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Interview With Nicholas Miller

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Memory, Meaning & Faith

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July 23, 2010

Interview With Nicholas Miller



Nicholas Miller has received the 2010 John Highbarger Memorial Dissertation Award from the University of Notre Dame for the "exceptional dissertation in history" he defended there. The dissertation committee found that his work, "contributes powerfully to the current trend among some historians to rescue the eighteenth-century clergyman and religious controversialist from the enormous condescension of posterity, and does so with intellectual confidence, careful scholarship and clarity of exposition and presentation." In honor of his award, we present this interview with Nick about his PhD dissertation, "The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestantism and the Separation of Church and State."

Memory, Meaning & Faith: Can you tell us the basic argument of your dissertation?

Nicholas Miller: Sure. It attempts to show that ideas about the separation of church and state are not based entirely or even primarily on Enlightenment thought, which was skeptical towards religion. Rather, notions of separating the civil magistrate from religious matters came directly out of certain theological ideas at the heart of the Protestant reformation.

Memory, Meaning & Faith: Those ideas being?

NM: Ideas surrounding Luther's notion of the priesthood of all believers—that all Christians, whether herdsman, traders, or scholars had the right and duty of not only praying directly to God through Christ, but also of studying and interpreting the Bible for themselves. People soon came to realize that if a prince, magistrate, or legislature passed religious laws, they first had to interpret the Bible to do so, and then apply that interpretation to other Christians. This process interfered with the basic right of private interpretation held by each believer.

Memory, Meaning & Faith: But many Protestant leaders, like Calvin and the Anglicans, as well as American Puritans, strongly enforced religious laws.

NM: What I am describing was a minority, dissenting Protestant position for many years. Martin Luther expressed this separationist view early on in his work. He later moved away from that view, but not before it was picked up by the Anabaptists, eventually including Menno Simons in the Netherlands.

Later, English dissenters came to Holland and made contact with Anabaptists and adopted their views on both adult baptism and the separation of church and state. These English Baptists returned to England, and in turn affected other important thinkers including Roger Williams, John Milton, and John Locke. The writings of these men were very influential in the American colonies, and their ideas were implemented by men such as William Penn, John Witherspoon, and James Madison.

Memory, Meaning & Faith: Is it reasonable to draw a lesson from history—That if religious doctrine played a role in the formation of religious liberty, it is important for its future?

NM: Definitely. We are entering an era of increased faith. We can see that in both the secular and religious worlds of today. Since 9/11, most people have accepted that some sort of faith commitments are important for navigating our world, both at

home and abroad. If people believe that the separation of church and state and religious liberty are basically secular commitments, they will view them with suspicion. A recovery of the Protestant foundations of these ideals is profoundly important to their continued relevance and impact.

Memory, Meaning & Faith: Where did you get the basic idea for your dissertation?

NM: It came to me a number of years ago when I was reading the chapter on the “Protest of the Princes” in Ellen White’s *The Great Controversy*. There, she detailed what she considered to be the theological foundations of religious liberty that lay at the core of Protestantism, and indeed from which the name “Protestant” came. The view that Protestantism and religious liberty are connected has taken a real beating over the last century and has been considered largely discredited. I wanted to take a careful and close look at the historical record to see if I could find meaningful historical support for her claim. I think I have done so, and I am very pleased that a major Catholic university agrees with the historical validity of the argument!

Memory, Meaning & Faith: Any other reasons why your dissertation might be of interest to Adventists?

NM: I think that the Priesthood of Believers idea is directly connected to the doctrine of the Sanctuary. In my view, Luther’s notion of the priesthood of all believers came from his understanding of our direct access to Christ in the heavenly sanctuary. Many think that Romans was Luther’s primary inspiration, but in the months leading up to the writing of his 95 Thesis, he was actually lecturing on the book of Hebrews. The view of Christ in the heavenly sanctuary found in Hebrews undoubtedly helped him to reject indulgences, penance, and priestly intercession and scriptural authority.

