

WHY TEACH CULTURAL HISTORY?

By Gary Land

For many people, including history teachers, history is simply past politics, the activities of kings, presidents, and other political figures along with military men who, in General Karl von Clausewitz's classic phrase, pursued political goals by other means.

Increasingly, however, historians recognize that the story of the past includes all aspects of human history. Hence, college and university catalogues now list such subjects as urban history, history of the

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family, ethnic histories of various kinds, social history, economic history, as well as intellectual and cultural history.

Difficulties With Definition

This last field, intellectual and cultural history, is difficult to define. In fact, textbook publishers have generally shied away from the field because individual teachers emphasize very different areas in classes with the same title.

Cultural history classes may deal

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with only the ideas of the intellectual elite who wrote major works or may describe the myths and prejudices of the masses. The "culture"

surveyed may be limited to significant paintings, sculptures, music, and architecture of the society or it may include "popular culture" as

expressed in dime novels, music hall songs, or McDonald's buildings. The course may be called intellectual history, cultural history, intellectual and cultural history, or some related terminology.

Definitions are not, however, a source of major concern because the study of nonpolitical human activity is important whether it is high-brow, middle-brow, or low-brow. In fact, if we are to understand humans in their totality, all aspects of their activity, not just the deep thoughts or aesthetically pleasing productions, deserve our attention.

Broadening Our Emphases

To adequately penetrate past societies, our history courses must move beyond the acts of congresses and parliaments to the deepest concerns of societies as expressed through various facets of their culture.

Today we have a more compel-

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ling reason for broadening our concept of history than simply the professional aim of moving toward "total history." A number of books have recently been published decrying the ignorance of modern young people.

If writers such as Allan Bloom, E. D. Hirsch, and Diane Ravitch¹ are correct, the young know neither

their political nor their cultural heritage. They cannot place the American Civil War within the correct half century, and they do not recognize such names as Feodor Dostoevsky and Ernest Hemingway.

I suspect that Seventh-day Adventist young people are, except for biblical knowledge, just as culturally ignorant as their peers.

Because the problem of cultural illiteracy is complex and has a variety of contributing factors, it does not lend itself to simple or quick solutions. However, discussing such subjects as literature, art, music, religion and philosophy in our history classes and relating them to the more conventional political and military content will introduce students to names and terminology that will help make them culturally literate. It will also provide them with a larger social context within which to understand individual works and artistic movements. Attention to popular culture will acquaint students with both the traditions of the popular arts and their temporary nature.

Exploring Other Worlds

Ultimately, the purpose of this endeavor, as with all historical study, is to lift students out of their own time and place and transport them to another historical world. Just as travel to foreign countries broadens our horizons by introducing us to different ways of dressing, eating, and talking, so the study of cultures distant in time makes us aware that ours is not the only way to act. We begin to realize that there are and have been other ways to be human.

Moving Toward Relativism?

But therein lies a major problem with cultural history. As students become aware of other beliefs, artistic standards, even moral systems, they observe the process of change from which no culture is exempt. This may cause them to ask whether truth is in any sense absolute. In thus questioning they echo the observations of many scholars.

One of the founding fathers of intellectual and cultural history,

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In the childhood of American history, for instance, Abraham Lincoln was "The Great Emancipator," a champion of human dignity and human rights—the man who freed the slaves.

Then, during the 1960s at the height of the civil-rights movement, Lincoln was seen as "just another white racist," a man who, during his 1858 Senate campaign denied any belief in racial equality and said he would refuse blacks the privileges of citizenship.

More recently, as Lincoln has been compared to others of this time we have come to understand his racial views more fairly. He was not a 1960s-style white liberal, but he was a man ahead of his times who held that slavery was a moral evil and took steps, when he could, to eradicate it.

Perhaps in Adventist history we are suffering through the same rites of passage. We learn, for instance, that the story of Ellen White holding the Big Bible was never placed in print by James and Ellen White. Indeed, it was not printed anywhere until nearly 50 years after the event. When it did appear, in Loughborough's sermon at the 1893 General Conference, it was obviously confused with the story of her holding a smaller Bible in Randolph, Massachusetts.⁷

So, the traditional account of the Big Bible was handed down through the family, and many Adventists might wonder, as did A. G. Daniells, how much of the story is original and how much "crawled into" the original story.⁸ But what about that Bible in Randolph, Massachusetts? In that story, Mrs. White pointed to texts she could not see and quoted them correctly. This time, however, we have an eyewitness account. So we do have a direct account of a Bible-holding story, one just as miraculous.

