George Washington and Religion

Kerby Anderson presents a compelling argument for the view that George Washington was a devoted Christian rather than a deist. He points to Washington's insistence on the importance of services for his soldiers, his personal church attendance, his prayer life and his commitment to the spiritual upbringing of his godchildren.

Background



What was George Washington's view of religion and in particular of Christianity? The historical perspective used to be that Washington was a Christian and orthodox in most of his beliefs. But the modern view has been that he was a either a lukewarm Anglican or more likely a Deist.

I want to look at some new research that argues for the traditional view and against the modern view of George Washington's religion. One book is *Washington's God: Religion, Liberty, and the Father of our Country*.{1} It is written by Michael Novak (American Enterprise Institute and winner of the Templeton Award) and Jana Novak. Another book, written by Peter Lillback with Jerry Newcombe, is *George Washington's Sacred Fire*.{2}

George Washington was born into a Virginia family of moderate wealth and was exposed to various religious activities: lessons in religion, regular prayer, Sunday school attendance, and reverence for God. His mother had a daily ritual of retiring with a book of religious readings.

By the time he was a teenager, Washington had already assumed serious responsibilities as a professional surveyor and then

as a major in the Virginia militia. His adventures in the wild lands gave him invaluable lessons about the military, Indians, and the British. Years later in a speech to the Delaware chiefs, Washington said, “You do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ. These will make you a greater and happier people than you are.”{3}

He studied the Bible as well as the writings of ancient heroes. The busts and portraits at Mount Vernon demonstrate this. There are busts of Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, Charles XII of Sweden, and Frederick II of Prussia. In the dining room are portraits of the Virgin Mary and St. John.

Washington’s own stepgranddaughter “Nelly” Custis saw him as a religious man. She wrote this to one of Washington’s early biographers:

> It was his custom to retire to his library at nine or ten o’clock, where he remained an hour before he went to his chamber. He always rose before the sun, and remained in his library until called to breakfast. I never witnessed his private devotions. I never inquired about them. I should have thought it the greatest heresy to doubt his firm belief in Christianity. His life, his writings, prove that he was a Christian. He was not one of those who act or pray, “that they may be seen of men.” He communed with his God in secret.{4}

In what follows we will look at the evidence for George Washington’s faith as it surfaced in his letters and actions as general and president.

Deism vs. Christianity

Pick up a book about George Washington written during the nineteenth century, and you will probably see that he is described as being a Christian. However, if you pick up a book

written in the last seventy years, it will describe him as a Deist. Why the change?

The turning point seems to be a study by historian Paul F. Boller, Jr. entitled *George Washington and Religion*. His conclusion can be summarized in a single sentence: To the "unbiased observer" George Washington appears as a Deist, not a devout Christian.{5} Most historians since Boller accepted this idea and were less likely to assert that Washington was a Christian.

What do we mean by "Deism"? Deism is the belief that God is merely a watchmaker God who started the universe but is not involved in the affairs of humans and human history. One definition of Deism is that "There is no special providence; no miracles or other divine interventions intrude upon the lawful natural order."{6}

Was George Washington a Deist? He was not. It is worth noting that even historian Paul Boller admitted that religion was important to Washington as a leader. Boller writes, "he saw to it that divine services were performed by the chaplains as regularly as possible on the Sabbath for the soldiers under his command."{7} We might reasonably ask, Why would chaplains be important to a Deist?

Boller even admits there are testimonials of Washington's church attendance. This is important since many historians even go further than Boller and assert that Washington did not even attend church as a mature adult.

Michael Novak admits that some of the names Washington often used for God *sound* Deist, but that does not mean that he was a Deist. In fact, his prayers for God's action were just the opposite of what you might hear from a Deist. Washington believed God favored the cause of liberty and should be beseeched to "interpose" his action on behalf of the Americans. He called for public thanksgiving for the many ways

in which Americans experienced God's hand in key events in our history.

Washington used more than eighty terms to refer to God, among them: Almighty God, Creator, Divine Goodness, Father of all mercies, and Lord of Hosts. The most common term he used in his writings and speeches was "Providence." When he did so, he used the masculine personal pronoun "he." Washington never refers directly to God as an "it," as he does occasionally with Providence. God is personal.{8)

If we look at the history of the eighteenth century, there were many with orthodox religious beliefs who sometimes used the philosophical language of the enlightenment. Washington was a Christian, even though he often used terms for God associated with Deists.

