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Integration of Faith and Learning

Marc A. Clauson

Cedarville University, clausonm@cedarville.edu

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Introduction

History may be the most influential discipline with the exception of philosophy. In the long history of the discipline, its importance in shaping thought and culture has emphatically borne out this assertion. This is not to denigrate other separate disciplines, but to assert that among all of them, history, the reflection on and study of the past, has led to dramatic paradigm shifts. How a civilization thinks about its past has a profound effect on how it views its future. The German people, for example, in the nineteenth century (or at least their intelligentsia) came to see their past as having been rooted in some pure race living in some golden age.¹ The evidence suggests that this thinking substantially influenced their later view of the glorious future of a new “Reich.” The American people have been and continue to be influenced by their perception of their own history. In addition, how one thinks about history and practices history affects the very possibility of reliable special revelation from God. One has but to point back to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the rise of the historical-critical approach to the Bible, which eventually came to dominate Biblical studies and which undermined the timeless truths of Scripture, making it relative to its own “primitive” religious stage of history.² Such a use of history has continued to produce the fruit of secularism ever since.

Philosophers have wrestled mightily with the many issues which have arisen in historical reflection and writing: the question of objectivity, the problem of selection, the problems of bias (related to the idea of presuppositions), explanation and understanding, and the issue of causal relationships, among others.³ Though these might appear at first glance to be impossibly arcane philosophical problems, in fact all of them (and more) have encroached substantially on the

¹ See George Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich*. New York: Schocken, 1981.

² See among many Roy Harrisville and Walter Sundberg, *The Bible in Modern Culture*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002. The “historical” element is here emphasized; the “critical” aspect has to do with rationalism applied to a text.

³ See William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History*, Second edition. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1993.

praxis of history. Is it possible to write “objective” history?⁴ When is a fact really a fact? Can one speak of causation apart from metaphysical considerations (many historians simply refuse to see causation as anything other than an arbitrary construct⁵)?

But philosophers of history have also attempted to address even more metaphysical issues. For example, what is the meaning of history? Does history have a pattern? If so, what is that pattern? What is the *telos* of history? Most importantly, how do we know what we know, and can we know anything? The answer to this last question is one of those that determines whether or to what extent history is even possible. It is a peculiarly difficult issue in history, since history by definition deals with events, individual actors and ideas that no longer exist in time and thus can only be known through surviving evidence. Furthermore, these events (these “data”) are particular and not recurring, even though similar events and ideas may recur.

The two kinds of questions raised above suggest a distinction in the discipline of history. What is labeled the speculative philosophy of history deals with the metaphysical or “big picture” questions—those of major worldview significance.⁶ The second-level issues of history (the “how” of the historical task) are covered under the label of the analytic philosophy of history.⁷ These issues can only be resolved as the metaphysical problems are settled.

The purpose of this paper, in light of the above problems, will be to set out first a distinctively Christian epistemology of history, then to show how history as a discipline relates to the concept of worldview (including and especially the Christian worldview) and finally how this Christian worldview of history is to be applied practically in the discerning reading of history and in the

⁴ See Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*. Toronto: Knopf, 1995, pp. 131-161, who argues in favor of “objective” history over against postmodernist history.

⁵ See *Ibid.*, 63.

⁶ See Ronald H. Nash, *The Meaning of History*. Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998, who has a succinct definition of this branch of philosophy of history. For an extended treatment, see M. C. Lemon, *Philosophy of History*. London: Routledge, 2003, pp. 5-278.

⁷ See Lemon, *Ibid.*, pp. 279-356.

writing of history. In other words, I will address both the speculative and analytic philosophies of history as they relate to the Christian worldview.

The first problem to be overcome is that of knowledge. History is directly concerned with knowledge of the past. Thus it is tied to epistemology. Epistemology in general is the study of how we know what we know and whether we can know with certainty, only probability, or not at all.⁸ This simple working definition leads to the various possible ways of knowing which have been posited throughout human history.⁹

A Christian Philosophy of History (Speculative Philosophy of History)

The epistemological alternatives—not necessarily mutually exclusive—are deductivism (sometimes called rationalism) or *a priori* knowledge rooted in innate ideas, empiricism or knowledge via generalization arrived at through induction from observation or experimentation (though not nearly so simple as this), intuition (sometimes, not necessarily accurately, equated with mysticism and unmediated revelation), and special revelation. The latter of course has to do with the use and acceptance of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, properly interpreted. It has been argued that such reliance on Scripture amounts to a form of *fideism* or “irrational faith.” But the counterargument has asserted that the Bible (equivalent to Scripture) is not accepted irrationally but is in fact logically supportable even though one need not rest his faith on this logical support. It might be better therefore to say that knowledge or truth rooted in Scripture is presuppositional knowledge.¹⁰ That is, one intentionally begins with the presupposition that the Scriptures are true, with the knowledge that truth is impossible without such an unproven assumption. In this paper, I will use such an approach without denigrating

⁸ See Charles Landesman, *An Introduction to Epistemology: The Central Issues*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1999.

