

History and HIS Story

Putting God in History

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What do we think about history? What do we think about ourselves? Does history portray reality? Is history culturally specific? Is history biased? Is history godly? What is history without God? Does it matter if we talk about history without talking about God? How is the God of history different from man's understanding of history and God? Come and be challenged. Let's put God into (and over!) history.

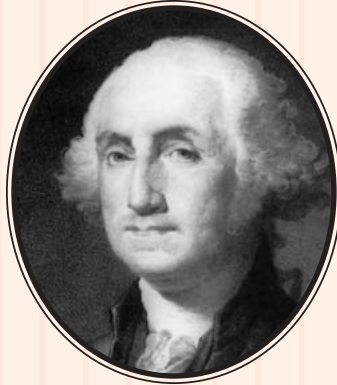
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Here is an encyclopedia citation about George Washington...

WASHINGTON, George (1732-1799), prominent American statesman of the era of the American British colonies' struggle for their independence; commander in chief of the colonial troops; President of the United States in 1789-97. The son of a large Virginia plantation owner, Washington engaged in land speculation and amassed a huge fortune. On the eve of and during the Seven Years' War (1756-63), Washington took part in the struggle against the French and in campaigns against the Indians. The latter resulted in the mass extermination of Indians.

In the North American colonies' War of Liberation from British dominion, Washington unequivocally stood for the defense of the colonies' interests. In 1774 he was elected to the first Continental Congress and in 1775 to the second Congress. At the start of the War of Independence (q.v.) (1775-83), the Congress, after the battles of Lexington and Concord, appointed Washington commander in chief of the colonial army. Washington played an important role in transforming the untrained and undisciplined colonial troops into a battle-fit and well-organized army. He also managed to strengthen the bonds between the colonies. With the aid from various countries and especially with aid from France, whose double aim was to fortify her position in America and deal a blow against Britain, Washington's army, after a series of defeats, came out victorious in the war against the British and won independence for the former thirteen colonies. This was a historically progressive act. But when in 1786 the masses demanded that the promises given them during the war to improve their lot be fulfilled and started a rebellion (see Shays' Rebellion), Washington headed the reactionary force which was organized to mete out punishment against the rebels. Under his chairmanship, the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention (1787) secretly drafted a new constitution assuring the bourgeoisie and the plantation slave-owners that the masses would be altogether deprived of participation in the administration of the State. On the basis of this constitution Washington was elected first President of the United States in 1789. (He was elected a second time in 1792).

During the Jacobin dictatorship in France, Washington, fearing the influence the Jacobin revolutionary ideas might have on the American people, began to conduct an ever increasingly reactionary policy. He suppressed the 1794 Pennsylvania farmers' uprising and simultaneously destroyed the emerging democratic clubs. Fear of revolution caused him to seek a rapprochement with Britain.

In 1793 Washington declared neutrality in the war which the counter-revolutionary European coalition waged against his ally, revolutionary France, thus violating the treaty of alliance signed with the latter. Under Washington's influence the United States in 1794 signed a disadvantageous and humiliating commercial treaty with Britain (see Jay's Treaty). This treaty called forth widespread dissatisfaction in the United States.

As one of the leaders of the American people's struggle for independence, Washington played an objectively progressive role. At the same time he invariably remained an exponent and defender of the plantation owners and the bourgeoisie.

How important is history to us? At the very least it teaches us something ourselves. History will reflect what we understand about ourselves and the world as we perceive it—not necessarily as it really is (or was.) Did my opening citation sound a little strange to you? It should. It is how George Washington was interpreted by the Soviet Union communists. It is of first importance with history that you get your facts straight. But we are not done then. Most of the facts were not so wrong in the communist description of Washington. But it wasn't the same history that we know.

We are limited creatures. Which facts shall we focus on? ...shall we pay attention to? ...shall we listen to? We filter all data that comes our way. We have to. It is filtered by what we believe to be true. It is filtered heavily by what we have experienced and how we reacted to it. It is hinted by what we want to have happen, by our desires and wants. This gets at the core problem we battle against day by day in the trenches. What we understand about ourselves and our world is crucial and foundational. It permeates our thinking and understanding, both what we do and how we view what goes on around us, i.e., how we view and LIVE history. It will certainly affect how we view even original sources of historical records and how we interpret what they tell us.

