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2010 Adventist Historians' Conference: Sabbath Sessions

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Memory, Meaning & Faith

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March 27, 2010

2010 Adventist Historians' Conference: Sabbath Sessions

Today is the final day of substantive meetings for the conference. (There will be a final business meeting tomorrow morning.) It starts with a Sabbath School session given by Gary Land on teaching about faith and history. Then there will be a church session, with a presentation by Dr. Ganoune Diop from the Global Mission Study Center at the General Conference.

“Teaching the Philosophy of Faith and History,” Gary Land, Andrews University

This is an idea that Dr. Land has had floating around his mind for a while, that he has finally put to paper. It relates to Christian approach to history. Historians are notorious for lack of interest in theory. In some ways this is good, as our attention should be on people, their ideas, and actions. Yet, even our narratives contain implicit philosophical assumptions about causation and meaning. Thus, we need to consider our philosophy, even if it is largely unspoken. Especially as Christians, we need to consider the meaning of history.

Section 1. Development Of My Interest When I was a Senior at PUC, I took a course in the philosophy of history by Walter Utt, in which I wrote a paper on my philosophy of history. It was rather elementary, and I'm afraid to even look at it today. But in preparing for it, I obtained a book entitled by British Philosopher W.H. Walsh, entitled *Philosophy of History: An Introduction*. I did not really understand it at the time, but it sat on my shelf, waiting for me to later appreciate it.

Next year, went to UC Santa Barbara, was introduced to concept of climate of opinion. Intellectual activity takes place within a framework of thought that contains assumptions that shape that activity. Historians work within a climate of opinion that shape their view of history, I came to understand. I thought that this would relate to a Christian view of history. I was uncomfortable with a providentialist view of history, and I was looking for an alternative. Historians would never agree on history unless they agreed on an underlying philosophy of history.

I began to try to think about a Christian philosophy that would underlie history. After I came to Andrews, I was asked to make a presentation to Phi Alpha Theta. I questioned the providentialist view of history, and came up with an alternative, that emphasized Christian views of human nature, Christian moral judgment, and a Christian recognition of innate human spirituality. Other Christian historians began to consider this, and publish books on the question of Christian thought and history, including George Mardsen and D.W. Bebbington and C.T. McIntire and his anthology *God, History, and Historians*. This group seemed to provide a sufficient basis to launch a course on the topic.

Section 2. Creation of Course We created a required course, “Faith and History,” and used a variety of books. Initially, *Patterns in History* by Bebbington combined with C.T. McIntire's *God History and Historians*. The former was accessible to undergrads, but the latter presented a challenge, giving many students their first exposure to substantive theology and quite foreign philosophical concepts. Other books, Collin Brown's *History and Faith* which brings Bible and history together, in a personal way, students enjoyed. Ronald Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, a more theoretical approach that students found to be somewhat dull and overly structured. Two anthologies students enjoy, *History and Historical Understanding* by Wells and McIntire, and another by Wells, *History and the Christian Historian*.

When my own *Teaching History* came out, I also used it. Robert Eric Frykenberg's *History and Belief* was too taxing for students, and I only used it once. Stephen J. Keeler in *This Rebellious House* looks at American history from a conservative Christian perspective, yet bringing a left-wing critique of capitalism and national power.

I have included a number of more secular book as well, including responses to post-modern theory by Richard Evans' *In Defense of History* and *Telling the Truth About History* by Appleby, Hunt, and Jacob. Depending on the mix of books, I have

sought to plug holes with lectures, especially on Adventist thinking about history. I have also required them to read two articles from *Fides et Historia*.

As you can see, I do not give them a philosophy of my own, but expose them to a range of philosophies within the Christian community. I want to give them the resources to think critically create their own philosophy of history. This was a paper that I initially assigned to them. But, it seemed that one semester was not enough time to have students grapple with and develop their own philosophy of history. I thus changed it to have them read and grapple with some individual thinker or problem.

These papers have been better than the more general, philosophical paper I have assigned.

Section 3. Final Reflections What have I learned? One must have moderate expectations about one can be achieved in one semester. Adventist students have little background in philosophy. They are naturally inclined towards empiricism, and getting them to think critically about historical knowledge is difficult.

Few students think that their faith will impact how they think about non-religious matters. Some are resistant to the notion (as well as some Christian historians) that there can be a “Christian perspective” on history. This arises from their empirical bent, as well as their tendency to separate the spiritual from the intellectual. We should nurture them in trying to get them to see a more complex relationship between historical knowledge and belief.

I begin my course by asking two questions: Why study history? Because it teaches us lessons. But what is this entity that is teaching us lessons? History is both the events of the past, and our accounts of the past. The latter is limited, and thus our ability to draw accurate or truthful lessons will be limited by our accounts. Thus, we need to consider what other reasons we may have for studying history.

The meaning of their own lives is connected to the meaning of history. If history is meaningless, how can our own lives have meaning? The critical definition of history helps us see that the 2nd view of history will put the focus on the way that historians think and reflect and create their historical understandings. Students like best philosophical works that use concrete examples from history to illustrate.

