

Didactic Dialectic in the Teaching of Early Modern European Religious History in the United States: The Conflict between Cultural Heritage and Historical Accuracy¹

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Many American and western European historians writing about or teaching the religious history of early modern Europe exhibit a conflict between their professional obligation to treat diverse religions accurately and without bias and their cultural heritage as Christians that has often led them to privilege western Christianity.

This conflict is evident in the treatment of Christianity itself, Islam, Judaism, and even in the analysis of Protestant denominations and Roman Catholicism. For example, historians take for granted that Christianity is a monotheistic religion. The authors of a popular textbook for American college students write: "Like Christianity and Judaism, Islam is monotheistic."² The newspaper, "The Boston Globe," reported recently that Pope John Paul "hopes to celebrate the millennium with leaders of Jewish and Islamic faiths in an extravaganza of monotheistic religions on Mount Sinai."³ Nevertheless, why should historians accept the decision of the Council of Nicaea and the apostolic creed? In doing so, historians adopt a slanted view of the early history of Christian pluralism and the propensity of the official church to castigate and excoriate any dissenting Christian group. Some early Christian Gnostics assumed the existence of as many as 365 gods.⁴ Accepting the pronouncements of the Council of Nicaea makes the historian a party to the church's campaigns against many Christian groups, such as the Arians, henceforth labeled heretical.

A current American college textbook, in discussing the Spanish invasion of the New World, states that "the missionaries soon discovered that the Indians had merely added the Christian God to their own deities."⁵ Unless a person is Christian and takes on faith that three can be one, Christianity is without doubt polytheistic. Another textbook affirms: "The most immediate of these consequences [of the Scientific Revolution] was a weakening of faith in the traditional Christian God of salvation, at least among the more educated classes."⁶ Which Christian god of salvation does the sentence refer to, the creator god or Jesus?

¹ In preparation, I consulted the major college textbooks in United States history and in Western civilization, well over twenty. As a result, the quotations I have selected are illustrative of a wider corpus. I thank Donald Chipman, Albert Hamscher, Ronald Love, Steven Marks, Denis Paz, Claire Sahlin, and Michael Wolfe for their suggestions and criticisms.

² William J. Duiker and Jackson J. Spielvogel, *World History* (2nd ed. Belmont, CA, 1998), p. 235.

³ March 17, 1998.

⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament: A Historical Introduction to the Early Christian Writings* (New York and Oxford, 1997), p. 6.

⁵ James L. Roark, Michael P. Johnson, Patricia Cline Cohen, Sarah Stage, Alan Lawson, and Susan M. Hartman, *The American Promise: A History of the United States* (Boston, 1998), p. 57.

⁶ Richard L. Greaves, Robert Zeller, and Tolbert Roberts, *Civilizations of the West: The Human Adventure* (2nd ed. New York, 1997), p. 530.

A historian could easily claim that Christianity has a pantheon of gods--the creator god, Jesus, the holy ghost, Satan--and even a goddess, Mary. Perhaps historians fear to group Christianity with the polytheistic religions it hoped to replace because such an identification would tarnish Christianity's attempts to differentiate itself and to claim superiority. Nevertheless, the only western religions we should unhesitatingly call monotheistic are Islam and Judaism.

Historians further privilege Christianity (and Judaism here) by capitalizing the word "God," while referencing other religions' gods in lowercase. Richard Trexler pointed this out in a seminal article in 1984, noting too the capitalization of "Him" to refer to a Judeo-Christian god.⁷ Sadly, this practice seems as common to me today as it was to Trexler more than a decade ago. Historians use "Christ" and "Jesus" interchangeably, but they must avoid the former name. "Christ" literally means "the anointed one," and is the Greek word for the Hebrew "messiah." "Christ" was originally a title that early Christians applied to the followers of those who believed Jesus had risen from the dead.⁸

Historians of European religion commonly use "Old Testament" as a title for the Jewish holy books. Old Testament infers that those books are preliminary to a New Testament, yet Jews believe no such thing and historians should not make a value judgment based on a Christian perception. A neutral, and religiously correct term would be Hebrew bible or scripture. Sad to say, until recently, even Jewish scholars used the label Old Testament. Worse, textbooks marginalize the Jews in early modern Europe, rarely mentioning them between their expulsion from Spain in 1492 and the beginnings of emancipation in the eighteenth century.