⁹ For an extended treatment of the history of epistemology since the modern era began, see Ernst Cassirer, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der Neueren Zeit*, 4 volumes. Berlin: Bruno Cassirer, 1911-1920.

¹⁰ See Cornelius van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*. Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1967, Idem, *Christian Apologetics*, Second edition. Nutley, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2003 and Idem, *Christian Theory of Knowledge*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1969 who has been seen as the presuppositionalist *par excellence*.

some of the other approaches to knowledge but also recognizing that none of the above modes of knowing can ever attain to a greater level of certainty. We must also presuppose that this revelation of God is in itself clear (*claritas*), or we would be forced to say that God is unable or unwilling to tell humans how he wants them to think and act. At the same time, however, this basic *claritas* is always limited to some degree by man's sin nature and its associated noetic effects.¹¹ Nevertheless, two factors mediate against the total inability of God's revelation to inform us: (1) the fact that man's mind is not completely blinded to "natural" knowledge and (2) the work of grace, whether common grace to all, including non-believers, or grace to believers, the latter which we would call the work of the Holy Spirit.¹² We assert that man thinks, in general, analogically to God, and is therefore able to think "God's thoughts after Him" in some measure.¹³ It has been debated whether and to what extent man can think univocally, but this need not detain us, since we do assume that truth can be on many matters, "true," in the sense it is what God "thinks"¹⁴. It makes no logical sense to assert that God gives revelation which then no one can understand at all by any means.¹⁵

Let me say at the outset that even though history (or any other discipline) at the metaphysical level of analysis—the speculative philosophy of history—may best be approached through a presuppositional approach, historians do make extensive use of empiricism in order to gain truth about specific historical events, as well as deduction (*a priori*) to draw conclusions and to make causal connections in history. Thus my purpose is not to reject other modes of knowing but to

¹¹ See James Callahan, *The Clarity of Scripture: History, Theology, and Contemporary Literary Studies*. Downer's Grove: InterVarsity, 2001 for an excellent treatment of the subject.

¹² Many theologians make no distinction in the work of the Spirit and would say that wherever there is truth, the Holy Spirit must have been involved. I am inclined to agree, but do not insist on the distinction because it is God at work, whichever alternative is correct. See Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979 (reprint).

¹³ See Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991, pp. 179-180.

¹⁴ It is not strictly true to have God "think," as He simply "knows" all things at all times and does not operate discursively as humans do. On one example of the controversy, see Herman Hoeksema, *The Clark-van Til Controversy*. Trinity Foundation Reprint, 1995. Gordon Clark taught that man's knowledge was univocal while van Til that it was analogous. In fact, Clark's ideas may be the most truly presuppositional.

¹⁵ I am not obviating the necessity of the proper use of hermeneutics, logic, and the teaching offices of the church. But I am emphasizing the "pre-modern" idea of *claritas* as a corrective to modern skepticism.

suggest that presuppositionalism regarding the truth of the Scriptures remains the best approach at this philosophical level of thinking about history. Indeed presuppositionalism is the *only* viable philosophical epistemology available to the Christian historian at this level.¹⁶ Empiricism (inductivism) suffers from its own well-known problems of lack of certainty or probability while *pure* rationalism or deductivism (*a priorism*) can do nothing by itself except enable an individual to think in a certain way about what is already in his mind, but with no knowledge that is external to himself.¹⁷ We begin with God, understood through His revelation, but this approach can be criticized as circular in that one uses what he wishes to prove (the epistemological supremacy of Scripture) to prove what he desires (the epistemological supremacy of Scripture)—a form of tautology. However, though technically this is a tautology, not all tautologies are invalid. If we do not begin with God, we must begin with man and his autonomy, and the very concept “man” implies corruption. God, on the other hand, is all perfection. This includes His knowledge, which is comprehensive and universal. This being the case, special revelation, God’s self-manifestation to mankind, must be the only perfectly trustworthy source for all human knowledge.

