

***Brief Reflections on Studying History from a
New Church Perspective***

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Imagine for a moment, if you will, that you have just walked into your first college history class. Your teacher asks the obligatory opening question of the term, “What is history?” How would you respond? A typical answer may be that history is the study of the past, or the study of past people and events. “Why study history?” your teacher asks. Historians, like most academics, feel the need to justify the importance of their subject. Undoubtedly you have heard the rationale that the study of history is important because of the lessons that can be learned from studying the past. Historians also point out that the study of history helps us to understand not only people and societies, but how our society came to be. The study of history helps to provide identity, develops national pride, and provides essential lessons necessary for good citizenship. Some even argue that the study of history helps build moral understanding.

How does the historian approach the study of the past to attain these goals? The job of the historian is to critically examine and then interpret evidence to give meaning and significance to past events. While some would argue that in doing this the historian must strive to divorce him or herself from personal values and viewpoints in the search for objective historical truth, most historians today, if not all, would agree that we cannot escape our own perspective.¹ Some argue that past events in and of themselves do not make history, but rather history is our examination and interpretation of those events. One historian has even defined history as, “the memory of things said and done.”² Clearly memories are not wholly objective, but are shaped by our perspective. Regardless of definition, historians begin their examination of the past by selecting evidence. This selection itself is marked by the historian’s view of what evidence is to be of the greatest significance. Such a selection cannot be entirely objective. We must remember also that people with their own perspectives recorded the events themselves.

¹ see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*. (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially introduction (“Nailing Jelly to the Wall”), pp.1-17.

² Bernard Bailyn, *On the Teaching & Writing of History*. (Hanover, New Hampshire: University Press of New England, 1994), p. 7. For examples of general discussions regarding this question see either this or Barbara Tuchman, *Practicing History: Selected Essays*, (New York, NY: Ballantine Books, 1981).

In this way history is not rewritten by each successive generation of historians so much as the events of the past are reinterpreted as historians attribute different significance to those events; while the meaning of those events may remain unchanged, our perspective colors the significance we ascribe to those events. In this way, our final view will be greatly influenced by our view of the world. For, if we are to make the past meaningful to the present it must be interpreted in relation to some value system or frame of reference. Studying or learning history from a perspective that denies revelation and the existence of God, for example, results in a particular interpretation of the significance of past events. A Marxist historian, for example, interprets past events within the context of material determinism and class struggle.

Does a New Church approach to history differ in this way from that of any other historian? The answer is that a New Church historian does not differ in the way in which he or she selects evidence or examines and analyzes that evidence. The methodology and the evidence are the same. Nor is the process of constructing interpretations of the meaning and significance of those events different. In fact, as teachers we must be vigilant in teaching students proper historical methodology – that is, how to critically examine evidence to distinguish historical fact from interpretation. Above all, the New Church historian must be a good historian. We must not allow particular views to cloud or skew the actual examination of evidence. Our desire to see Providence in history, for example, cannot affect the selection or examination of evidence.

A New Church study of history does differ, however, in other important ways. Our belief in the purpose of the Lord's creation and Divine revelation can inform the types of questions we ask of the evidence and our reasons for studying history. The types of questions we might ask may not be unique, but the reasons behind the questions and the conclusions we draw can be.

This is what makes studying history exciting. Like other historians we believe that we can learn lessons from the past. History does in fact provide identity and essential lessons necessary for good citizenship. Historians are right in that it helps build moral understanding. In fact, history is crucial in developing the civil and moral conscience necessary to freely choose between good and evil. And yet there are other reasons as well.

Much has been written concerning the importance of studying history as a means of seeing the workings of the Lord's providence in retrospect. Our views of Providence inform our decisions about historical causation. In studying Ancient Israel, for example, we can see the importance of the Babylonian captivity in forcing the Jewish people away from the merely external worship of ritual required of them at the Temple. We can see the importance of the influence of Greek philosophy in Judah in providing the Jewish people the means of beginning to think more interiorly. All this was in preparation for the Lord's birth. For the

Christian Church to be established, the simple obedience of the Jewish Church needed to be replaced with the Lord's more interior teachings of charity and love to the neighbor. The Religious Wars of the 16th and 17th century likewise were a necessary means for people to reject the corruption of a fallen Christian Church in the Lord's preparation for His Second Coming.

A study of history can also illustrate the Lord's order and His continual working to protect human freedom. Through history we can gain an understanding of the order of creation and the concept of the Grand Man. Through the study of the Lord's revelation through the five churches we can follow not only the story of the Church specific and mankind's relationship with the Lord, but see within it some general reflection of the story of our own life.