Or consider the story of the boat that came back. Mrs. White herself tells how, on a trip by sailboat to West Island off the Massachusetts coast, she, H. S. Gurney, and others were caught in a violent storm. It seemed they were doomed, but a brief vision assured Mrs. White that they would not be lost. Their cries were heard from the island and they were rescued.⁹

One children's book continues the story, however.¹⁰ In the embellished version, the sailboat, which was borrowed, was lost. When Gurney returned to confess the accident to its owner, he discovered the boat had found its own way home!

Unfortunately, a careful check of the sources reveals that the story of the boat finding its own way home

Denominational history makes us different and distinctive; it gives us a common bond and helps us identify with one another.

was an entirely separate incident, a personal experience of Gurney alone. So the historian has to separate the two stories in order to maintain the integrity of both.¹¹

Guardians of Memory

Historians then, are the guardians of a people's memory. Without them we would wander farther and farther away from reality. Our history would be less and less useful in binding us together because it would become increasingly distorted by the biases of small interest groups within the larger community.

We need Adventist history then, for identity, for interest, for instruction, and for insight. And we need Adventist historians to maintain the integrity of the process.

Ellen G. White summarized well the value of denominational history when she wrote, "The past history of the cause of God needs to be often brought before the people, young and old. We need often to recount God's goodness and praise Him for His wonderful works."¹² □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Joseph Bates, *Autobiography* (Battle Creek, Mich.: SDA Pub. Assn., 1868), p. 25, 26.

² Joseph Bates to Bro. White, *Review and Herald*, vol. 2 (February 17, 1852), p. 80.

³ George Knight, *From 1888 to Apostacy: The Case of A. T. Jones* (Hagerstown, Md.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1987), pp. 124-127.

⁴ Ron Graybill, *Ellen G. White and Church Race Relations* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1970).

⁵ Warren H. Jones, "Ellen White: Prophet or Plagiarist? Closed Windows or Open Doors?" pp. 5-12; "Literary Thief or God's Messenger?" pp. 13-16; "Human Thoughts or Divine Truths?" pp. 16-19, *Ministry*, 55:6 (June 1982).

⁶ Ron Graybill, "J. N. Andrews: Family Man," in Harry Leonard, ed., *J. N. Andrews: The Man and the Mission* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 1985), pp. 14-41.

⁷ Ron Graybill, "Ellen G. White and the Big Bible" (unpublished paper). For a lively rejoinder to my paper on the Big Bible, see A. L. White, "The Witness of the 'Big Bible,'" White Estate Document File #81b. For an account of the holding of a large Bible in Randolph, Mass., see Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 2 (Battle Creek, Mich.: James White, 1858), pp. 78, 79.

⁸ Section entitled "Bible Conference of 1919," article, "Use of the Spirit of Prophecy in Our Teaching of Bible and History," *Spectrum*, 10:1 (May 1979), p. 28.

⁹ Ellen G. White, *Early Writings* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1882, 1945), pp. 23, 24.

¹⁰ Bonnie Blue Campbell, *The Time the Boat Came Back* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1976).

¹¹ H. S. Gurney to Dear Charlie, c. April 20, 1896, White Estate Document File #193. (DF #3147 at A.U. White Estate).

¹² White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Pub. Assn., 1948), vol. 6, p. 365.

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James Harvey Robinson, saw such study as a means of releasing us from the bonds of prejudice and tradition. Advocating "the New History," he wrote:

Contemporary religious, educational, and legal ideas are not the immediate product of existing circumstances, but were developed in great part during periods when man knew far less than he does now. Curiously enough our habits of thought change much more slowly than our environment and are usually far in arrears. Our respect for a given institution may be purely traditional and have little relation to its value, as judged by existing conditions.²

Therefore, Robinson concluded:

We must develop historical-mindedness upon a far more generous scale than hitherto, for this will add a still deficient element in our intellectual equipment and will promote rational progress as nothing else can do.³

While recent scholars do not exhibit Robinson's confidence in progress, they have continued to champion the relativism of his arguments. Allan Bloom summarizes the current dominant attitude:

History and social studies are used in a variety of ways to overcome prejudice. We should not be so ethnocentric, a term drawn

from anthropology, which tells us more about the meaning of openness. We should not think our way is better than others. The intention is not so much to teach the students about other times and places as to make them aware of the fact that their preferences are only that—accidents of their time and place. Their beliefs do not entitle them as individuals, or collectively as a nation, to think they are superior to anyone else.⁴

For the Christian, the implications of this attitude are especially troubling. Not only do Christians believe that there is absolute truth, they also believe that Christianity is the fullest expression of this absolute truth that humans can know.