A Religious Nation Goes to War

There has been some dispute about how religious America was during the Revolutionary War. There was a shortage of churches and clergy (especially along the paths of westward migration). But we should also remember that this War of Independence followed the First Great Awakening.

At the first meeting of the Continental Congress in Philadelphia (September 1774), the first motion from the floor was for prayer to seek guidance from God. But there was resistance, not because of the prayer, but because of the theological disagreements among the members (Anabaptist, Quakers, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Presbyterians). Sam Adams settled the dispute by saying he was no bigot and could pray along with any minister as long as he was a patriot.{9} I have in my office a picture of a painting showing George Washington praying with men like Patrick Henry, John Jay, and Richard Henry Lee.

At the second meeting, they proposed that Washington be

appointed commander in chief of the Continental Army. He did not think he was equal to the command but accepted it. He wrote his wife, “I shall rely, therefore, confidently on that Providence, which has heretofore preserved and been bountiful to me, not doubting but that I shall return safe to you in the fall.”{10} At the time, Washington was the only man on the continent in uniform since no Continental Army yet existed. To the British, he was the supreme traitor, in open rebellion to the King. His neck was at risk, and the American independence depended on him.

One event that George Washington believed showed God’s providence was the Battle of Long Island in 1776. Washington and his men were trapped on Brooklyn Heights, Long Island. The British were poised to crush the American army the next day and that would have been the end of the rebellion. Washington planned a bold move and began evacuating his troops under the cover of darkness using everything from fishing vessels to rowboats. But there was not enough time to accomplish the task. When morning came, the fog of night remained and only lifted in time for the British to see the last American boat crossing the East River beyond the reach of their guns. You can read more about this miraculous event in Michael Novak’s book, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding*.{11}

Washington also required chaplains for the Continental Army, and personally took time for prayer. He forbade his troops under pain of death from uttering blasphemies, even profanity. He called upon them to conduct themselves as Christian soldiers because the people demanded it.{12}

Washington’s actions during the Revolutionary War demonstrate his Christian character.

First in War and First in Peace

In his eulogy for George Washington, Henry Lee said he was "First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." We could also say the Washington demonstrated Christian character both in war and in peace.

While fulfilling his duties as general, he came to be known as a "nursing father." This is a biblical phrase (Num. 11:12, Is. 49:23 KJV) that appears in many of the tributes to Washington after his death. He brought together very diverse groups to fight the Revolutionary War by bridging ethnic and social divisions. This ranged from the regiment from Marblehead, Massachusetts (that included men of mixed race, blacks, and Indians), to the Virginian and southern aristocrats to the yeomen in hunting shirts from western Virginia.

One of his orders stated that "All chaplains are to perform divine service tomorrow, and on every succeeding Sunday. . . . The commander in chief expects an exact compliance with this order, and that it be observed in future as an invariable rule of practice—and every neglect will be consider not only a breach of orders, but a disregard to decency, virtue and religion."{13}

Washington grew even more explicit as the war dragged on: "While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and soldiers we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of religion. To the distinguished character of patriot, it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of a Christian."{14}

Washington lost a great deal of money during the war by paying for things out of his own pocket and by refusing a salary. He happily returned to Mount Vernon and spent happy years with his wife. But the constitutional convention in 1787 brought him to elective office. He was elected as president by unanimous vote in 1789.

In his inaugural address, Washington said, “No people can be bound to acknowledge and adore the invisible hand, which conducts the affairs of men more than the people of the United States. Every step, by which they have advanced to the character of an independent nation, seems to have been distinguished by some token of providential agency.”

He issued a thanksgiving proclamation in 1789 in which he asserted “the duty of all nations” in regard to God. His thanksgiving proclamation of 1795 proclaims there are signs of “Divine beneficence” in the world. And in his farewell address, he reminded Americans that “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports.”

Washington demonstrated Christian character in war and in peace.

Washington as Christian: Pro and Con

Let’s summarize the arguments historians make about Washington’s religious faith. Those who believe that George Washington was a Deist and not a Christian usually make the following observations.

