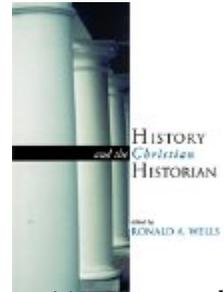


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Ronald A. Wells, ed. *History and the Christian Historian*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998. vi + 248 pp. \$23.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8028-4536-8.

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How does an Evangelical Christian “do history”? Should the way in which Evangelicals “do it” differ significantly from the way historians of different faith positions write, teach, and lecture? Can Evangelicals be intellectually reputable without compromising their professed faith? Weighty questions these—especially for those who count themselves to be both Evangelicals and historians. This collection of essays attempts to wrestle with these questions while at the same time providing discussions of value to the broader historical community. On the whole, *History and the Christian Historian* fulfills its task, although not all will agree with the answers its contributors offer.

Admittedly, a certain irony characterizes this collection. As Evangelical scholars here reflect on the interaction of Christian faith with the practice of the academic discipline of history, several of the contributors appeal to the much-trumpeted call of modern scholarship for a diversity of voices in learning. They contend, logically enough, that this diversity should embrace viewpoints informed by religious faith, and particularly Evangelical Christian faith. The irony lies in the fact that for centuries Christianity dominated the educational culture of Western civilization and American education in particular until well into the twentieth century. Christian scholars are, in effect, asking for a place at table when formerly they sat at the head.

Irony aside, readers will find the volume instructive and of broad usefulness. Those who share much of the basic conviction of the contributors, as I do, will find many of the contributors’ arguments persuasive. Indeed, as a self-identified Fundamentalist—and not simply an Evangelical—I probably stand to the right of most (if not all) of the contributors to this volume. Yet even

for those who do not share the faith positions expressed therein, the book provides thoughtful discussion on issues of broad interest to historians, as well as a glimpse into the state of modern Christian scholarship and the issues over which Christian historians wrangle.

This book is not simply a intramural debate. The essays wrestle with questions and topics of broad interest in the field of history. Often the pattern is to survey the situation in a given discipline or area and then conclude with thoughts about what difference Christian faith makes in studying the topic. Examples are Margaret Bendroth’s discussion of gender studies and Richard Pointer on Puritan studies. In these essays, a reader uninterested in the religious discussions may still benefit from the survey each author offers of his or her topic. Even the essays on more ostensibly “Christian topics”—such as Mark Noll on missiology and Bill Leonard on the Southern Baptists—should prove valuable introductions to the literature and history of interpretation concerning those subjects.

Nonetheless, there is a clear emphasis on a distinctively Christian perspective on history. Perhaps the best example is George Marsden’s “What Difference Might Christian Perspectives Make?” Here Marsden discusses issues he covers in greater detail in his *Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*,<sup>[1]</sup> such as the impact of a belief in creation on one’s approach to history.

Still, only C. Stephen Evans, dealing with the historical veracity of the New Testament documents, comes anywhere close to offering a traditional Christian apologetic, particularly in his discussion of miracles. Yet the philosophical and historiographical discussions in Evans’ essay illustrate an evident change in Christian scholarship. Most authors clearly reject what are commonly viewed as older Christian models of “doing history.”

Marsden, for example, says that in academic discussion, “Christians will not be quoting Bible verses or alleging special providences as means of historical explanation” (p. 11). Mark Noll likewise notes how Christian historians have eschewed providential history, a tradition he says stretches back to Eusebius. Modern Christian historians, he says, make history not a subset of theology but of science. Noll’s view, apparently shared by most of the writers in this volume, is that for many Evangelical scholars, history is studied as a part of “the sphere of creation” rather than “the sphere of grace” (p. 110).

The difference between older and newer models is evident throughout but particularly in D. G. Hart’s essay on the Conference on Faith and History, an organization of Evangelical historians. Hart pointedly contrasts the approach to revivals represented by Harry Stout of Yale and Calvinistic historian Iain Murray. Comparing Stout’s biography of George Whitefield (an example of the contemporary model) with Murray’s history of American revivals (which resembles more traditional Christian models),<sup>[2]</sup> Hart takes on Murray’s whole supernatural approach, with its assertions of God’s activities in history and moral lessons drawn from the past. Hart does not question the reality of providence but rather the ability of the historian to discern it. Indeed Hart displays what would be among Evangelicals in former times almost a surprising agnosticism concerning these issues. The difference between Hart and non-Christian historians would be not that there is no Christian metanarrative but rather a question of whether a historian can connect that metanarrative with “the narratives of the United States, ethnic groups, or Western civilization” (p. 87).

As the reference to “metanarrative” indicates, one theme that runs throughout the volume is discussion of postmodernism. Shirley Mullen and Jerry L. Summers refer to postmodernism explicitly in their titles, and the subject is close to hand in most of the other essays too. Such interest in postmodernism is not surprising since many believe that the postmodern stress on diversity and hearing marginalized voices has provided Evangelicals with their opening to claim a place in the academy. None seems to reject postmodernism out of hand, although several offer qualifications. It strikes me that this is a weakness. Theological considerations aside (which are not appropriate to this forum), the challenge of postmodernism to traditional understandings of Christian faith and approach to history (not to mention the field of history as a whole) would seem to demand a fuller discussion. If the apparent dangers are indeed only apparent, then one might ask for an assuaging of fears.

The authors strive throughout to show how they can relate faith to historical writing without compromising academic integrity. In doing so, they raise questions worthy of serious consideration. Yet there remains a sense that sometimes they couch this relation of faith to history in terms acceptable to the generally more liberal views of members of the academy. For example, G. Marcille Frederick writes on “Doing Justice in History: Using Narrative Frames Responsibly.” Clearly, one can offer a biblical case promoting justice and then incorporating that sensitivity into historical writing. But such a quality is likely to offer little offense to scholars as a whole, for whom advocacy of “doing justice” is hardly controversial. An assertion of a special providence would likely evoke far more discussion.

Where the authors really succeed is in demonstrating that a historian must reckon with genuine religious faith as a factor in history and not try always to recast religious motives as cloaks for some other, “genuine” motivations. One need not be a professing Christian to use such an approach, as Perry Miller demonstrated in suggesting that perhaps what really motivated the Puritans was, after all, their religious beliefs. Nonetheless, the contributors make this point well and with consistent emphasis. Ronald Wells, for instance, reinforces the value of this consideration as he discusses the conflict in Northern Ireland. Religion would seem to be an obvious factor in that conflict, but as Wells demonstrates, some historians have sought to recast that battle as “really” being about something else. Wells’ simple plea to reckon with religion in Ulster offers a necessary corrective. If faith sometimes blinds historians to other factors (and it can), faith nonetheless creates a sympathy and understanding for the historian who is also a participant observer.

The challenge for Evangelical historians is to bring their sympathy to the subject without letting it distort their viewpoints. But this challenge exists for all historians, whatever their religion or overriding ideology, and as such should provide no basis for disregarding Christian viewpoints out of hand. The other question, which these writers and others like them should perhaps discuss more fully (at least among themselves), is whether the way in which they propose to “do history” is reconcilable to the Christian faith they also profess to believe.

In short, *History and the Christian Historian* is a helpful work, a window on one segment of the community of modern historians. The authors consistently write clearly (not something to be taken for granted) and provide discussions useful to researchers beyond the bounds

of their own religious sphere. The book should provoke helpful debate, among both Evangelical historians and all historians in general.

Notes:

[1]. George Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[2]. Harry Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George White-*

*field and the Rise of Modern Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991); Iain Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).

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