An argument could be made that the Protestant doctrine most influential on western systems of governance and democracy is the Sanctuary and priesthood of believers. Perhaps if we understood more fully the importance that the Sanctuary doctrine has played in Protestantism generally we would have better success sharing our particular insights into the Day of Atonement and 1844. In any event, our shared heritage of religious liberty is a good place to begin discussions on these topics.

Memory, Meaning & Faith: What lessons have you drawn from the reasons your University gave you the award?

NM: I think it generally reflects that Notre Dame, especially at the graduate level, views itself as a community of Christian scholars, rather than as an exclusively Catholic University. I think that my reviewers in the department were interested in my claims of Protestant influence as against skeptical enlightenment influence, and did not think of the story in terms of Protestant versus Catholic. In the face of so much secularism in academia, many people of faith find allies among those of many different denominations.

Memory, Meaning & Faith: What advice would you give to a scholar who draws a hypothesis from an inspired source but doesn't find their research supporting that conclusion?

NM: Well, there are a number of ways of dealing with this. One is to go back to the inspired source to determine if you are interpreting it correctly and clearly. At times, our study of God’s natural revelation can clarify our interpretation of special revelation. This happened when Christ did not come on October 22, 1844, forcing our pioneers to reconsider their interpretation of the passages in Daniel 8 and 9.


Another response is to recognize the inherent limitations of historical research. We have forgotten vastly more about the past than we can ever recover or remember. As historians, we have to maintain a certain humility regarding the limitations of our profession and the knowledge that we can reliably obtain based on the tools of historical scholarship. The scattered, incomplete, and fragmentary pieces of the past, when combined with the biases and limitations of our own experiences and judgments, should prevent us from trumpeting grandly that our historical studies have shown such-and-such inspired statements to be erroneous.

There should be an “I don’t know” shelf in every historians’ academic closet where we can place questions about the past that don’t seem to line up with inspired teachings. Maybe in the future our understanding of the inspired statement will deepen, or our insight into history will sharpen, or both, and the question will be resolved. Or perhaps it will be resolved in heaven. But we definitely won’t have all the answers now, and our faith should not depend upon achieving finding them, or it is not truly faith.

Posted by [Nicholas Miller](#) on July 23, 2010 in [Church and Society](#), [Church History](#), [Philosophy of History](#) | [Permalink](#)

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Comments

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Congratulations, Dr. Miller! This is so great to hear.

Posted by: [Zane](#) | [July 24, 2010 at 09:07 AM](#)

Thanks for the thoughtful interview & congratulations.

You mentioned how emphasizing the foundational teaching of the sanctuary is a shared heritage for protestant religious freedom. Can you explain more how this heritage might make the sharing of the 2300 day prophecy more effective?

Posted by: [Anthony WagenerSmith](#) | [July 24, 2010 at 09:17 PM](#)

If we speak to other Christians more meaningfully about the heavenly sanctuary as an important part of their own Protestant heritage, we will build part of a bridge to talking to them about further details of the sanctuary, such as a two-compartment ministry, the day of atonement, etc. Rather than backing into the sanctuary doctrine through the prophecies of Daniel, we could talk about it in terms of more commonly shared ideas, such as commitments to religious freedom and the priesthood of believers.

Posted by: [Nicholas Miller](#) | [July 26, 2010 at 05:19 PM](#)

Sharing ideas of what we believed is good and we should always remember to respect what others believe in too. Everybody has their own faith and belief.

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Posted by: [daging](#) | [June 22, 2011 at 05:35 AM](#)

Approaching the SDA sanctuary doctrine via Hebrews rather than Daniel is unlikely to foster greater understanding and fellowship with other denominations.

The best SDA scholarship dealing with 1844 falls short of the rock solid exegesis required to give the doctrine credibility.

I'm referring to a specific article based on Hebrews, by a seminary professor, which is being offered by his students as a defense of the SDA sanctuary doctrine.

That it was published in AUSS makes me wonder about the capabilities of the editors to critically review articles for publication.

I can be much more specific if there is any interest.

Posted by: [Hansen](#) | [August 04, 2011 at 03:14 AM](#)

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