With this as the foundation, we are now in a position to construct a Christian worldview of history with the Bible as the “sourcebook” of principles—not details—from which to draw. The Bible then provides the framework for thinking about history and the philosophy of history while rationalism and empiricism may profitably be used to analyze and synthesize the “data” of history *within* the Biblical framework. Once we accept the Christian Scriptures as true we proceed to assert that the Bible does have something to say about history.¹⁸ This Biblical truth is not

¹⁶ Certainly at the non-speculative level of historical reflection, empiricism and rationalism are both quite useful and even necessary so long as they are used properly.

¹⁷ Of course, one may legitimately deduce *from* first principles, but one must first know these principles to be true. This is why the presuppositional approach beginning with Scripture is able to make use of the deductive approach and arrive at true conclusions. On the use of deductive logic, see Irving Copi and Carl Cohen, *Introduction to Logic*. Paramus, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002.

¹⁸ As in fact, the Bible has something to say about every human area of thought and practice, whether directly or by logical deduction.

contained in grand or sweeping generalizations but rather in the patterns discernable in Scripture.¹⁹ The patterns themselves come to us through the grand narrative of the Fall and redemption. If history is the study of what has happened in time, we know for example, that the universe and the earth in particular had a definite beginning (Genesis 1). The beginning moreover was brought about by God (in ontological Trinity). We also know that the world and universe will have a definite end—that is, history in the sense we know it on earth will come to an end (Revelation of John). Even more important, we know from the narrative recorded in Scripture, that the God who created and will bring to an end this earth, is continually controlling all events in history. Indeed He is actively involved in all events, causing, permitting, giving grace, withholding grace (contra Deism and Naturalism which respectively remove God as an efficient and proximate cause or remove God altogether).²⁰

God is in the Christian worldview of history vitally immanent as well as powerfully transcendent. This is not to make God the cause of evil in history. The problem of the origins of evil and God's role in it cannot be explored here. But Scripture—our assumed repository of truth—is abundantly clear that God Himself is not the source of evil, even though He always is aware of it and involved in its expression in the world, restraining it or allowing it or moving individuals to act in ways that will in the immediate context cause evil but whose actions can and are used by God to bring about the greater good.

Finally, we know that time has been forever changed by the incarnation of God the Son in time. In Christ, time, that is, history, is divided as it were into two parts, as evidenced even by our Western calendar—before Christ and after His birth, death and resurrection. He is the *mitte*

¹⁹ That is, the Bible is not a systematic treatment of historiography, but through induction and deduction one is able to construct valid principles about history.

²⁰ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*. Oxford: University Press, 1961, p. 50, says that history is “a play written by God.” I would add that God also directs the play and has absolute control over all the actors.

die Zeit, not in a chronological sense but in a redemptive sense.²¹ This is what Augustine implies when he speaks of the City of God. History moves at two levels, the “city of man” and the “city of God” or kingdom of God on earth. While men live as citizens of the city of man and live in history, they also, if they are redeemed, live in God’s kingdom as citizens of heaven.²² In fact, their true citizenship is in the heavenly city and the earthly city is slowly and inexorably being destroyed as Christ triumphs—albeit through a potentially pessimistic future for individual believers.²³ History is linear and not cyclical (as it had been for many of Augustine’s pagan contemporaries).

There have been many divergent interpretations of Augustine. Some have seen him as saying history is irrelevant. Others have countered that history for Augustine is very relevant. Moreover he is somewhat ambiguous regarding whether history is the record of unilinear progress or whether it may be a record full of regress and sin.²⁴ Regardless, history is linear and God does control it actively. This was Augustine’s great “breakthrough” in the philosophy of history and his theory ultimately derives from the Bible.

The Christian worldview of history has really never been substantially modified by the church or by Christian historians in general.²⁵ But some important questions do arise, one of the most important of which I will address. For example, can a Christian discern the *why* of God’s working in historical events? The limits of special revelation do not permit this question to be answered with specificity. We may of course posit a list of possibilities: judgment, chastisement, reward or grace, etc. But we must be careful not to speculate where Scripture does not allow it.

²¹ See Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and Time: The Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*. London: SCM, 1962, who used the phrase above in the German edition.

²² Aurelius Augustine, *City of God Against the Pagans*, 7 volumes. Harvard University Press, 1912-1972 (Loeb Classical Library).

²³ Interestingly, and paradoxically, for Augustine, history is not as it seems on the surface.

²⁴ See M. C. Lemon, *Philosophy of History*, op. cit., pp. 62-65.

²⁵ I am using the term “Christian” here in its narrower sense of those who are redeemed, not in the older sense of those in the visible church. Moreover, by “Christian” I mean here orthodox Christian in the tradition of the Reformation.