A more serious bias affirms, often implicitly, that Christianity and indeed all the major western religions have been forces for good in history. A virtual theodicy of history exists that, while often noting the evil caused by western religions, still takes for granted that religion is good and that religiosity is preferable to religious indifference, let alone--god forbid!--to atheism. Missionary activity becomes the victory of civilization over pagan barbarism, whether in missions to Germanic tribes between the sixth and ninth centuries or in missions to Africa in the nineteenth century. Christian education is synonymous with moral improvement, and Christian victories over Islam (at Poitiers, at Lepanto, or at Vienna, for example) saved Europe from an alien religion. Nevertheless, the historian should question such assumptions. There are no historical reasons to believe that the belief systems of Romans, Germanic tribes, or American Indians were any less viable than Christianity. One could just as well term missionary activity that converts people to Christianity as tragic. I disagree with the following statement in a textbook on the Reformation: "In the New World, the Jesuits met with general good fortune and some marked achievement....[they] established separate colonies [in Brazil and in Paraguay] where the Indians could be Europeanized and Christianized without the negative influences of the Spanish government and social exploitation."⁹

⁷ Richard C. Trexler, "Reverence and Profanity in the Study of Early Modern Religion," in *Religion and Society in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Kaspar von Greyerz (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 261-62. I am perplexed that *The Chicago Manual of Style* (14th ed. [Chicago, 1993], p. 266) posits that "God" is a proper noun.

⁸ F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingston, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Oxford University press, 1983), p. 278.

⁹ De Lamar Jensen, *Reformation Europe: Age of Reform and Revolution* (Lexington, MA, and Toronto, 1992), p. 207.

Similarly, scholars should not extol Christian military victories over other peoples (such as Vikings or Muslims). A historian once told me, with some hyperbole, that he considered Charles Martel's triumph over the Muslims at Poitiers to have been the greatest disaster in European history precisely because it helped to maintain Christian hegemony as opposed to the implementation of a more tolerant Islamic rule. I do not suggest that we interpret the Muslim defeat in France in 732 or the Ottoman defeats at Vienna in 1529 and 1683 in that way, but we should be aware that different interpretations are possible. Norman Davies underscores the christianophile and romanocentric perspectives of historians in noting the prevalent view of the westward drive of the barbarians and the rise of Islam as ushering in and delineating the medieval "Dark Ages." Instead of bemoaning the fall of the western Roman empire, Davies contends, "one could empathize no less properly with the experiences of the advancing barbarians, of the pagans, or of the Muslim warriors." Our view of the end of the western Roman world would then not be of imminent societal decline, but of "excitement, expectation, and promise."¹⁰

Furthermore, historians habitually see Christian ethics as a standard of good, and deviations as moral lapses. However, the truth of Christianity lies in its history, for Christianity's claim to improve moral standards must be measured against the history of its devotees' actions. Historians have shown no clear indication that Christianity (or Judaism or Islam) has either made the world a better place or proven to be ethically superior to western alternative beliefs (such as deism or atheism) or to non-western religions and ethical systems. Inspired by travelers' reports and the broadening of cultural and geographical horizons, philosophes of the Enlightenment realized this, even as they idealized to a fault Confucians, Brahmins, and American Indians. Philosophes pointed out with good effect and with exaggeration, to be sure, the moral evils committed in the name of and because of western religions. Yet, two centuries later, historians, if not returning to the medieval glorification of Christianity, have subtly offered a favorable view of Christianity. That is, they see accounts of the evils and sins of Christians as corruption from a pure Christianity. Historians tend to depict the Cluniac reform, the Protestant Reformation, and the Catholic Reformation, for example, as positive developments that intended to restore Christianity to a more moral state. Why should the historian dare to assume that a Christianity less "corrupt" is a good thing? Why do historians denigrate the Renaissance popes for sexual conduct or for not being spiritual enough? Arguably, the popes' patronage of artists, the creation of the Vatican library, and the interest in culture were noble achievements, more constructive than celibacy and prayer. For instance, one textbook laments that "The 'princes' of the Church were more interested in politics, wealth, and art than in spiritual affairs."¹¹ The Renaissance church was in fact experiencing spiritual vitality,¹² even as popes strengthened its administrative structure. A scholar denigrates Julius II for being "a thoroughly political, even military pope, far removed from the Apostle Peter and the mandate of Jesus Christ."¹³ Such a statement is outrageous. Can a professional academic maintain with certainty that Jesus, a man whose purported words were put down in writing in different versions fully thirty to eighty years after his death, left a mandate for an institution that was not in existence during his lifetime? Another historian asserts: "Worldliness, ignorance, and selected vices infected the Renaissance church