First, Washington never took communion at Sunday services. Second, he refused to declare his specific beliefs in public. Third, he rarely used the name of Jesus Christ in private correspondence and in public utterances. Finally, while he believed in God and had an awareness of Providence in his life, it all seems more like a Greek or Roman view of fate.

Michael Novak’s response to these observations is helpful. “All these objections have a grain of truth in them. Still, they are consistent with Washington’s being a serious Christian who believed that he had a public vocation that required some tact regarding his private confessional life.”{15} Novak adds:

> It is not at all unusual for public men in pluralistic American life to maintain a notable reserve about their private convictions. They do not burden the public with declarations of their deepest beliefs, whose general force they trust their actions will sufficiently reveal. In the public forum, they happily give to Caesar what is Caesar's and in the private forum, to God what is God's.{16}

What are some of the reasons to believe Washington was a Christian? First, he religiously observed the Sabbath as a day of rest and frequently attended church services on that day. Second, many report that Washington reserved time for private prayer. Third, Washington saved many of the dozens of sermons sent to him by clergymen, and read some of them aloud to his wife.

Fourth, Washington hung paintings of the Virgin Mary and St. John in places of honor in his dining room in Mount Vernon. Fifth, the chaplains who served under him during the long years of the Revolutionary War believed Washington was a Christian. Sixth, Washington (unlike Thomas Jefferson) was never accused by the press or his opponents of not being a Christian.

It is also worth noting that, unlike Jefferson, Washington agreed to be a godparent for at least eight children. This was far from a casual commitment since it required the godparents to agree to help insure that a child was raised in the Christian faith. Washington not only agreed to be a godparent, but presented his godsons and goddaughters with Bibles and prayer books.

George Washington was not a Deist who believed in a "watchmaker God." He was a Christian and demonstrated that Christian character throughout his life.

Notes

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3. Novak, *Washington's God*, 93.
4. Ibid., 136.
5. Lillback, *Sacred Fire*, 28.
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12. Novak, *Washington's God*, 30-31.
13. Ibid., 90.
14. Ibid.
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William Wilberforce and Abolishing the Slave Trade: How True Christian Values Ended Support of Slavery

Rusty Wright provides an insightful summary of the journey which led William Wilberforce from unbelief to Christ and to leading the fight to abolish the slave trade in Britain. He clearly shows how true Christian values were key in inspiring

Wilberforce's persistent effort to rid Britain of this shameful scourge, the slave trade.

Slavery's Scourge

What do you think of slavery? Are you for it or against it?

I suspect most readers would immediately denounce slavery as a scourge on humanity. But in the eighteenth century, much of western society accepted slavery and the slave trade. It took heroic efforts by dedicated leaders to turn the tide.

William Wilberforce, the famous British parliamentarian, helped lead a grueling but bipartisan twenty-year struggle to outlaw the trading of slaves. His inspiring story has many lessons for today's leaders.

Abraham Lincoln acknowledged Wilberforce's significant role in abolition.{1} Nelson Mandela, addressing the British Parliament in 1996 as South Africa's president, declared, "We have returned to the land of William Wilberforce who dared . . . to demand that the slaves in our country should be freed."{2}

The task was formidable. Eighteenth-century Britain led the world in slave trading. A pillar of colonial economy, the trade was legal, lucrative, and brutal. In one notorious episode, a ship's captain threw 132 slaves overboard, claiming illness and water shortage. British law protected the ship's owners, considering slaves property (like "horses," ruled one judge).{3}

African tribal chiefs, Arab slave dealers, and European traders rounded up Africans, stuffed them into ships' holds, and delivered them to colonial auctions for sale and forced servitude. The "Middle Passage" across the Atlantic was especially horrific. Slaves typically lay horizontal, shackled and chained to each other, packed like sardines. The air was stale and the sanitation putrid.

Olaudah Equiano, a freed slave, said the "stench of the hold," the heat, and the cramped quarters brought sickness and much death. The deceased, Equiano explained, fell "victims to the improvident avarice . . . of their purchasers." He wrote, "The shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying, rendered the whole a scene of horror almost inconceivable." Some slaves, when taken up on deck, jumped overboard, preferring death to their misery.{4}

Enter William Wilberforce, young, silver-tongued, popular, ambitious, seemingly destined for political greatness. Then, a profound change led him on a path that some say cost him the prime ministership, but helped rescue an oppressed people and a nation's character.