Because we must be selective, it is imperative that we exercise right thinking. But we are in a dilemma. We need to see the bigger picture in order to understand correctly what is happening to us by all that is happening around us. I think you can see where this is leading.

Let me ask you all, what is the most accurate history book? The Bible! When it speaks about historical facts, it has been found to be correct even if we at first thought it was mistaken about some point. In time, it has proven to be accurate. But it only speaks about history in passing. That book can be characterized as a dialogue between God and mankind. It tells the story of God's relationship with mankind, and about who God is and what man is like. It therefore gives us the overhead view of what is going on. It defines what reality is really like. It claims to be 'breathed' from the Author of reality and to be authoritative. Its historicity confirms that claim to us.

It also reveals big differences between God and us. We are typically out to control the events and the circumstances that happen to us. We appeal to authority when we want to get help with some problem. But then we try to avoid that same authority when we think it will work against us. Even our religion too often smacks of self servitude. You all know about God being the "cosmic candy machine"— just drop in a prayer and out comes your treat! It is interesting to note that anthropology has a thought-provoking definition of religion. In a nutshell, it defines religion as "supernatural science." By that I mean that man tries to figure out the forces in the supernatural realm in order to apply them, just as he does in the physical world. We can see it pretty easily in the tribal level societies, in the nature religions like animism and shamanism. But do we recognize it even in what we do?

But the God of the Bible has a different agenda in mind. He teaches us events (but not dates) in order to remember Him and what He has done for us. He does not want us to forget. He uses events, both good and bad, to reveal Himself and His character to us—about who He is and what He is like. As a consequence He also reveals to us who we are and what we are like. God very explicitly uses history as a vehicle to reveal our hearts and to mold us after His heart. He is much more interested in how we respond to the events in our lives than in removing unpleasant ones from us or giving us our hearts' desires. God uses history to reveal to us who He is and what we are like. He uses it to reveal His own heart and our heart, and to mold us after His heart.

But we would not necessarily know that, if God did not reveal Himself and His intention to us. If we do not understand God's purposes, the God of history will be different than man's understanding of God and history. If we are uninformed by God about what is real, then we humans must draw our conclusions just by observing reality. We quickly run into a silent dilemma. Here is a situation in which the creation is trying to comment on and describe the creator. But the two are very different natures, very different essences. They are just plain different stuff. The creation is limited and absolutely circumscribed by his own createdness. He can only describe things in terms of himself—the only thing he can know for sure.

Then, to make it harder, there is an unspoken presumption of uniformity, that is to say that the way things are now is the way they have always been. The earth may look different than it did umpteen eons ago, but the forces that shape it have always been the same and behaved the same way. But things that occur beyond the lifetime of the observer are really beyond the bedrock of knowing. We have to assume that they always operate the same way. Doesn't history tell us so?

Perhaps the most telling blind spot in all this is the question, "But what if things haven't always been this way?" There is a basic problem out there that all peoples have grappled with, whether they recognize it or not. What if the conditions now are NOT normal? What IF things haven't always been this way? If we accept as a normal circumstance what is instead an aberration, a corruption of normal practice, we can only draw wrong conclusions, maybe even drastically wrong conclusions, and then act in probably seriously wrong ways. The problem we all deal with is, to use a biblical word, sin. People may not recognize it so distinctly, but everyone is trying to improve upon its consequences.

Is sin normal? God tells us NO! Is it typical? Well, in this spiritual age, yes. Is it normal? No, righteousness and lovingkindness are. If sin is typical but not normal and we do not recognize its existence, we will think that either a supreme being is also a sinful being (our gods are just like us...ask the Greeks), or that he created things just the way we find them (either there is no right nor wrong, or everything is good just the way it is.) If we do not understand the true nature of our humanity, then we will follow wrong beliefs and then behave in wrong ways. We will do so sincerely, but wrongly nonetheless.

Very generally we can divide our thinking about history and reality into Eastern and Western. You are familiar with the Ying Yang symbol. It is a Chinese symbol, although the concept is found around the globe. It expresses the general idea that there are balanced forces operating in the world—good and bad, hot and cold, health and illness, etc. If one thing gets out of balance, then it must be put back into balance. This is the theory behind acupuncture. One is trying to improve the balance of the healthy force in one's body. Although good and evil are recognized as moral concepts, good and evil as forces are equally strong. The god who created the world is either silent and uncaring about his creation, or else is no stronger than all the other gods who are running around out there—depending on which religion we look at.

