

OpenTheo

A Dust-up among the Historians

December 9, 2022



Life and Books and Everything - Clearly Reformed

For as much as the CFH talks about inclusion and the free exchange of ideas, it is clear that the present leadership of the historical guild assumes conclusions on the left.

In this response to a recent article published by Jay Green, Kevin discusses the pitfalls of using history for activist purposes.

Transcript

[MUSIC] Greetings and salutations. Welcome to Life and Books and everything. I'm Kevin D. Young.

Today I'm reading my world opinions piece, and maybe I'll give a little bit of explanation along the way for some of the terms and issues here. The piece is entitled "A Dust Up Among the Historians, the Problem of the Historian as Activist" approach to the past. To many outsiders, the field of history probably looks like a straightforward endeavor.

Historians teach us about the people, the events, and the ideas of the past. Sounds simple, but once you start studying the past, you realize there is no one agreed upon way to do history. In the last several years, this perennial difficulty has become especially pronounced within the guild of Evangelical Historians.

Evangelicals broadly understood. A recent online kerfuffle helps illuminate this intra-evangelical debate. At the end of November, Jay Green, a professor of history at Covenant College, published a piece on the new shape of Christian public discourse.

That's the title of the article. If you read this online, you can link to this in various other articles that I reference throughout the piece. In this article, he tries to map public Christian voices across an x-axis that moves from emancipationists on the left and civilizationalists on the right.

Those are Green's terms, and emancipationists think of those who see their aims as trying to give people freedom and freedom of expression and to live out their identities.

That's emancipationists. In civilizationalists, think of those who are trying to preserve Western civilization, and usually that means some type of Christian civilization.

That's the x-axis. The y-axis moves from minimalist at the bottom to maximalists at the top. Those two are Green's categories, minimalist, meaning people who are attempting their aims, but are doing so more or less according to the rules of modern liberal society.

I don't mean politically liberal, but rather classically liberal. They're trying to play within the rules of the game, you might say. The maximalists, those who sort of whatever it takes, mentality, the system is so broken that radical times demand radical measures.

That's sort of what he means across the x and the y-axis. Like all metaschemes, Green's analysis isn't perfect as he readily acknowledges, but as a conversation starter, it introduces helpful categories. What made Green's analysis useful and controversial is that he named names.

For example, he put me in the civilizational minimalist category. That is, just to refresh the categories, that he puts me as someone, not in the emancipation aside, but civilizational, trying to strengthen Western civilization and Christian culture, but in the minimalist camp that is according to the rules of the game in modern Western democratic societies. And you can read the piece and don't complain with where he puts me given the four quadrants he identifies.

Not surprisingly, some individuals did not agree with the quadrant they were assigned. In particular, Kristen Dumay of Calvin University did not appreciate being placed in the emancipatory maximalist category. Her response to being put in the illiberal quadrant was somewhat ironically given the charge of illiberality, quote, "excuse me, but what the hell?" end quote.

Jay Green then responded by noting how much he admires writers like Jamartisby, Beth Allison Barr, and Kristen Dumay, how his essay should have been clear, how he is quote, "very much a work in progress." John Fia, as the executive editor of Currents, and that's the place online where the article was published, admitted it was a mistake to have published Green's piece in its original form. Fia also added that Green was right to apologize to Dumay and that he, Fia, also wanted to affirm Dumay's liberality and apologize to her in public as he had already apologized in private. Underlying this apology fest is an ongoing debate about the role of the Christian historian.

In the latest issue of Fia's *Historia*, the Journal of the Conference on Faith in History, there are three printed plenary addresses, all dealing with the topic of Christian historians as activists. In his presidential address, John Fia describes how his own historical work has become more "sermonic." Fia tries to allow for different models, and given the three plenaries, his was trying to allow that historian as activist was not the only way to approach the subject. He does, however, sympathize with those who see

black bodies in American streets, in the presence of patriarchy in our churches, and the selfish refusal of Christians to listen to science.

In her address, Dumay acknowledges that her book, *Jesus and John Wayne*, is activist history, but in her estimation, so are historical books that support the status quo. For decades, she writes, "The pursuit of Christian history has been dominated by white Protestant men." There's was an activist history for the powerful, so why shouldn't we have an activist history for the trampled and marginalized? Is the essence of her argument? In a final plenary address, Jamartisby insists that the "historian as activist" debate is "very white-centered." We all have biases, to be argues, the only question is whether we will be clear about them. "The question is about taking "sides." As activists and advocates, historians are called to take "sides." What are we to make of this historian as activist debate? Two quick thoughts.

First, for as much as the C.F.H. Conference on Faith and History talks about inclusion and the free exchange of ideas. It is clear that the present leadership of the historical guild assumes conclusions on the left. Thea writes, "We in the C.F.H. may not be a bunch of campus radicals, and some of us might have some mixed feelings about the agenda of the new left, or even the consensus Cold War liberals of the 1950s and 1960s." Wait, only mixed feelings, we might ask? Likewise, Tisby claims, "We are talking about issues that are pretty clear.

Either masks work to reduce the virus spread or they don't. Either the election was as legitimate as our elections ever are or it was stolen. Either Black Lives Matter or they don't." Besides the fact that the effectiveness of masking turned out to be far from clear, this is hardly a representative list of issues.

Might the Bible actually be clear about say abortion and gay marriage quote unquote, than about the effectiveness of masks? And when a calmly reasoned article like Greens prompts so much hand-ringing in such a flurry of apologies, one can be forgiven for wondering how open the guild really is to dissenting opinions and critical interaction. Second, the historian is activist approach sounds a lot like the scholarly approach that Mark Knoll, Nathan Hatch and George Marsden, formal and informal mentors to so many in the current generation of historians, sought to supplant. In their book from the 1980s, *The Search for Christian America*, Knoll Hatch and Marsden argued that quote, "Once we begin with our own commitments, the selection of the facts to fit them is all too easy.

The more so since selectivity is usually unconscious." End quote. The problem they saw on the right is now ever present on the left. Quote, "Rather than offering genuine insight into our own times," they wrote, "the past becomes just one more medium to convey positions which we already hold." What we need instead, they insist, Al-Aceus Lewis, is to open the windows to the clean sea breeze of the centuries.

Wise words, and a better approach than visiting the past, looking to settle scores for the

present.

[MUSIC]