Wilberforce's "Great Change"

The transatlantic slave trade was filled with horror stories about human inhumanity. John Newton, a former slave trader, told of a shipmate "who threw a child overboard because it moaned at night in its mother's arms and kept him awake."{5}

William Wilberforce grew up among Britain's privileged, far from these horrors. Heir to a fortune, he was a slacker and socialite at Cambridge. Sporting an adept sense of humor, he loved partying and playing cards more than schoolwork. His superior intellect frequently covered for his lax academic habits. His keen mind, delightful wit, and charming personality kept many doors open.{6}

At Cambridge, he befriended William Pitt the Younger, who would become Britain's youngest Prime Minister. Both were elected to Parliament in their twenties. Wilberforce became Pitt's bulldog, using his oratorical and relational skills to advance Pitt's legislative agenda.

From 1784 to 1786, what he later called his "Great Change" would forever reshape his life's work. It began innocently

enough when he invited his friend, Cambridge professor Isaac Milner, to accompany him on a journey to France. Milner was a brilliant scientist who eventually became vice chancellor of Cambridge. (That's similar to a university president in the U.S.) As they conversed during the trip, Wilberforce was surprised to hear Milner speak favorably of biblical faith. Wilberforce was a skeptic and wanted nothing to do with ardent believers to whom he had been exposed in his youth.

During their travels, Milner and Wilberforce spent long hours discussing faith and the Bible. His doubts receded as Milner answered his objections. Initial intellectual assent to Christian faith morphed into deeper conviction and a personal relationship with God.{7}

Back in England, he reluctantly consulted John Newton, slave trader turned pastor and writer of the well-known hymn, "Amazing Grace." Newton had been Wilberforce's minister for a time during his youth, before his spiritual interest waned. Wilberforce wrote that after his meeting with Newton, "My mind was in a calm, tranquil state, more humbled, looking more devoutly up to God."{8} Newton encouraged Wilberforce that God had raised him up "for the good of the nation."{9}

In time, Wilberforce grew to consider "the suppression of the slave trade" part of his God-given destiny.{10} At first he thought abolition would come quickly, but he guessed incorrectly, as we will see.

The Battle in Parliament

When William Wilberforce first introduced anti-slave-trade legislation into Parliament, he had high hopes. He quickly learned that opposition would be fierce.

Financial stakeholders howled. Significant elements of British economy relied on slavery. Businesspersons didn't want to sacrifice profit. Their elected representatives didn't want to

sacrifice votes. Some claimed slavery benefited slaves since it removed them from barbarous Africa. The Royal Family opposed abolition. Even Admiral Lord Nelson, Britain's great hero, denounced "the damnable doctrine of Wilberforce and his hypocritical allies."{11}

Wilberforce and the Abolitionists repeatedly introduced legislation. Apathy, hostility and parliamentary chicanery dragged out the battle. Once, his opponents distributed free opera tickets to some abolition supporters for the evening of a crucial vote, which the Abolitionists then lost. Enough supporting members of Parliament were at the opera to have reversed the outcome.{12} Twice West Indian sea captains threatened Wilberforce's life. His health faltered.{13}

Buoyed by friends and faith, Wilberforce persisted. He believed God viewed all humans as equal,{14}citing Acts 17:26, "[God] has made from one blood every nation of men." Methodism founder John Wesley encouraged perseverance, writing, "If God is with you, who can be against you? . . . Be not weary in well-doing. Go on . . . till even American slavery, the vilest that ever saw the sun, shall vanish away."{15} John Newton wrote and testified in Parliament about his experiences as a slave trader, "a business at which my heart now shudders," he explained.{16}

Finally, in 1807, twenty years after beginning, Wilberforce prevailed. Parliament erupted in cheering as the slave trade abolition bill passed.

