lost to the present and future. While it remains true that the past constantly exerts an influence on the present, the historian is confronted with the same grievance expressed by C.S. Lewis who fittingly opined,

“We have already forgotten; even if we remembered, we have not time. The new moments are upon us. At every tick of the clock, in every inhabited part of the world, an unimaginable richness and variety of ‘history’ falls off the world into total oblivion.”²⁶

A staggering preponderance of the past is undiscoverable, and only a minute portion is ever captured (rescued) and preserved by historians. This weighs heavily upon the historian, who is compelled to acknowledge that of all the consummate past that has gone before, only a scintilla is discoverable. Compounding the troublesomeness of this reality, it must also be acknowledged that from the immense amount of discoverable history, only a slender portion is ever reported. As we observed earlier, historians can only report a “cupful” of the ocean of history they discover. This sobering thought does not mean that historians are unable to discover the truth about the past, or even that they are unable to report their findings faithfully. Exhaustive reporting is not essential to truthful reporting. However, it does mean that every historian understands that they are always encountering an incomplete story, and then redacting that into reportable history. This is the supreme challenge of every historiographical approach. Given all these limitations, historians must write with humility. Bradley and Muller clarify that even operating within the confines of the best historiography, “...biases can never be completely suspended, and modern historiography has properly concluded that the issue of interpretation begins the moment we think about the past.”²⁷ This means the historian never does “history” without simultaneously doing historiography. It is simply impossible to do one without the other.

William Cronon raises a valid concern, “The vision of history as an endless struggle among competing narratives and values may not seem very reassuring. How, for instance, are we to choose

²⁶ C. S. Lewis, *Christian Reflections* (United States: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 133

²⁷ Bradley & Muller, p. 64

among the infinite stories that our different values seem capable of generating?”²⁸ Nevertheless, the principal intention of the historian is not to report the past for its own sake. Because the present moment is nothing more than, quite literally, the absolute product of everything that transpired previously, historians are chiefly striving to offer explanatory power for what is experienced in the present. Therefore, the historian perpetually engages in an assessment of the relevant and consequential. To Trueman, this forces historians to take a broader view of past events to understand their relevance to the present. “Historians do not think in isolated sound bites; they think in terms of larger patterns and networks of happenings... [thus] Historical explanatory schemes should be heuristic not prescriptive.”²⁹

Returning to Lewis’ postulation, the immensity of the past lost to the present is tragic and unfathomable. Every previous event, regardless of how great or small, contributes to the story of the past and the present. Every previous action of every person, every spoken and written word, every motive and intention of the heart, and the story of the concatenation of every atom, and reproduction of every protein molecule is past. Thus, William Cronon queries, “How, for instance, are we to choose among the infinite stories...?” Historians select stories from the past that they believe are worth discovering, researching, and reporting because they perceive that they add value to the human experience both now and in the future. In his work “Historians’ Fallacies”, David Fisher argues this point, claiming, “that history-writing is not storytelling but problem-solving.”³⁰ All people, historians, and laypeople reach back into the past to discover solutions to understanding the present in some way that is not obvious by maintaining their focus on the present. This kind of “problem-solving” can be as limited and singular as the individual, or as comprehensive in scope as a nation, empire, or the entire human race. This exercise will only be limited in scope by the particular problem, or puzzlement for which historians are seeking to explain or solve. This means of interpreting reality is

²⁸ William Cronon, “A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative.” *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 4 (1992): 1347–76. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2079346> p. 1370

²⁹ Trueman, *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History*, p. 73.

³⁰ David Hackett Fisher, *Historian’s Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (Harper and Row, 1970), p. 7.

the seedbed for propagandists to construct their metanarratives, subsuming constituent parts for autonomy-reducing objectives.³¹

Historiography is theology

When historians study the past, they engage in a discipline only available to creatures of derivative ontology. History is not available to the one who possesses divine aseity as he cannot know “history”. God’s omniscience is not in question; he undoubtedly knows all things by causal (prescriptive) knowledge. God’s existence, however, is not exhausted in sequential time like that of creatures. Scripture elevates God’s omnipresence to the same footing as his omniscience and demonstrates that God is not just everywhere present *spatially*, but he is also everywhere present chronologically. God is infinite and eternal. God’s eternity, according to the medieval philosopher Boethius, is his, “...complete, simultaneous and perfect possession of everlasting life, all at once.”³² The result of God’s eternity, as it is described here, is that he does not know the past as history. His presence is suffused comprehensively throughout all time and space, making every place and time his present reality. The past, therefore, is not a reality to him; he knows only an eternal present.

This in no way delegitimizes the discipline of history for derivative beings. Obedience for creatures is not defined by replicating God’s essence but by submission to his imperatives and imitating his virtues (“Therefore be imitators of God”).³³ Because God is not losing time as finite creatures do (forcing us to rely on recorded history to reclaim the past), God has sanctioned the recording and study of history through his inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. By codifying human history, including creation and redemption, in sacred writ, God has legitimized the study of history. The atemporality of God, along with his gracious act of infallibly recording history, is the basis for the discipline of history itself.³⁴ Thus, those who presume to engage in the discipline of history without

³¹ It is hard to resist the temptation, at this juncture, to digress into a scathing critique of modernity itself with its endowment of two global wars producing an inestimable amount of suffering.