Why should courses such as this be in history curriculum? We want to create more than just technicians, but those that can think about meaning and the creation of worldviews.

Q & A Postmodernism – what do you do with students who seem entirely committed to a view that everything is merely viewpoint? Challenge the notion of absolute claims of relativism as being absolute itself, but it is hard to change minds in one semester.

At what level is this course taught? 400 level course, taken junior or senior year.

How does it affect their later work? Not sure, rather modest expectations.

How do you deal with a question of the providential aspect of history, when you have a Christian environment of God working within history? Especially when you receive communications from parents that you are not fostering a faith perspective, because you are dealing with historical realities? Have discussed the issue, but has never been a problem. It is hard to footnote to God’s actions in history.

Comment: We would do better with our students if we did not segregate it out from general history courses. Waiting until final year to talk theory disconnects it from the history that we have already read.

Comment: Mormons have great difficulty with history. Our history departments were founded to show that prophecy works. How are we doing now? Have we escaped the grasp of history is only for purposes of prophecy?

Comment: We have copped out, opted out, of engaging in this dialogue. There is now a disconnect between our public evangelism and our historical understanding, at least of our professional classes.

Comment: What about the proposition of wearing two hats, one for the church, and one for the profession? Doing both a confessional history and a professional history as we address different audiences. This need not be inconsistent and contradictory. Hopefully it can be done responsibly and consistently.

“Getting to the Other Side: A Comprehensive Mission, message, and Model,” Dr. Ganoune Diop, Director of

Global Mission Study Centers of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists

Adventist Mission is five-fold.

1. We participate in God's mission – we have talked about the church's mission. But now we change the emphasis to God's mission. (Mission Dei)
2. Further the Reformation towards its intended goals.
3. Proclaim an everlasting good news.
4. Invite people to join in God's family, facilitating their growth in discipleship.
5. Plant churches

I will touch on the five, briefly, with room for engagement.

"We are to copy no human being. There is no human being wise enough to be our criterion. We are to look at the Man Jesus Christ. . . . We may behold Christ to good purpose" (Ellen White).

Jesus spent most of ministry around Sea of Galilee. Mark 1:35 – while it was early, he went to a secluded place to pray. The disciples found Him, and said everyone is looking for you. Jesus said, let us go somewhere else, to the towns nearby, so I may preach there also. Mark 4:35 – on that day, at evening, He said, Let us go over to the other side.

From this point on, in the gospel of Mark, whenever Jesus goes to the other side, Mark tells us. He moves east to west, and west to east. He duplicates efforts on both sides. When he feeds 5,000 on one side, there are 12 baskets left over. On the other side, there are 5 left over. The western side was Jewish, the eastern side was Pagan.

Christ is intentional about traveling, east, west, and north to Syrophonecia, and then South to Jerusalem. Crossing over to unentered places, even at threat and risk to himself. He ascended to heaven, and descended into the lower parts of the earth. He who descended is the one who ascended, so that He might fill all things.

Mission has to have the scope that Jesus initiated; east, west, north, south, up and down. Christ came to create a new family. Mission is asking people to join that family. We used to put people down to make ourselves special, but we need to move beyond this and cross over to share blessings with those who have our common humanity.

Though, Adventist mission is not Baptist mission. We share Christ. But which Christ? The everlasting gospel. A comprehensive gospel.

Amos 3:7 – He would not do anything without revealing his secrets to his servants the prophets. We are a people of prophets, sent before the end of the world. Early Adventists understood their message to proclaim to the world the prophetic message. Agents of compassion, because God does not want to destroy the world.

What kind of message? A comprehensive good news. But good news is predicated on responding to bad news. What is the bad news? Wheel of existence. Bad Karma. Now we are detached from Brahma. We are buried under layers of impurity, we have forgotten. What about Bible? Sin, curse, death, eternal separation from God.


The good news is the cancellation of this bad news about sin and the curse. The person who cancelled the bad news is Jesus Christ. He not only bore our sin, He became our sin. He conquered death. This is everlasting good news. God is inviting you to life.

Q & A There is the challenge of tribalism and ethnicism and blood-lines in the church, the failure of the church in Rwanda and Nazi Germany. What can we do? Emphasize the notions of family and neighbor. Post-modernism arose in France, not by chance, in relation to the occupations of misuse of power. We as a people versus we as human beings. We are human beings before we are men and women, class, or race. To be a Christian and to be a humanist are not at odds with one another. Jesus has not been taken seriously in His pacifism. As Adventists, are we too taken with Adventists who assume positions of political power?

Adventist exclusivity – separation of church and state often separates us from our community, not just from worldliness.

Posted by [Nicholas Miller](#) on March 27, 2010 in [2010 Adventist Historians' Conference](#), [Book Review](#), [Missions and Ministry](#), [Philosophy of History](#) | [Permalink](#)

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