I would like to draw on this to discuss briefly what I believe is a deeper definition of history – a definition that can inform the types of questions we ask of our evidence. *History is in its essence the story of the Lord's continual love for the human race and how human beings have received and reacted to this influx.* True, history can help us to better understand individuals and societies, but how and to what end? History can show us what societies thought, what they did, and what they valued. But without an understanding that history is the study of man in his spiritual as well as natural environment, we can really only understand the external expressions of that society. We each receive the Lord's influx according to our good. In this way, by studying past societies we cannot only see their values, but in essence their state of good. A deeper understanding of natural events allows us to begin to understand the spiritual state of a society. For true charity to exist, we must know who the neighbor is. Moreover, we are taught, "He who from genuine charity loves the neighbor inquires what the quality of a man is, and does good to him discreetly, and according to the quality of his good." (Charity 52)

By better understanding past cultures, we gain not only a deeper understanding of the neighbor, but a deeper understanding of ourselves, which is crucial for spiritual development. By examining the past, we can see examples of spiritual states through the natural context of a society's values, and apply them to our own development. I believe it was the historian Frederick Jackson Turner who once defined history as the critical examination of experience. Isn't regeneration likewise the critical examination of our own spiritual life within the natural context of our lives in this world?

Let me try to illustrate this with a very brief, and admittedly somewhat oversimplified example from the study of colonial America. The Puritans came to the New World to create a "Godly community" in which the end goal of society was salvation. They believed in an order of creation in which the end of all creation was serving God. Evidence shows that they believed very strongly in the importance of reading the Lord's Word daily. Knowing the teaching of the Lord's Word was paramount to society, and children were taught the Bible from

the earliest age. They valued the sanctity of marriage, and society was built around the family. Divorce, for example was allowed only in the case of adultery or desertion. A husband and wife were to love one another, and together love God above all else.

And yet, they believed in faith alone. They saw God in His Old Testament form, as an angry as jealous God. Believing they were the extension of Jehovah's covenant with Abraham, they feared that sin within the community would bring punishment to them all, as it had when one within the Children of Israel disobeyed. For this reason they actively sought out sin and publicly punished the offenders. Their society was often a society based on fear and doubt emphasizing reading the Bible out of fear they might otherwise unknowingly commit sin. Good and charity did not lead to salvation, but rather was to be done only as proof of being saved through God's grace. Worship and marriage were mandated and enforced by the leaders of society and they often sent their children to be raised by others for fear that they might be too lenient with them.

The Quakers, too, came to the New World several decades later in search of religious freedom to create a religious community. Unlike the Puritans, they believed that all mankind could be saved. Rather than lumps of wretchedness, every human being possessed God within him. Man was created in the image and likeness of their New Testament view of God. Therefore, they believed in peace and benevolence, and emphasized love to the neighbor. Rather than coercing their children, they believed in nurturing their innocence. They believed in the importance of reaching out to the neighbor and living a useful life.

However, they did not emphasize the importance of reading the Lord's Word. True religion did not come from books, but only from direct experience of God, through the Seed of Christ within. They believed that the Scriptures could only be understood as one enters into the Holy Spirit. In essence, then, the Lord revealed Himself through the Holy Spirit within each of them.

What can we learn from the study of these two societies? An examination of evidence can show us the values of each of these societies. The Puritans valued marriage, the family, community, and the importance of reading the Lord's Word. Asking deeper questions into how they received and acted upon the Lord's influx provides a deeper understanding, however, and a glimpse perhaps of their spiritual state. They believed in faith alone, and valued the importance of truth without a belief in genuine good. The Writings teach us that truth without good is not truth. Likewise, by asking deeper questions of the evidence with Quakers, we see that they valued charity, use, and love to the neighbor. However, they did not place the same value in receiving truth through the Lord's Word. The Writings teach that just as truth without good is not truth, good without truth is not good. Truth without good is like a body without life, while good without truth is like life without a body, or understanding without will or will without understanding. It is

possible to know truth without willing it, and will good and truth likewise without knowing it. (AC 10555)

By studying these societies from this perspective our goal is not to judge or condemn these societies, but rather to better understand how it is that different societies receive truth from the Lord. Both of these societies were receiving the Lord's influx as He was preparing the way for His Second Coming. Both received and reacted to His influx in different ways, which can be seen in their differing values.

By studying history we gain an understanding of how individuals and societies receive the Lord's love. The more we can understand the neighbor, the more charitable we can be. An examination of the effects of these states not only allows us to better understand others, but to apply that to states in our own life.

It is at the college level that students begin to learn and apply the methodology of history. They begin to move beyond the actual events of history to learn how to examine and analyze evidence in order to interpret their significance. As New Church historians we must be as vigilant in our methodology as any other historian. But it is at the college level that students can begin to formulate the types of questions, based on an understanding of doctrine, of the evidence that can provide them with a deeper understanding of how history can not only illustrate the Lord's Providence in history, but allow them to better understand both the neighbor and themselves.