We are limited to the *potentia ordinata* of God and cannot discover His *potentia absoluta*.²⁶

Nevertheless, history has meaning and it also has a *telos*, a goal, which we know from Scripture.²⁷

But does this mean we can say nothing much about the events and ideas which take place in time? Even thinkers like David Hume the skeptic and Immanuel Kant, who accepted Hume's idea that nothing could be known about the noumenal world, both allowed that at the least one could make inferences with probability from what one sees. Until recently, historians in the Enlightenment *and* Christian traditions have followed this line of thought in believing that the past is recoverable in terms of what actually happened (Leopold von Ranke's famous saying that history should "tell how it really was"²⁸). To be sure, the past cannot be recovered perfectly in every case. One must deal with the problems of authenticity and reliability, and bias, as well as the difficulty of explanation in history and the debate over the existence of "covering laws" or general principles in the face of historical uniqueness.²⁹ But the Christian worldview, in common with Modernism, holds that the past is recoverable accurately to a large extent. To put it another way, one can know the truth of the past with a relatively high degree of certainty in most cases (at least in theory). That is, the Christian worldview enables the historian to assert that in theory the past is recoverable, even if it may be in practice extremely difficult. Moreover, the Christian worldview, based on special revelation, informs us as to the entire *framework* of history even though we do not know every detail of either past or future.

²⁶ One is reminded of John Calvin's story of the man who was asked the highly speculative question, why did God create hell?, to which the answer was "Hell was made for the curious." See *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, edited by John T. McNeill, translated by Ford Lewis Battles, 2 volumes. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960, Book I, Chapter 14, section 1, sub-section 4

²⁷ As for the "why" from a strictly human standpoint, history in its modernist form has been reduced to this aspect alone, and even here, historians (except for "psychhistorians") are reluctant to speculate overly much. Intent, rather than motive (why) is as far as most modernists will go. See Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method*. New York: Knopf, 1969, pp. 239ff. In addition, there is often a failure to properly distinguish between "why" and "how" in explanation. The latter may be related, but is logically separate. See William Dray, *Philosophy of History*, op. cit., pp. 8ff.

²⁸ von Ranke uttered these words in 1824. von Ranke actually said more: "the strict presentation of the facts...is undoubtedly the supreme law," quoted in Fritz Stern, editor, *The Varieties of History*. New York: Meridian, 1956, p. 216.

²⁹ On explanation, covering laws and uniqueness of historical events, see William Dray, *Philosophy of History*, op. cit., Chapter 2.

Recently the postmodernist worldview has challenged this worldview rooted in an objective philosophy of history.³⁰ Postmodernism has had a quite profound influence even in the evangelical Christian community (and even among students at colleges like Cedarville University). Though I cannot go into detail on the entire postmodernist worldview, I can say that it is an “anti-system,” that is, a worldview which undermines by its very nature other worldviews that are foundationalist and dogmatic or rationalistic to any extent. It has no system of itself with which to replace what it undermines. Thus if Christian historical approaches are believed by the postmodernist not to be capable of objectivity in reconstruction, then history is left completely at the mercy of radical imagination and negative revisionism. There can be no facts in history. One cannot draw objective generalizations. In fact, if carried to its logical extreme, one may legitimately claim that some events did not actually occur, since the postmodern viewpoint is considered equally “valid” compared to the “modern” viewpoint.³¹ Beverley Southgate has explained postmodernism in relation to history:

...in the context of historiography, postmodernism implies especially a challenge to those conventional certainties—such as ‘facts’, ‘objectivity’, and ‘truth’—in terms of which much history in the past has been written (and read). The sceptical approach of postmodern theorists questions the absolute validity of such concepts; it concludes that there can never be one single privileged position from which the story of the past can finally be told; it implies an inescapable and inevitable relativism in our own positions in relation to the past; so it requires that we see any version of history as nothing more than a tentative hypothesis underpinned by a possibly unstated, but nonetheless specific purpose. Furthermore, most such historical hypotheses will be presented in linguistic form, and that provokes questions again of what the historian’s language represents: whether there is assumed to be a correspondence with a past reality, or whether what is presented is just an internally consistent system constructed from and for a specific point of view.³²

It seems that one of the key points of contrast between the Christian worldview of history and the postmodern view concerns the question of correspondence theory of truth and reality versus the

³⁰ On this development and a response to it, see Gertrude Himmelfarb, *On Looking into the Abyss: Untimely Thoughts on Culture and Society*, op. cit., pp. 131-161, dealing critically with “postmodernist history.”