But Christianity is also historical in the sense that it is based upon events that are believed to have happened within time and space. For Adventists, the first advent of Jesus and the events of the 2300-year prophecy are among the historical elements of their faith.

Ideas Influenced by Time and Place

Furthermore, Christianity has clearly developed historically, drawing first from the Judaic tradition and then from the Greco-Roman civilization within which it was formed. Major theologians such as Augustine (354-430 A.D.), who worked with the Platonic philosophical tradition, and Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225-1274 A.D.), who borrowed from Aristotle, consciously used the ideas of their cultural heritage to express their understanding of Christianity.

Even in more modern times individuals who believed that they were restoring pure biblical Christianity, such as John Calvin and Martin Luther, interpreted Scripture in the light of their own particular background.

Not only has Christianity in general been influenced by the assumptions and thought patterns, often called world views, of its surrounding culture, but Seventh-day Adventism also clearly reflects the 19th-century American milieu within which it was born. The interest in health reform, the taboos against such activities as dancing, theater-going, and even our interpretation of the prophecies of Daniel and Revelation can

be traced to certain influential movements operating within the culture of the time.

Awareness of such problems has led to the historical relativism, sometimes called historicism, spoken of earlier. Must we conclude, as did James Burke in a popular television series and book, that "all views at all times are equally valid"? Explaining his view, Burke further states

There is no metaphysical, super-ordinary, final, absolute reality. There is no special direction to events. The universe is what we say it is. When theories change the universe changes. The truth is relative.⁵

No Simple Solutions

This dilemma does not succumb to simplistic solutions. But we can

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establish strategies to deal with it.

First, we must recognize that historical and cultural relativists have valid reasons for asserting that beliefs are culturally conditioned. The expression of our awareness historically and geographically only makes us more sensitive to this fact. As a result, the study of cultural history offers us an opportunity to reexamine our beliefs in the light of human experience as illuminated by the historical record. We will no longer be bound by the myopia of our own time and place.

Second, we need not accept the relativists' claim that recognizing how beliefs have changed over time necessarily leads us to relativism. "History and the study of cultures do not teach or prove that values or cultures are relative," writes Allan Bloom. "All to the contrary, that is a philosophical prem-

ise that we now bring to our study of them."⁶

Recognizing Cultural Conditioning

We need to be aware that all historical understanding—in short, everything written in textbooks and monographs and taught in the classroom—grows out of the views of the individual historian and teacher. Our only access to the past is through the surviving documents and books based upon them.

Once we are aware of the cultural conditioning inherent in the written record, we can more knowledgeably discuss the validity of different beliefs and practices. We can examine the reasons and claims for every philosophy, religion, moral system, or political structure we encounter, comparing them with our own assumptions. By so doing we work toward a clearer and stronger position of our own.

There is always the danger that such a process may lead to the rejection of the beliefs with which we began. However, if we truly believe that Christianity, and Adventism in particular, most fully express the truth about God and human beings, then we can face this situation with confidence. The only other option is to choose to remain in ignorance, certainly a position that most educators and thoughtful persons would reject as unacceptable.

By broadening the subject matter of history to include the totality of human experience, cultural history can play an important role in the development of self-awareness. Cultural history provides a springboard for the reexamination of one's beliefs through knowledge of the past. In so doing, it helps us achieve a certain humility, because we are aware that others have thought and behaved differently.

Renewed Certainty

The insights gained through a study of cultural history can offer us a renewed sense of certainty, because we know that our beliefs are our own, and not accepted solely on the basis of tradition.

For a denomination challenged with the task of taking its faith to all the peoples of the world such an

approach seems absolutely necessary. The student who has begun in the classroom the process of separating the absolutes of Christianity from their historical circumstances will be ready to translate that living faith into another cultural context, whether it be a Western society or a non-Western civilization.