¹⁰ *Europe: A History* (New York, 1996), p. 214.

¹¹ Thomas H. Greer and Gavin Lewis, *A Brief History of the Western World* (7th ed. Fort Worth, 1997), p. 362.

¹² See, for example, Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, c.1400-c.1580* (New Haven and London, 1992).

¹³ Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Popes* (New York, 1997), p. 270.

at all levels, corrupting cardinals, monks, and village priests.”¹⁴ However, do worldliness, ignorance, and selected vices not characterize all churches at all times, not to mention all human institutions, or has there existed a pure church at some time that I am not aware of? The very use of the word “infected” shows that historian’s bias against the Renaissance church and papacy.

It seems to me that historians not suffering from christianophilia might call attention to the historical record, one that offers no clear-cut evidence that even a so-called uncorrupted Christianity has benefitted overall the peoples of Europe. Missionary activity is by definition intolerant and is part of the history of persecution. Interestingly, historians assume that persecuted minority groups have been tolerant, but such has not been the case. Jews in medieval and early modern Europe could be as intolerant as Christians,¹⁵ the Jews simply lacked the political power to persecute.¹⁶

Crusades to western Asia, within Europe, and to the Americas have been the source of rampant destruction, death, and misery. Christian sexual morality has had repressive effects on populations. The belief that Christians know the truth has caused bestial actions against those reluctant to accept that “truth.”¹⁷

Christianophilia can also appear unintentionally. Two American textbook authors contend: “When Columbus sailed in 1492, all of western Europe acknowledged the Catholic Church and its pope in Rome.”¹⁸ I do not think fifteenth-century European Jews recognized the pope’s authority. I read recently in a textbook of Western civilization that “The Reformation advanced the idea of equality. Equality is rooted in the Judeo-Christian belief that all peoples are the creatures of a single God.”¹⁹ That statement would be ridiculous if it were not laughable. Judaism and Christianity, two religions whose holy books and whose histories condone slavery, social hierarchy, and female subordination, are to be congratulated for their advancement of the idea of equality? Rather, one might have a cogent argument that ideas of equality, for the most part, have appeared historically in opposition to the major religions or in fringe groups lacking in numbers or influence.

It is interesting that one variant of favoritism in the treatment of Christianity by historians in the United States has been a covert anti-Catholicism, especially in the treatment of the Protestant Reformation. Some describe the Catholic English queen as “bloody Mary” because she executed Protestants, while praising her successor, even though Elizabeth’s government persecuted both Catholics and extreme Protestants. Thus, one textbook decries “Mary’s reign of terror,” while praising Elizabeth’s moderate policies.²⁰ Historians often see Luther as a heroic

¹⁴ Anthony Esler, *The Western World: A Narrative History* (Upper Saddle River, NJ, 1997), p. 271.

¹⁵ John Christian Laursen and Cary J. Nederman, eds., *Beyond the Persecuting Society: Religious Toleration Before the Enlightenment* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 14.

¹⁶ The classic formulation of the “power test,” that groups can prove their commitment to tolerance when they actually exercise power, was offered by Joseph Lecler, *Histoire de la tolérance au siècle de la Réforme* (1922).

¹⁷ For example, David E. Stennard, *American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* (New York and Oxford, 1992).

¹⁸ George Brown Tyndall and David Emory Shi, *America: A Narrative History* (2 vols. New York, 1997), I, 21.