³¹ I must reiterate that the modernist (in the Enlightenment tradition) and the Christian agree on certain crucial aspects of the historical enterprise, namely that recovery of the past with appropriate critical tools, is theoretically possible. See Himmelfarb, *Ibid.*

³² Beverley Southgate, *History: What and Why? Ancient, Modern, and Postmodern Perspectives*. London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 7-8.

consistency theory. These are presented by the postmodern philosopher of history as mutually exclusive alternatives. Modernist and Christian views believe that what the historian does corresponds more or less with the reality of the past, while the postmodernist sees it as only an internally consistent theory (implying insurmountable bias) that has no necessary relation to past reality. In addition, the postmodernist will then be receptive to many possible alternative views of past reality and will see these as “empowering” to previously marginalized groups whose history has been suppressed. In essence, history becomes a fiction used to promote one’s own agenda.

Now to be sure, postmodernism also rejects what it calls the modernist “metanarrative” or system and the Christian worldview would concur on some points that modernism, rooted in the Enlightenment, a secularizing movement, has failed to live up to its promise and has in fact undermined much of the Christian faith. However, it seems that postmodernism itself suffers from a “failure of resolve” in that, as a movement (if it can be called that), it has not defined itself in terms of a replacement for modernism. In fact, postmodernists might disdain such a move simply because they disdain system. This is to “throw the baby out with the bath water.” For while the Christian rejects those elements of the Enlightenment that have attempted to destroy the foundations of the Christian faith, he or she does not reject those aspects of the modernist project which themselves were derived from earlier eras. In some sense, the Christian is a pre-modern, not a postmodern. His motto is *fides quaerens intellectum*, “faith seeking understanding,” a motto that existed long before the eighteenth century with Augustine and others. But his faith is—and never has been in its older sense—a “blind faith.”

To be sure, the Christian historian does encounter the problem of bias, which he believes he can overcome to an extent and at least recognize and compensate for. But he does not jettison the correspondence theory of truth. This goes to the heart of a Christian worldview. Ronald Nash, D. J. O’Connor, Brian Carr and Jonathan Dancy, among others, have addressed the issue of

correspondence theory of truth versus coherence theory.³³ According to Dancy, all “coherentists” agree “that consistency is a necessary condition for coherence.”³⁴ In addition, completeness or comprehensiveness are necessary conditions. But probably most important is the notion of “a coherent set [of data] stuck together or fitted together in a special way.”³⁵ This of course is where logic comes into play. The Christian historian would certainly agree with this theory as far as it goes. A set of “facts” (if we can speak meaningfully of facts, an issue raised by postmodernists) should certainly be related logically. Moreover, all the relevant facts should be included in the set. Traditional Christian philosophers of history have insisted that logic itself is a reflection of reality, in this case, the way God acts in the universe. Logical coherence is not merely a convention. But coherence is not enough for the Christian worldview of history.

In addition, we speak of correspondence theory, the idea that “for a proposition to be true is for it to fit the facts.”³⁶ If two different people operating on exactly the same set of facts reach different conclusions, about the reality of the past, we say that probably one or both are wrong, since to allow both to be true in this case violates the principle of non-contradiction.³⁷ At any rate, correspondence theory requires, in its traditional form, that there be a genuine and external correspondence between the historian’s conclusions (what one believes or theorizes or asserts) and reality.³⁸ Moreover the Christian worldview asserts that such a correspondence, because of

³³ See Ronald Nash, *Faith and Reason: Searching for a Rational Faith*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1988 and *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984; D. J. O’Connor and Brian Carr, *Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*. University of Minnesota Press, 1982; Jonathan Dancy, *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989.

³⁴ Dancy, op. cit., p. 110.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 115.

³⁷ See Ibid., pp. 115-116.

³⁸ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*. Cambridge: University Press, 1985 states that before Kant “it is perhaps impossible to find any philosopher who did not have a correspondence theory of truth.” (p. 56). It would probably not be too radical to assert that today most if not all Christian philosophers would hold to some sort of correspondence or similitude theory of truth.

the rules of operation God Himself has “built into” the structure of the world, is possible in theory and with a relatively high level of confidence in most cases.³⁹