Hinduism develops things another step. It views the universe as a closed system, basically. The creation is its own god. Good and bad behaviors have their natural consequences. Everything is reshuffled and recycled in reincarnation. But it is very mechanical. Karma is a cycle. It is fate. It cannot be broken out of. Although there is good and bad, the system is basically amoral because it is so mechanical. Life is a matter of fate—what is, is what is meant to be.

Western thinking, by which I mean what began in classical Greece, takes a different slant on sorting out reality. It was under Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle that western thinking took its direction. They refined and defined what became the disciplines of science and logic. They practiced what would be called inductive and deductive reasoning. Their thinking was founded on the distinction between the ideal and the real. The real is transient and only an expression of the ideal which is eternal and separate from nature. Plato and Aristotle's systems dominated Western intellect until the Age of Enlightenment. Logic and science continued, but the foundation shifted from Aristotle's archetypal idea to Renee Descartes' "*I think therefore I am.*" He began his reasonings from himself. And so it continues into the present, until we arrive at a stage nicely expressed by the French architect Le Corbusier, "*Man is the measure of all things.*" Western thought has changed from an understanding that says reality is based outside of the world we know, to an understanding that says that the world is all we can know.

Both Eastern and Western thinking are rational approaches that seek understanding. Both are deductive beginning from certain presumptions, that is to say, from generalizations to particulars, i.e., from a principle to an application. They are deductive because they read their understanding back into every day events. Both are inductive, going from particularities to generalizations, i.e., from parts to a whole, from observations to principles. They are inductive because they explain the world based on observation. Neither Eastern nor Western has any outside help with understanding— both take their knowledge resources from the world as they experience it.

Can one understand history without God? Is there another way apart from God's revealed Word? Well, history teaches us the long-term outcomes of each of the different ways humans have lived out their different ways of thinking. We get to see the outcome of humankind's different attempts to create order and meaning and contentment. We get to decide how well they did. So who did the best? Whose way was 'good enough?' Who made a lasting society? Who discovered God?

Paul's analysis in Romans 1 is telling. *"that which is know about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God, or give thanks; but they became futile in their speculations,"* (Romans 1:19-21)

There is enough testimony in nature that people are without excuse. But instead of correctly deducing God from nature, we made gods in the image of nature, even in our own likeness. In the end, no one was able to think outside the box called creation. Man's conscience tells him right and wrong, but even with the Law of God, man could not come to God. It required God to reveal Himself and to act on His behalf for our own good in order to reconnect us, the crown of His creation, with Himself. And we have a record of that reconnecting, the record of His revealed Word, the Christ, in the Bible.

Now, the Bible is not primarily a history book. It is rather selective about what it covers and when. And just as man's history is a record of what he considers to be important and of note, so is the Bible according to God's purpose. What does man consider to be important, and what does God consider to be important? What does the Bible note and record...our place in creation, our current condition, God's campaign to restore man to his intended purpose, and the apparent fact that the nature of our relationship is important and our achievements are not.

There is one more thing that we as believers in Jesus as Christ must proclaim. We have an historic faith. I don't mean a faith that has been around for 2000 years. I mean one that is based on an historic event involving real people. We believe that God gave a witness through the prophets about what was going to happen, that there would be a suffering servant who would save the people from their sins through his death. We believe that indeed happened in the historic person of Jesus of Nazareth. The apostles staked the rest of their lives on the historical Jesus and what happened to Him and through Him. The apostle Paul tells us plainly that we have a faith based in tangible reality in 1 Corinthians 15. This is not wishful thinking or an idealized example. It really happened. And because it really happened, it demands that we accept it and live according to it, or to discount it and ultimately reject it. It calls us to order our lives by it. We better really believe it, because we can expect to pay the price.

One more thing. Proverbs 12:1 teaches us that, *"whoever loves discipline, loves knowledge, but he who hates reproof is stupid."* History is not called a discipline for nothing. If we seek its knowledge, we seek a good thing. It requires effort. It demands that we own up to the content of the knowledge. We are responsible for what we receive from it, that we set our path by the lessons history teaches. In history God has revealed humankind's way of life. Through history we are reprovved or encouraged by the consequences others experienced and that God invoked. History is both knowledge and reproof.

If we believe that the God of the revealed Word is truly God, than it is most important for us to see reality as God sees it, and to see ourselves as He sees us, and to live our lives on His basis. Only then can we know as we ought, and be known as we desire.