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January 07, 2011

Historians and the Supernatural

By Lisa C. Diller (Southern Adventist University, History Department)

It keeps cropping up in my classes. Perhaps we're studying about reported visions that the Aztecs were said to have had which predicted the arrival of Europeans in the Western Hemisphere. "Do you think this really happened, Professor Diller?" someone is bound to ask. And then we stop to have the conversation about miracles—a conversation it seems I have almost every semester in all my courses.

I see my work as a historian as service to God—an act of worship. But that doesn't mean that in all my studies I am seeing God's will and activity in the world. Even within the theological framework of the Seventh-day Adventist historian we tend to see God's work as supernatural, based on faith, and therefore a bit more mysterious than we'd like our own professional evidence and arguments to be. As a practicing historian, I need to have some sort of consistent principles by which I assess what "really" happened, to the extent that I can. That's part of what makes disciplines different from each other—the nature of the evidence that each one uses.

Most of the time I can't really know for sure what happened about the most interesting elements in history. The nature of my evidence can preclude Enlightenment-style certainty about the things that we (or my students, anyway) might consider most important in life - love, fear, anger, motivation. Did Eleanor of Aquitaine have an affair? Was Charles II a secret Catholic? Were the women accused of witchcraft really possessed by demons? When I can't "really" know about some element, I choose to reflect the evidence that I have. "So-and-so said that they saw a priest going to Charles II's room the night he died" or "Adultery was listed among the crimes for which King Louis was justified in annulling his marriage with Eleanor."

The same is true of supernatural events. I don't know what, if any, supernatural events accompanied the Battle of Hastings, but I do know that both sides saw stellar activity as an omen in their favor. Just before some of the Viking raids into England, monastic records say that there were appearances in the sky of horses running or dragons flying. I don't see it as my job to prove whether or not these events happened, but to talk about the people who believed those things.

It might be superficially easier if I were only teaching about European history or history that overlaps with the Great Controversy or history that connects tightly with the Christian church. Perhaps my students and I would take it for granted that the unusual events we're reading about (healings, answers to prayer) are

miracles. But there are lots of supernatural events attested to in African, Andean, and South Asian history. When I am teaching about Islam, for instance, in my Middle Eastern History class, my students want to know if I think that God “really” came to Muhammad. Now, I can talk about this as a Christian, especially because I teach in a Seventh-day Adventist context where I am encouraged to explore questions of faith. I can lead my students in a discussion about how God works in the world and what Scriptures we might base such principles on. But as a historian, I tell them I cannot “prove” whether God did or didn’t come to Muhammad, at least not using the traditional forms of historical evidence.

Also, as a Christian, I want to be careful about discounting the supernatural in stories that don’t happen to coincide with my own belief system. If I am too quick to say, “those supernatural stories that people were telling in Latin America are probably just describing some sort of hallucinogenic state,” then I am setting myself and my students up to discount the action of the supernatural in human society in all times and places. I begin to function as if there really is no supernatural at all. It will be harder for me to believe in any miracles. So, I settle for being professionally neutral.

Historians are actually more interested in what meaning the people at the time made of an event rather than explicating each actual detail of what happened. What did suspicions of Charles II’s Catholicism mean for people in Restoration England? How might Charles have acted if he was a Catholic? Did his behavior reflect this? With respect to Muhammad and Islam, I can ask what sorts of evidences about God’s work for/with Muhammad would have been convincing to his peers. I can look at what texts we have about his behavior and the response of his community. I won’t discount that he might have had a spiritual experience, just as I won’t discount that some of the sixteenth century women might have been attempting to truck with the devil. I can’t know for sure. I can’t always know how to trust my sources. But my greater interest might be in why women were all of a sudden being accused of witchcraft in the sixteenth century and not before, and why such accusations died out in the seventeenth century.

One thing I find interesting is that at some level, most of my professional work requires trust, of a certain kind. As a historian, I have to trust my sources—I can’t assume everyone was lying all the time. But I also have to treat them all with the same scrutiny. I don’t get to play favorites. And I don’t get to say some things are “miracles” of God that can be proven and other things are “just” superstition that can be discounted. I can often come to a reasonable argument on one side or another based on the preponderance of evidence, but I must be humble and contingent about my conclusions. These are skills I first learned within my Christian upbringing—trusting ancient written sources, reading texts critically and comparatively, and being humble about how much I actually can ultimately attest to—being open to the unfolding of truth in the future in a way which might upset what it is that I think I know for sure right now.

I am uncomfortable with all this. I don’t like there being multiple ways of knowing. I don’t like bracketing anything (as those who know me will laughingly attest). I want to find a way to integrate all my ways of knowing so that I don’t “know” one way in one context and “know” differently in another. But right now I have to say that I “know” the Civil War occurred in a different way than I “know” my husband loves me. I “know” who to vote for in the city council elections differently than I “know” how to treat my sinus infection.

As I work toward a more nuanced understanding of this in my professional life, I’m finding works by Gary Land, George Marsden, and John Wilson to be very helpful (1). I am glad to be talking about this with the Body of Christ—I don’t have to evaluate the processes of my profession alone. Perhaps that is just as much a testimony to the presence of the Kingdom of God abroad in the world as anything.

(1) For further reading have a look at these two electronic essays: Christopher Smith: ["Supernatural](#)

[Phenomena in the Study of History](#)" and John Wilson: "[Presuppositions of a Christian Historian](#)".

Professor [Lisa Clark Diller](#) (Ph.D. University of Chicago, 2003) teaches on and researches the early modern world at Southern Adventist University. She and her husband Tommy live and put their faith into service in downtown Chattanooga, TN. Diller enjoys crossing cultural, geographic, and socio-economic boundaries whenever possible.

Posted by [Angelika Kaiser](#) on January 07, 2011 in [Church History](#), [Historical Theology](#), [Philosophy of History](#) | [Permalink](#)

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This is one of my favorite perennial topics to think about as well as I prepare to teach my history courses. There are no easy answers, but you are opening up some real questions to explore. I'm really wanting to know if there is a difference between being a historian generically, and a Christian historian? Or should Christian historians just aspire to being "good" historians? I have suggested in the past that a Christian historian may have two roles: one apologetic to the outside world where he or she plays by their professional rules of evidence, the other, confessional, where the historian speaks to his or her faith community and can reference the supernatural in a more direct manner. I think that the believing historian should take both these roles seriously.

While I agree that history cannot "prove" the truth or falsehood of supernatural claims, can history be used to make those claims more or less likely or plausible? I think that it can, and that this is one of the important distinctions that sets historic Christianity off from some other more modern mystical movements, including Mormonism and Scientology. I find these latter movements have a much more difficult time defending their historical claims.

Thanks for your thoughts on this important topic.

Posted by: Nicholas Miller | [January 09, 2011 at 07:37 PM](#)

Thanks for expanding the conversation, Nicholas. I'd also really enjoy hearing from people who don't only study Christian history and how they handle "miracles", etc, in their area.

Posted by: Lisa Clark Diller | [January 09, 2011 at 08:45 PM](#)

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