In the end, the question comes down to a Christian philosophy of ontology, epistemology and a Christian theology of providence, all rooted in the Christian Scriptures. If what we see and experience is real, apart from our interpretation of what it is, then what was seen and experienced in the past was also real, again, regardless of how we interpret it. In other words, there was an objective past which historians look to reconstruct. Moreover, the Christian Scriptures have revealed a history to us, along with a way of understanding that history which applies to subsequent historical reality. If the past has a real existence, then the issue is the extent to which we are able to know it accurately. But this is not a philosophical issue that need cause undue concern. It is more an issue of our ability to “get at” this objective past. But even here, the epistemological problem is not insurmountable. Granted inherent bias on the part of contemporaneous witnesses and on our part, we still have methods that help us attain a part of that real past, assuming, as we do, that words have objective meaning and that our minds can be guided by an external logic which is objectively oriented. It is not that we know exhaustively, as only God can do that, or that historians can never be wrong or ignorant about the past, since they can if the data does not exist or if it is interpreted it incorrectly. But it is possible to know something with a relatively high degree of probability (with a presupposition that historical events recorded in Scripture are accepted as true absolutely in an objective sense and not merely probably true) and even with such a high degree of probability that one can say it is virtually and objectively certain.⁴⁰

³⁹ There will of course be instances where the paucity of data will make the level of certainty relatively low, but this does not change the overall theory rooted in a Christian worldview.

⁴⁰ For example, there may exist such a high incidence of corroboration of a given event that it must be held as virtually certain, especially given a very low probability of any counterfactual to refute it. Philosophically any event might in the future be refuted since it is always theoretically possible to find new evidence. But practically, it would be nearly impossible to conceive of any counterfactual to certain assertions, for example, that Abraham Lincoln was shot in 1864. In addition, the probability of evidence to counter this “fact” is virtually zero.

This does not prevent subjective skepticism, but that is a different issue, one which speaks to inherent human weakness. Even this kind of doubt may be overcome by the Holy Spirit. But of course we must be careful at this point. If the data is objectively deficient in some way, then it would be incorrect to allege that the Holy Spirit was leading one to accept as true what he ought to doubt. Thus, conclusions rooted in objective rules and propositions must be present in addition to the alleged work of the Spirit. If one goes against all reason and reason is applied correctly, then to say one believes an assertion of fact would be incorrect unless, the data to support what one believed were simply not present and the Holy Spirit was speaking only to that person. Such non-transitive “knowledge” is reserved for prophets and others in Scripture as a rule.

The Christian Worldview in Practice (Analytic Philosophy of History)

I stated at the beginning of this paper that I would also address the application of the Christian worldview of history to the actual study of history at the level of “doing” history. The remainder of this manuscript will take up this task. If we believe that truth or reality in its historical sense—as opposed to timeless metaphysical truth—is possible to attain objectively, how do we work out this worldview among students. We teach first that the Scriptures are the only inspired, inerrant, and authoritative source of principles for thinking about history. This is a theological presupposition without which we could not operate in practice.⁴¹ But the Bible is not a detailed set of instructions for doing historical research and writing. Rather, we draw from it general parameters within which we operate. We have seen some of those principles above.

But others are deduced from the more general principles. The more important of these principles are concerned with method. For example, the empirical or inductive method of generalizing from specific facts or data is crucial to the historical enterprise. But how do we have confidence in this method? We are confident because we believe (from Scripture) that God

⁴¹ When I speak of inspiration and inerrancy, I am, strictly speaking, referring only to the original autographs, not to the many thousands of copies which may contain a degree of error because of the fallibility of human beings. Nevertheless, I would also insist that the copies have proven themselves to be reliable sources of the original truth, when compared with each other. This hints at a certain level of providential preservation that we do not see in other historical documents.

created a world that operates with order or regularity and that human beings have been created with an innate ability to apply certain methods to reconstruct reality of the past. In other words, God “made the rules” whereby we discern truth. The “rules of the game” include logic and a proper method of interpreting words and phrases, as well as the confidence that what we “see” (whether in direct observation as in the “hard sciences” or via historical documents) is “real.” This gives us confidence when we use the inductive method to gather facts and then to make inferences about them.⁴² When for example, we discover that Erasmus Darwin, Georg Hegel, Herbert Spencer, and many others held to a theory of “development” or evolution, broadly speaking, in the nineteenth century, before Charles Darwin, we can then generalize that the idea of evolution was “in the air” so to speak. We have “piled up” individual facts” and then moved from the specific to the general. It is true that for most historical endeavors, these facts can only lead to generalizations with a higher or lower degree of probability. This is the very nature of empiricism or inductivism—its limit. But this limit does not entail rejection of the method, but rather a more diligent search for the history “as it really was.” For the goal of the historian is comprehensive and accurate truth with regard to all of history. Even if he cannot actually attain that goal in practice, he is obligated to strive for it, because he knows that there is objective truth about history. The question arises, how would one know if he did arrive at “the” truth about some historical question? This question is impossible to answer, but it misses the point at any rate, since the historian’s duty is to continue to strive for accuracy and comprehensiveness in the reconstruction of the past. Hence, he will continue to strive regardless. Some questions will be more or less settled over time, while others will never be settled. The goal is always the same because objective truth exists regardless of how close we get to it.