¹⁹ Marvin Perry, *Western Civilization: A Brief History* (3rd ed. Boston and New York, 1997), p. 240.

²⁰ Stanley Chodorow, Macgregor Knox, Conrad Schirokauer, Joseph R. Strayer, and Hans W. Gatzke, *The Mainstream of Civilization* (6th ed. Fort Worth, 1994), p. 442.

figure, standing up to a “corrupt” and “superstitious” papacy. One historian writes: “The spiritual lethargy and bureaucratic corruption besetting the Roman Catholic church in the early sixteenth century made it a fit target for reform.”²¹ Has this historian accepted Protestant propaganda? Why do American historians too often believe that the Reformation Luther began was a good thing? To cite from one recent book: “...the Reformation too increased productivity. Protestant morality demanded work: not only strenuous but constant, methodical, carefully planned effort, a subjugation of the wayward impulses of the individual...Protestantism encouraged work for restraining and giving form to energies that might otherwise turn malicious.”²² These statements (Perhaps a little Max Weber can be a dangerous thing!) bear little relationship to reality and the last suggests that Catholicism leads people to be malicious. However, the viciously misogynistic and anti-Semitic Luther was hardly a positive influence. His substitution of faith for behavior as the crux of religion can be seen as divorcing religious ethics from moral reform and the call to charity. Attention to one’s own salvation, salvation gained by faith alone, has frequently led to a disregard for the welfare of others. The one palpable ethic in Christianity that the historian can categorize as worthwhile is the injunction to improve the life of a neighbor, though unfortunately, this has most often remained an ideal hardly carried out in the historical record.

There is a geographical bias to the American study of early modern European religion. Because historians in the United States writing about religion focus on England, France, and Germany, with some attention to Spain and Italy, they commonly ignore both Orthodox Christianity and eastern European Islam. Historians usually mention the iconoclastic controversy, the eleventh-century split between western and Orthodox Christianity, and the seventeenth-century conflict surrounding the Old Believers, but otherwise ignore religious developments in the east. Scholars appear to pay attention to the Ottoman Turks only when they threatened the Byzantine Empire and then southeastern and central Europe. That is, textbooks routinely discuss the fall of Constantinople in 1453 and the Turkish advance up the Danube. Islam, the religion of the conquerors, rarely receives its due. How did Islam put down roots among the populations of southeastern Europe, and how did it affect daily life, gender relations, and the economy? Western historians rarely address these questions, consigning European Islam to the historical dustbin. Does neglect perhaps reflect an unconscious reaction to the possibility that historically in Europe, western Christianity could suffer from a lengthy comparison with Islam? After all, *Candide* went to Constantinople for good reason, for the Ottoman Empire was the most religiously tolerant and the most secular European government.

Finally, I take issue with those in our ranks who contrast western religions with early modern superstitions. Here, historians unwittingly repeat the prejudice of the early modern elite, who saw their ideas as differing in kind from the credulity of an ignorant peasantry²³ or of non-Europeans. Thus, one textbook claims that “Cortez played upon the natives’ superstitious fears...”²⁴ Another declares: “some superstitious men and women, for example, believed that

²¹ John A. Garraty, *The American Nation* (2 vols. New York, 1993), I, 12.

²² David Burner, Virginia Bernhard, and Stanley Kutler, *Firsthand America: A History of the United States* (5th ed. 2 vols. St. James, NY, 1998), I, 13.

²³ Natalie Zemon Davis, “Proverbial Wisdom and Popular Errors,” in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford, 1975), pp. 227-67. Euan Cameron writes that “Even before the Reformation, however, late medieval clergy copiously documented those popular cults which they called ‘superstitious’ ” (*The European Reformation* [Oxford, 1991], p. 10).