Cultural and intellectual history, by making us more aware of our identity, individually and collectively, puts us in a position of strength as we face the buffetting winds of a rapidly changing world. □

NOTES AND REFERENCES

¹ Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1987); Diane Ravitch and Chester E. Finn, Jr., *What Do Our 17-Year-Olds Know?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987).

² James Harvey Robinson, *The New History* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1912; paperback ed., New York: The Free Press, 1965), p. 22.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁴ Bloom, p. 30. Because of the relativistic assumptions behind much cultural history, Bloom is quite critical of the field. He believes that philosophy is a superior means of transcending time and place.

⁵ James Burke, *The Day the Universe Changed* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1985), p. 337.

⁶ Bloom, p. 39.

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held by many Christians, world political affairs are very closely related to the development of Christianity, the growth of churches, and the completion of the gospel commission. Seventh-day Adventist students need to learn about political affairs and systems and their relationship to religion in a variety of governments and political systems. Such knowledge will help them better understand their church, their political system, and the world around them. □

REFERENCES

¹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publishing Assn., 1940), p. 28.

² John 15:19; 17:14, 16.

³ 1 John 2:15; Colossians 3:2.

⁴ James 4:4.

⁵ David Easton, *The Political System* (New York: Knopf, 1953).

⁶ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1930), pp. 2, 3.

⁷ Karl Marx, "Principles of Communism," in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (New York: International, 1975), p. 354.

⁸ Donald N. Clark, *Christianity in Modern Korea* (New York: University Press of America, 1986), p. 36.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Donald Eugene Smith, *Religion and Political Development* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1970).

SOCIAL STUDIES FOR STUDENTS OF DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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5. A sense of compassion for the less fortunate;

6. A sense of respect for and therefore a tolerance for the opinions of others;

7. A willingness to accept necessary changes within a system of law and order deriving from the will of the people;

8. Attitudes favorable to the social, physical, cultural, and economic development that will enable the learners to participate in the life of the community, and when they leave school to function as innovators in a society in which all members can take pride; social studies should make the school an agent of change.⁶

The original purpose of the ASSP was to reorganize the approach to social studies both at the primary and secondary levels as well as in teacher-training colleges.⁷ These concepts have, therefore, become the basis for the advanced teacher-training program in social studies in Kenya.

Guidelines for Zimbabwe Schools

When the newly independent country of Zimbabwe in 1980 settled on a social studies syllabus for their primary schools, they adopted the following broad guidelines:

1. To gain such an understanding of oneself as a member of society as will result in positive and acceptable behavior in the community.

2. To gain insight into the organization, origins, and culture of his and other communities.

3. To understand one's social obligations and responsibilities in fulfilling them.

4. To know about life in certain selected communities and countries, comparing and contrasting them with one's own so as to ensure an appreciative understanding of their differences.

5. To be able to relate the past to the present in the study of change and continuity in human affairs.

6. To be aware of the implications of population growth upon one's physical and social environment.⁸

In most African countries the syllabi both for primary and secondary schools are set by the government. Where church-operated schools still exist, they have to follow the same guidelines as the government-operated institutions. This is particularly true in the secondary schools where students are prepared for national exams.

Obstacles to Implementation

The above guidelines show that the theoretical framework exists for a competent social-studies program in the African nations. However, in some countries the program has not been made fully operational because those in charge have failed to commit sufficient resources to make it succeed.

Some governments have committed themselves to upgrading science training, feeling that they will achieve greatest benefit from the money thus spent. However, social studies is critical to the education and modernization efforts of developing nations.

Improvement is needed in two main areas. Textbooks are seldom available in sufficient quantities. In fact they are often not available at all. Teachers often have limited training, and their pay is so low that they skip classes to earn a second income from another job. Neither of these problems is unique to social studies, but rather tied in with other problems in the educational systems of the developing countries.

Christian Values and Social Studies

Although social studies offers some solutions to the conflicts between peoples and nations, it also highlights the intractable nature of certain human problems and draws attention to the eternal and more stable values of human existence. These values seem to have greater appeal in the third world than in some of the developed countries.⁹

A Christian who is well versed in the social sciences will definitely have an advantage in interpreting the human situation at this critical