Of course, outlawing the British transatlantic slave trade in 1807 did not immediately eradicate the trade. In fact, it continued, practiced illegally for a while by British subjects and for decades among other nations like France, Spain and Portugal. Alas, African tribal chiefs and Arab slave-dealers continued to supply captured Africans for the system.{17}

But outlawing the slave trade proved the impetus for a host of

social improvements, including prison reforms, child labor laws, and abolition of slavery itself in 1833, of which Wilberforce learned only a few days before his death.

Wilberforce's Methods: Lessons for Today

The esteemed historian W.E.H. Lecky ranked the British anti-slavery movement "among the three or four perfectly virtuous pages . . . in the history of nations."{18} While, of course, Wilberforce and his Abolitionist colleagues were not perfect, their historic effort left many lessons for today. Consider a few that could enhance your own interaction in the workplace, academia, politics, cross-cultural engagement, in your neighborhood or family.

The value of friendships and teamwork. Many of the Abolitionists lived for several years in the same community. They and their families enjoyed one another's friendship and moral support. This camaraderie provided invaluable encouragement, ideas, and correction.

Bipartisan cooperation was essential to Wilberforce's success. He set aside differences on certain issues to collaborate for the greater good. Both political liberals and conservatives joined the abolition cause. Quakers mobilized support. Wilberforce partnered with Jeremy Benthama founder of Utilitarianismon abolition and prison reform.{19} Utilitarianism, of course, favors the end justifying the means, hardly a biblical value.{20} Yet the two could work together.

Wilberforce sought to make civil discourse civil. Biographer Kevin Belmonte notes, "After his Great Change Wilberforce was nearly always able to dissent from the opinions of others with tact and kindness. This trait grew gradually within him; it was not instantaneous, nor did he always act as charitably as he might have wished on some occasions. But he kept

trying."{21} He aimed to disagree without being disagreeable.

Wilberforce attempted to establish common ground with his opponents. In his opening speech on abolition before Parliament, he was especially gracious. "I mean not to accuse anyone," he explained, "but to take the shame upon myself, in common indeed with the whole Parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others."{22}

William Wilberforce was not perfect. He had fears, flaws and foibles like anyone. You likely would not agree with all his political views. But he did possess dedication to principle and to God, close friends of many stripes, a penchant for bipartisan cooperation, and steadfast commitment to right terrible injustice. A fine example for life and work today.

Wilberforce's Motivation: Lessons for Today

Have you ever been tempted by opposition to abandon a good cause? What motivated William Wilberforce to persevere in pursuing abolition for twenty agonizing years?

After discovering faith, Wilberforce viewed the world through different lenses-biblical lenses. He authored a popular book to explain faith's implications. Famous parliamentarian Edmund Burke, who found solace in it during his last two days of life, said, "If I live, I shall thank Wilberforce for having sent such a book into the world."{23}

Wilberforce's book, *Real Christianity*,{24} emphasized personal, life-changing faith, not mere nominal assent. He wrote, "God loved the world so much and felt such tender mercy for us that He gave His only Son Jesus Christ for our

redemption."{25} He felt all humans have an innate flawself-centeredness or sin that inhibits true generosity, "clouds our moral vision and blunts our moral sensitivity."{26} He called selfishness "the mortal disease of all political communities"{27} and humbly admitted his own "need and imperfection."{28}

Wilberforce believed Jesus suffered "death on the cross . . . for our sake" so those accepting His pardon "should come to Him and . . . have life that lasts forever."{29} Don't get the cart before the horse, he warned. Good behavior doesn't earn God's acceptance; it should be a result of "our reconciliation with God."{30} Wilberforce encouraged his reader to "Throw yourself completely . . . on [God's] undeserved mercy. He is full of love, and He will never reject you."{31}

Wilberforce aspired to the Golden Rule: "doing to others as we would have them do to us."{32} He believed the faith was intellectually credible and advocated teaching its supporting evidences,{33} but cautioned that "a lack of faith is in general a disease of the heart more than of the mind."{34}

Wilberforce asked penetrating questions: "Do we love our enemies? Are we gentle even when we are provoked? Are we ready to forgive and apt to forget injuries? . . . Do we return evil with good . . . ? Can we rejoice in our enemy's good fortune, or sympathize with their distresses?"{35} Sound convicting? Join the club.