But this operation raises the further practical question of whether we can in fact obtain “facts.” Individual facts are the building blocks of history. It is argued, not without validity, that facts are

⁴² On the inductive or empirical method, see David Kelley, *The Art of Reasoning*, Third edition. New York: W. W. Norton, 1998. On its limitations, see Dancy, *op. cit.*

not generally “bare” but are already to some extent interpreted. Does this objection negate our historical work entirely? The Christian worldview would answer “No.” Certainly facts are frequently already laden with interpretation, for example, when we say that Georg Hegel believed in a form of evolution. What do we mean by the term evolution? Does Hegel’s “world spirit” and his “dialectic” make for a type of evolutionary theory? These are issues to be examined every time we engage in historical research or reading. But we can account and compensate for these problems by careful definition of terms such as “evolution” as well as being aware of our own biases at the outset of our enterprise.

In addition, in doing history we deal with other problems such as the use of deductive reasoning, authenticity of alleged evidence, reliability of evidence, selection of relevant and significant facts in order to make generalizations, arranging facts in narrative form, and explaining and making causal connections between and among facts and generalizations.⁴³ Once again, the Christian worldview comes to our rescue at the level of principle. The concept of reliability or credibility would make no sense unless we accept the presupposition that there is objective truth to be discovered. If a postmodernist historian examines pieces of evidence he or she has no way to create a hierarchy of credibility among documents (or other types of evidence) since he has no standard of objectivity in terms of the “what” he is looking for to begin with. The Christian believes there is some objective truth about the past and he or she can then measure the credibility of his evidence by that standard.

With regard to significance and selection, once again the Christian, unlike the postmodernist, has a standard against which to compare his evidence. One could not speak meaningfully of significance if there were no objective reality as the standard. As with all the other aspects of doing history, the fact that we have presuppositions that guide us does not mean that these

⁴³ On many of these issues, see Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method*. New York: Knopf, 1969, a fine older work, and David Hackett Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*. New York: Harper, 1970, still in print and widely used, dealing with some 136 possible fallacies to avoid.

elements are without their problems. Confidence that it is possible to apply the credibility criterion or the significance criterion does not mean that the actual determination of credibility and significance are easy.⁴⁴

One of the most vexing elements of the doing of history is causation. Causation is the idea that a given event or set of events is related to some subsequent or simultaneous event or events in a way that is more than co-incidental. In other words, there is not a spurious relationship but a real relationship between the antecedent and the consequent.⁴⁵ David Hume severely undermined the idea of causation in the eighteenth century and contributed to a later skepticism even in the natural realm.⁴⁶ But the Christian worldview understands that God has established real causal relationships and that He is intimately involved in causation. If this is true then we should, within the limits of the human condition, be able to discover those relations. To be sure, such discovery is not always easy.⁴⁷ Nor will our causal connections always be unassailable and incapable of correction. Nevertheless, following the accepted rules and avoiding the fallacies, we will be able to move toward proper causal relationships. And we will most certainly not reject causality altogether. Once again, a Christian worldview informs us that though causality may be difficult to establish, it is not impossible.

Finally, the issue of revisionism in history is a topic that will not soon disappear. There is a proper revisionism which takes place when new facts are discovered that make for a more objective history. This is a valuable endeavor. In addition, as the Christian worldview as a set of presuppositions is brought to bear on any historical event, a “philosophical revisionism” may take place that is legitimate. However, when the presuppositional “lens” through which we view the

⁴⁴ This is why history is often rightly called an art as opposed to a science.

⁴⁵ On causation in history see William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History*, op. cit. On causation generally, see J. L. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe: A Study of Causation*. Oxford: University Press, 1980.

⁴⁶ Hume does provide a fairly standard definition of cause: A causes B iff: A precedes B, A and B are spatio-temporally contiguous and all objects resembling A are always accompanied by B in the manner specified in the first two conditions. See Gregory M. Zeigler, “Hume’s View of the Causal Relation,” in *Personalist*, vol. 56 (1975), pp. 351-363. The problem is that *historical* relations are unique, not repetitive.

⁴⁷ On the problems, see Fischer, *Historians’ Fallacies*, op. cit., Chapter 6 and Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, op. cit., Chapter XI. These modernist (not Christian) historians have made us very aware of the limits of causal reasoning, but they themselves do not reject it.

past is distorted by non-Christian assumptions, an improper revisionism may occur. Christian historians must be aware of these issues as they do and read history.

