

SUNDAY ARTICLE

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How to Read Our Heritage

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One of the most pressing but invisible threats to Christian thinking at the present time is that of fallacious history. Like carbon monoxide, it can be fatal; you just don't notice it is happening until it is too late.

Fallacious history comes in numerous forms. The most obvious and influential are those pushed by popular culture.

Movies are the primary culprits here. So powerful are the aesthetics of modern cinema that the stories the movies tell can be compelling for no other reason than that they seem so real.

Thus, if there is a movie in which Americans crack the Enigma code in the Second World War, then the common assumption is, well, the Americans cracked the Enigma Code. (It was actually the British who did so.)

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Books, too, have an influence, especially those that are combined with a glossy movie. Take *The Da Vinci Code*, for example. Dan Brown tells us therein that the church only agreed to affirm Christ's deity by the narrowest of margins and as a result of powerful political pressure. The truth is more prosaic: while there was certainly a political component to the Trinitarian debates of the fourth century, the case was ultimately won by arguments and by a huge majority.

Old wives' tales, or, to use the more "politically correct" terminology, urban myths, also play their role in shaping the popular understanding of the past.

That John Calvin burned Michael Servetus in Geneva is certainly true but hardly the whole truth. Attention to the life and times of Servetus reveals that he was wanted by Catholics as much as Protestants, and that Calvin tried to have his mode of execution changed to beheading as a small act of mercy. Without pardoning Calvin or lessening the nastiness of what happened, Calvin's actions were simply not exceptional by the standards of the time, a point that should temper our judgment of him.

Christianity is, of course, a historical religion. Paul makes that point clearly regarding the resurrection: if Christ is not raised (in real time and space),

then we are of all people to be most pitied (1 Corinthians 15:19).

The church is also a historical phenomenon: her actions, her creeds and confessions, everything she has ever done has been historical. All Christians should therefore be historians.

In light of this, we need to be good historians in order to spot the bogus and fallacious when we see it.

Now, there is no secret to being a good historian. It just requires a set of skills learned like any other, from playing the piano to baking cakes.

Thus, there are numerous things Christians should keep in mind when reading history books, particularly those that touch on the history of Christianity.

First, remember that history is a narrative of the past constructed on the basis of evidence.

Thus, when reading history, always ask: What evidence is being cited? Indeed, *is* evidence being cited? What kind is it? Is it eyewitness testimony? Is it a written document? And is the evidence capable of sustaining the narrative being offered?

For example, a train ticket in a woman's purse might indicate that she travelled from New York to Washington one December. But if that is the only evidence for the journey, and yet the historian claims that she went to Washington and met the president, the reader can legitimately question the narrative.

Second, remember that the historian has an agenda. This does not mean that all histories can simply be reduced to the viewpoint of the writer. The racist who denies the Holocaust ever happened does not offer a narrative that is just as legitimate as the Jewish writer who says it did. Yet the

Jewish writer's Jewishness will no doubt shape to some extent how he reads the evidence.

When Dan Brown wrote his nonsense about the Council of Nicaea, his desire to write a controversial bestseller while undermining the Christian faith was no doubt a factor in how he selected and interpreted the evidence.

Third, read as much good history as you can.

These are great times for reading history. Every week, I receive an email from Amazon.com informing me of the latest books being published in the historical genre. Rarely does a week go by when I am not tempted to type in my credit card number and purchase a new volume.

The period does not matter: the canons of good history, in terms of marshalling and interpreting evidence, are the same for histories of ancient Greece as they are for those of modern Nicaragua. Reading good history will help you spot the bad when you see it.

Christianity needs Christians who know good history. Good history helps to build our confidence in our historical religion and to offer an answer to the bad historians – and there are many of them.

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