An inscribed tribute to Wilberforce at Westminster Abbey where he is buried commends his efforts, "Which, by the blessing of God, removed from England the guilt of the African slave trade, and prepared the way for the abolition of slavery in every colony of the Empire: . . . he relied, not in vain, on God."{36}

Wilberforce's legacy of faith and service persists. What will

your legacy be?

*Parts of this essay are adapted from Rusty Wright, "'Amazing Grace' Movie: Lessons for Today's Politicians," Copyright Rusty Wright 2007, and are used by permission.

Notes

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27. Ibid., 243 ff.; 246.
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32. Belmonte 2002, 2007, op. cit., 177; 90-91. Biblical references for the "Golden Rule" are Luke 6:31 and Matthew 7:12.

33. Wilberforce, op. cit., 18; 221-222; 285-293.
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35. Ibid., 193.
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History and the Christian Faith

For many people in our world today "history," as Henry Ford once said, "is bunk." Indeed, some people go so far as to say that we really can't know anything at all about the past! But since the truth of Christianity depends on certain historical events (like the resurrection of Jesus, for example) having actually occurred, Dr. Michael Gleghorn shows why there is no good reason to be so skeptical about our knowledge of the past.

The Importance of History

Can we really know anything at all about the past? For example, can we really know if Nebuchadnezzar was king of Babylon in the sixth century B.C., or if Jesus of Nazareth was an actual historical person, or if Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address? Although these might sound like questions that would only interest professional historians, they're actually important for Christians too.

But why should Christians be concerned with such questions? Well, because the truth of our faith depends on certain events having actually happened in the past. As British theologian Alan Richardson stated:



The Christian faith is . . . an historical faith . . . it is bound up with certain happenings in the past, and if these happenings could be shown never to have occurred . . . then the . . . Christian faith . . . would be found to have been built on sand.{1}

Consider an example. Christians believe that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of the world. Now, in order for this belief to even possibly be true, the crucifixion of Jesus must have occurred in history. If the account of Jesus' death on the cross is merely legendary, or otherwise unhistorical, then the Christian proclamation that he died on the cross for our sins cannot be true. As T. A. Roberts observed:

The truth of Christianity is anchored in history: hence the . . . recognition that if some . . . of the events upon which Christianity has been traditionally thought to be based could be proved unhistorical, then the religious claims of Christianity would be seriously jeopardized.{2}

What actually happened in the past, therefore, is extremely significant for biblical Christianity. But this raises an important question: How can we really know what happened in the past? How can we know if the things we read about in our history books ever really happened? How can we know if Jesus *really* was crucified, as the Gospel writers say he was? We weren't there to personally observe these events. And (at least so far) there's no time machine by which we can visit the past and see for ourselves what really happened. The events of the past are gone. They're no longer directly available for study. So how can we ever *really* know what happened?

For the Christian, such questions confront us with the issue of whether genuine knowledge of the past is possible or whether we're forever doomed to be skeptical about the historical events recorded in the Bible. In the remainder of this article I hope to show that we should indeed be skeptical, particularly of the arguments of skeptics who say that we can know nothing of the past.

The Problem of the Unobservable Past

It shouldn't surprise us that the truth of Christianity depends on certain events having actually happened in the past. The Apostle Paul told the Corinthians: "if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith" (1 Cor. 15:14). For Paul, if the bodily resurrection of Jesus was not an actual historical event, then faith in Christ was useless. What happened in the past, therefore, is important for Christianity.

But some scholars insist that we can never *really* know what happened in the past. This view, called radical historical relativism, denies that real, or objective, knowledge of the past is possible. This poses a challenge for Christianity. As the Christian philosopher Ronald Nash observes, ". . . the skepticism about the past that must result from a total historical relativism would seriously weaken one of Christianity's major apologetic foundations."{3}

But why would anyone be skeptical about our ability to know at least some objective truth about the past? One reason has to do with our inability to directly observe the past. The late Charles Beard noted that, unlike the chemist, the historian cannot directly observe the objects of his study. His only access to the past comes through records and artifacts that have survived to the present.{4}

There is certainly some truth to this. But why does the historian's inability to directly observe the past mean that

he can't have genuine knowledge of the past? Beard contrasts the historian with the chemist, implying that the latter does have objective knowledge of chemistry. But it's important to remember that individual chemists don't acquire *all* their knowledge through direct scientific observation. Indeed, much of it comes from reading journal articles by other chemists, articles that function much like the historical documents of the historian!{5}

But can the chemist really gain objective knowledge by reading such articles? It appears so. Suppose a chemist begins working on a new problem based on the carefully established results of previous experiments. But suppose that he hasn't personally conducted all these experiments; he's merely read about them in scientific journals. Any knowledge not directly verified by the chemist would be indirect knowledge.{6} But it's not *completely* lacking in objectivity for that reason.