All that takes place in the classroom is directed toward the inculcation of the Christian worldview but not without also “borrowing” from the best of non-Christian theory that is grounded in part in an understanding of a Christian worldview. As some have put it, “all truth is God’s truth,” so long as we understand how to measure truth as opposed to error. This approach in itself raises a further practical issue, and one which has provoked much discussion among students. Is it possible to write history apart from making it “providential history,” that is, history that is explicit about its reference to God as causal agent and about attempting to explain why God acted as He did in historical events? This has been a vexing question, as many Christian historians are writing history that is well-received, but are not writing from any explicitly providential perspective.⁴⁸ The answer to this question, while difficult, seems to distill to the main point that “good” history may be history that does not explicitly include God. Using methods rooted in a Christian worldview and, as I mentioned above, borrowing from the secular historians what is consistent with a Christian worldview, one may construct a narrative that satisfies the requirements of the Christian approach to history—objectivity, correspondence with reality, logical internal coherence—without invoking the name of God as explicit causal agent and without attempting the impossible, that being the explanation of events through answering the question of why God was involved as He was in events.

Conclusions

History is about accurately reconstructing the past. In so doing, we may legitimately use history to teach lessons about the present or future.⁴⁹ But without a Christian worldview underpinning any study of history and the practice of history, the pursuit of historical

⁴⁸ See Tim Stafford, “Whatever Happened to Christian History?” in *Christianity Today*, volume 45, issue 5 (2001), who interviewed several prominent believing historians who have written non-providential history. Some prominent names include Mark Noll, George Marsden and Nathan Hatch among American religious historians.

⁴⁹ Recall the famous quote attributed to Lord Acton: “Those who forget history are doomed to repeat it.”

reconstruction can range from error to utter despair and meaninglessness. One can attempt history, as the modernist historians do, and be partially correct as to meaning in context, but, because of the idea of historicism, be unable to connect the particular to anything else. History becomes an anachronism at best.⁵⁰ On the other end of the scale, we have encountered postmodernism which undermines all confidence in the ability to recover reality as it was—to any extent.⁵¹ A distinctively Christian philosophy of history enables one to examine confidently, though at the same time humbly, the past with the reasonable assurance that its reality can be recovered within the limitations of human depravity and recovered for the express purpose of teaching lessons to the present that will reflect glory to the God who acts in history. Within this framework of the Biblical worldview, the historian conducts his research according to many rules shared with modernist historians. But at the same time, he recognizes that underlying his endeavors are many presuppositions that lead to very different interpretations of the same events and ideas. For example, the interpretation of the idea of evolution in the nineteenth century will probably substantially differ as between the non-Christian, modernist (sometimes called scientific) historian and the Christian who uses modernist methodology. The former sees evolutionary thought as a good development while the latter would view it as a negative development. Nonetheless, both will, when they pursue their work properly, come to the same conclusions with regard to what actually happened or what individuals actually thought, assuming both selected the same data as relevant and significant.⁵² Such divergence goes to the issue of meaning in history: one view, informed by a distinctively Christian worldview, seeks to discover what lies beneath the events and ideas while the other, modeling itself after the natural sciences,

⁵⁰ On historicism in one of its influential forms, see Georg Iggers, *The German Conception of History*, Revised edition. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1968.

⁵¹ This is not to say that all postmodernists are “created equal.” In fact, I would posit a spectrum of postmodernism, beginning on one end with a “Christian postmodernism.” If this is correct, the Christian version is more moderate than the radical version, but no less problematic.

⁵² The element of selection also plays into bias and may skew the historian’s conclusions. Two historians may choose *different* data in relation to some given event or idea. This could be either unintentional or intentional. If intentional, it may be an indicator of a given worldview. See William Dray, *Philosophy of History*, op. cit., pp. 35-41 for a succinct discussion of the problem.

seeks only an accurate account without attempting (or believing the attempt is reasonable) to “get beyond” the facts.⁵³

History cannot be legitimately pursued without reference to a theistic worldview. Further, it cannot be pursued with optimal results apart from an explicitly Christian viewpoint. It is this Christian, not merely theistic (though theistic and modernist views can go part of the way), and not merely modernist/scientific, worldview that the Christian university must cultivate in its students, in history to be certain, but also in all disciplines.

⁵³ See Ronald Nash, *op. cit.*, p. 5 and Gordon Graham, *The Shape of the Past*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.