³² Peach, Filiz. *Death, 'Deathlessness' and Existenz in Karl Jaspers' Philosophy*. Germany: Edinburgh University Press, 2008. p. 150

³³ Ephesians 5:1

³⁴ It would be an abundant improvement for theologians and philosophers to refer to this attribute of the Divine Being as “*onmitemporality*” and not atemporality. This, then, would justly and sufficiently communicate his transcendence and immanence.

deference to God, or reverence for his word, find themselves unmoored and rudderless.

History as stewardship

The honest and truthful retelling of history is (“revising”) in a manner reflecting God’s own faithfulness. This is the distinctly Christian way of doing history. This does not imply that every history text authored by a Christian should double as a gospel tract, or even that recorded history is explicitly referential to God and his purposes. To record history in a God-honoring way is to model his own recording of history in the Sacred Text. Acknowledging the omniscience of God means that history is never truly lost. There remains one Person who knows all of history. Therefore, historians are burdened with three levels of accountability. First, to their peers. Second, to all future students of history. And, finally, to the one who remains fully cognizant and perfectly present in all of history.

There can be no doubt that God is history-positive. This is evidenced by his own recording of history in the Scriptures and the Scriptures’ endorsement of external non-inspired history. In the Scriptures, we observe both Prophet and Apostolic, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, appealing to non-inspired histories as authoritative (e.g., Jude referencing the historicity and prophecies of Enoch). Furthermore, there is a historiographic methodology that God approves of in the writings of Luke (c.f. Luke 1:1-4³⁵). According to Luke, Theophilus’ assurance of the accuracy of his record was directly dependent on his historiographical approach. Ramesh Richard is right to caution against converting the Bible into nothing more than a historical text, as that is not its primary function. However, “a Christian philosophy of history is derived from the Bible.”³⁶ Christians are indebted to Scripture as their final authority, and the inspired text provides “a theological grid through which one is to think about history.”³⁷

³⁵ “Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:1-4).

³⁶ Ramesh Richard, “Elements of a biblical philosophy of history: pre-millennialism as a philosophy of history; part 2” *Bibliotheca sacra* 138, no. 550 (1981): 108-118.

³⁷ Ramesh Richard, *Elements of a biblical philosophy of history: pre-millennialism as a philosophy of history*, 109

Historiography; guided by Scriptural example and pleasing to God

As we have seen, the Scriptures contain a historiography that should be appreciated as God-endorsed, if not inspired. Because the Scriptures contain so much history, a discovery of its methodology is possible. Although we do not have inspired authors continuing to write authoritative history in a post-apostolic world, we understand, along with Hegel, that “The world is not abandoned to chance and external accident but controlled by Providence.” Fea poses the challenge that, “all Christian historians must face. How does one understand the relationship between providence and the study of history?”³⁸

The historiographical methodology of Scripture

God has suffered a telling absence in academia. While celebrated as an achievement, this is a grave failure perpetuated by those who pine after liberation from God’s presence and rule. Should this failure be reversed, the promising results would signal a rediscovery of transcendental truth, value, and beauty. The effect of this would mark an advance in learning and pedagogy not seen since the enlightenment. George Marsden skillfully diagnoses the current ills of the academy in its willing dismissal of a God-consciousness, suggesting that if this could be reconsidered and repented of, “...these issues, which have brought modern intellectual life to its current dysfunctional impasse, can be viewed in fresh and promising ways.”³⁹ Within academia, Science is posited as the great leveler, and yet, the academy continues to disregard the truth that science remains one of philosophy’s greatest achievements. It is a constant and glaring blunder for empiricists (positivists) who accept only the kind of knowledge induced through the scientific method failing to recognize that the scientific method itself is not founded upon empiricism.⁴⁰ Marsden’s critique of contemporary university culture is that “explicit religious perspectives, or at least explicit Christian perspectives, are increasingly considered unscientific and unprofessional.”⁴¹ The lamentable result is that in the academy, there exists,

³⁸ Fea, John. *Why Study History?: Reflecting on the Importance of the Past*. (Baker Academic, 2013), 68

³⁹ George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.

⁴⁰ Geoff, Lyotard, Jean-François Massumi, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (United States: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 29.

⁴¹ George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 1998), 2.

“...almost no identifiable Christian schools of thought to compare with various Marxist, feminist, gay, post-modern, African-American, conservative, or liberal schools of thought? . . . What is it about the dominant academic culture that teaches people they must suppress reflection on the intellectual implications of their faith?”⁴²

Surrendered obedience to the Lordship of Christ must pervade every aspect of life. Thus, Christian historiography must be intentional, unapologetic, and yet apologetical in the way that scholars “honor Christ the Lord as holy”.⁴³ Scripture is sufficient to ground the historian in a methodology honoring God and authentic to how he inspired the recording of history in special revelation. God’s word is the only robust and dependable justification for the very existence of the discipline of history. Special revelation warrants the discipline of history and mandates that it be practiced faithfully and redemptively with ultimate accountability under the shadow of One possessing an all-seeing eye and all-knowing mind. Outside of this, history is impossible to prove, accurately recapture, or assess with any transcendental value. History is then perpetually subjected to the whims and capriciousness of presentists, materialists, and irrationalists. In other words, without the sure guide of special revelation, and a scholastic submission to the Lordship of Christ, the discipline and study of history is utter vanity.

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ 1 Peter 3:15

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