While historical knowledge may fall short of absolute certainty (as most of our knowledge invariably does), this doesn't make it completely subjective or arbitrary. Further, since most of what we know doesn't seem to be based on direct observation, our inability to directly observe the past cannot (at least by itself) make genuine knowledge of history impossible. Ultimately, then, this argument for historical relativism is simply unconvincing.

The Problem of Personal Perspective

I recently spoke with a young man who told me that he gets his news from three different sources: CNN, FOX, and the BBC. When I asked him why, he told me that each station has its own particular perspective. He therefore listens to all three in order to (hopefully) arrive at a more objective understanding of what's really going on in the world.

Interestingly, a similar issue has been observed in the writing of history. Historical relativists argue that no

historian can be completely unbiased and value-neutral in his description of the past. Instead, everything he writes, from the selection of historical facts to the connections he sees between those facts, is influenced by his personality, values, and even prejudices. Every work of history (including the historical books of the Bible) is said to be written from a unique viewpoint. It's relative to a particular author's perspective and, hence, cannot be objective.

How should Christians respond to this? Did the biblical writers reliably record what happened in the past? Or are their writings so influenced by their personalities and values that we can never know what *really* happened? Well, it's probably true that every work of history, like every story in a newspaper, is colored (at least to some extent) by the author's worldview. In this sense, absolute objectivity is impossible. But does this mean that historical relativism is true? Not according to Norman Geisler. He writes:

Perfect objectivity may be practically unattainable within the limited resources of the historian on most if not all topics. But . . . the inability to attain 100 percent objectivity is a long way from total relativity.{7}

While historians and reporters may write from a particular worldview perspective, it doesn't follow that they're completely incapable of at least some objectivity. Indeed, certain safeguards exist which actually help ensure this. Suppose a historian writes that king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon did not capture Jerusalem in the sixth century B.C. His thesis can be challenged and corrected on the basis of the available historical and archaeological evidence which indicates that Nebuchadnezzar did do this. Similarly, if a newspaper runs a story which later turns out to be incorrect, it might be forced to print a retraction.

While complete objectivity in history may be impossible, a sufficient degree of objectivity can nonetheless be attained

because the historian's work is subject to correction in light of the evidence. The problem of personal perspective, then, doesn't inevitably lead to total historical relativism. Therefore, objections to the historical reliability of the Bible that are based on this argument are not ultimately persuasive.

Problems with Historical Relativism

We've seen that historical relativism denies that we can know objective truth about the past. While this poses a challenge to biblical Christianity, the arguments offered in support of this position aren't very convincing. Not only are the *supporting* arguments unconvincing, however, the arguments *against* this position are devastating. Let's look at just two.

First, there are many facts of history that virtually all historians agree on – regardless of their worldview. For example, what responsible historian would seriously deny that George Washington was the first president of the United States, or that Abraham Lincoln delivered the Gettysburg Address? As one historical relativist admitted, "there are basic facts which are the same for all historians."{8} But consider what this means. If a Christian, a Buddhist, an atheist, and a Muslim can all agree on certain basic facts of history, then it would seem to follow that at least some objective knowledge of history is possible. But in that case, total historical relativism is false, for it *denies* that such knowledge is possible.

Another reason for rejecting historical relativism is that it makes it impossible to distinguish good history from poor history, or genuine history from propaganda. As Dr. Ronald Nash observes, "If hard relativism were true, any distinction between truth and error in history would disappear."{9} Just think about what this would mean. There would be no real difference between history and historical fiction! Further, there would be no legitimate basis for criticizing obviously

false historical theories. This reveals that something is wrong with historical relativism, for as Dr. Craig reminds us, "All historians distinguish good history from poor." For example, he recalls how Immanuel Velikovsky attempted "to rewrite ancient history on the basis of world-wide catastrophes caused by extra-terrestrial forces . . . dismissing entire ancient kingdoms and languages as fictional."{10}

How did historians react to such ideas? According to Edwin Yamauchi, who wrote a detailed critical analysis of the theory, most historians were "quite hostile" to Velikovsky's work.{11} They were irritated by his callous disregard for the actual historical evidence. In a similar vein, one need only remember the tremendous critical response to some of Dan Brown's more outrageous claims in *The Da Vinci Code*. It's important to notice that when scholars criticize the theories of Velikovsky and Brown, they tacitly acknowledge "the objectivity of history."{12} Their criticism shows that they view these theories as flawed because they don't correspond to what really happened in the past.

Well, with such good reasons for rejecting historical relativism, we needn't fear its threat to biblical Christianity.

Determining Truth in History

How can we determine what actually happened in the past? Is there any way to separate the "wheat" from the "chaff," so to speak, when it comes to evaluating competing interpretations of a particular historical person or event? For example, if one writer claims Jesus was married, and another claims he wasn't, how can we determine which of the claims is true?

Well as you've probably already guessed, the issue really comes down to the evidence. For information about Jesus, virtually all scholars agree that our most valuable evidence

comes from the New Testament Gospels. Each of these documents can be reliably dated to the first century, and "the events they record are based on either direct or indirect eyewitness testimony."{13} They thus represent our earliest and best sources of information about Jesus.

But even if we limit our discussion to these sources, different scholars still reach different conclusions about Jesus' marital status. So again, how can we determine the truth? We might employ a model known as inference to the best explanation. Simply put, this model says that "the historian should accept the hypothesis that best explains all the evidence."{14} Now admittedly, this isn't an exact science. But as Dr. Craig reminds us, "The goal of historical knowledge is to obtain probability, not mathematical certainty."{15} To demand more than this of history is simply to make unreasonable demands. Even in a court of law, we must be content with proof beyond a reasonable doubt -– not beyond all possible doubt.{16}

Keeping these things in mind, does the evidence best support the hypothesis that Jesus was, or wasn't, married? If you're interested in such a discussion I would highly recommend Darrell Bock's recent book, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code*. After a careful examination of the evidence, he concludes that Jesus was definitely *not* married – a conclusion shared by the vast majority of New Testament scholars.{17}

Of course, I'm not trying to argue that this issue can be decisively settled by simply citing an authority (although I certainly agree with Dr. Bock's conclusion). My point is rather that we have a way of determining truth in history. By carefully evaluating the best available evidence, and by logically inferring the best explanation of that evidence, we can determine (sometimes with a high degree of probability) what actually happened in the past.

Christianity is a religion rooted in history. Not a history

about which we can have no real understanding, but a history that we can know and be confident in believing.

Notes

1. Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics* (London: SCM, 1947), 91, cited in Ronald H. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding* (Dallas: Word Publishing/Probe Books, 1984), 12.

2. T. A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic* (London: SPCK, 1960), vii, cited in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding*, 12.

3. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding,* 77-78.

4. This information comes from Ronald Nash's discussion of Charles Beard's essay, "That Noble Dream," in Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding,* 84.

5. William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian Truth and Apologetics* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1994), 176.

6. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding,* 85.

7. Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 1976), 297, cited in Nash, Christian Faith and Historical Understanding, 88-89.

8. E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (New York: Random House, 1953), 8, cited in Craig, Reasonable Faith, 185.

9. Nash, *Christian Faith and Historical Understanding,* 88.

10. Craig, *Reasonable Faith,* 186-87.

11. Edwin Yamauchi, "Immanuel Velikovsky's Catastrophic History," *Journal of the American Scientific Affiliation* 25 (1973): 134, cited in Craig, Reasonable Faith, 187.

12. Craig, *Reasonable Faith*, 187.

13. Lee Strobel, *The Case for Christ,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1998), 25.

14. Craig, *Reasonable Faith,* 184.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Darrell L. Bock, *Breaking the Da Vinci Code* (Nashville: Nelson Books, 2004), 31-45. Also see my previous article, "Redeeming The Da Vinci Code," at probe.org/redeeming-the-da-vinci-code/.

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