²⁴ Greer and Lewis, *A Brief History of the Western World*, p. 304.

viewing the consecrated host during mass in the morning would guard them from death throughout the day....”²⁵ This is not a valid statement. Either the belief that bread can be consecrated and become a god is as superstitious as people’s belief that the host can guard them from death, or both beliefs are not superstitious. Too often, rather than make hard choices, we adopt the distinction between religion and superstition that Europeans favored; in other words, what the established churches accepted---even though that varied over time--was religious, while beliefs shunned by the churches were superstitious or magical. Why cannot historians borrow a more neutral and historical definition? Beliefs that are consistent with a culture’s world view are not superstitious, while beliefs that contradict a holistic system are. For example, prior to the widespread acceptance of the Scientific Revolution and empiricism, beliefs in demons, ghosts, saints, and transubstantiation, for example, were not superstitious, for they were coherent and compatible with the way in which most European Christians saw the cosmos. In that climate of opinion, anything was possible as boundaries between the supernatural and the natural world did not exist. Afterwards, when epistemology changed dramatically, and a sense that some things were impossible pervaded western education, beliefs that once had been consistent with the prevalent perception of the way the universe operated came to appear superstitious.

Sixty years ago, Edward Evans-Pritchard, in describing the Azande belief in oracle-poison, wrote: “They [the Azande] reason excellently in the idiom of their beliefs, but they cannot reason outside, or against, their beliefs because they have no other idiom in which to express their thoughts.”²⁶ We cannot therefore call superstitious their belief that an oracle answers questions due to the effect of a poison on a fowl. Our own conception of the natural world operates in the same fashion: “Any contradiction between a particular scientific notion and the facts of experience will be explained by other scientific notions; there is a ready reserve of possible scientific hypotheses available to explain any conceivable event. Secured by its circularity...science may deny, or at least cast aside as of no scientific interest, whole ranges of experience which to the unscientific mind appear both massive and vital”²⁷ In our own naturalistic and scientific world view, we can properly denote opinions as superstitious that we cannot label as such in early modern Europe.

Why, one wonders, do historians continue to label superstitious early modern beliefs that were religious? I fear it may be because many historians, as Christians, acknowledge as true beliefs that they should properly term superstitious in our modern, scientific age. In short, the United States is a religious nation, and too many historians cannot easily compartmentalize their Sunday beliefs and divorce them from their empirical training as historians.

In all fairness, textbooks have improved markedly over the past decade and there has emerged a more even-handed treatment of Islam and of the European invasion of the Americas. On other issues, such as the marginalizing of Jews in the European experience, the barebones treatment of eastern orthodoxy, the presentation of Christianity as a monotheism, and the

²⁵ Robert E. Lerner, Standish Meacham, and Edward McNall Burns, *Western Civilizations* (13th ed. New York and London, 1998), p. 468.

²⁶ *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford, 1937), pp. 314-15, cited in Michael Polyani, “The Stability of Scientific Theories against Experience,” in *Witchcraft and Sorcery*, ed. Max Marwick (Harmondsworth, England, 1970), p. 333.

²⁷ Polyani, “The Stability of Scientific Theories against Experience,” p. 337.

distorted application of the terms “superstitious” and “superstition,” historians in the United States continue to reveal a conflict in their teaching and writing between their cultural and religious heritage and historical accuracy.

To cite briefly a few examples, historians regularly and incorrectly call Christianity a monotheistic religion, thus accepting the judgment of the Council of Nicaea. College textbooks sometimes denigrate the Ottoman Turks of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries for attacking Christian Europe. Historians give only a cursory discussion of Orthodox and Russian Christianity in courses and books that claim to deal with Europe as a whole; instead, they devote nearly all their attention to varieties of Western Christianity. The conflict appears in the use of names: the Judeo-Christian deity becomes “God,” while other religions have “gods”; Jewish scripture becomes the Old Testament, as if it were merely preliminary to the Christian New Testament; Jesus becomes Christ, a name given to a Christian lord.

In sum, historians ought to reflect upon their natural inclinations to adopt their own cultural and religious heritage that favors Western Christianity. Indeed, this is only part of a larger problem that sees university historians in the United States treat religion, especially Christianity, as a positive historical force.

1. Privileging of Christianity--council of Nicaea and monotheism; Christianity good; “god”; Jesus; Old Testament; use of superstitions to refer to non-Christian beliefs; missionary activity good; pagan refers to everything not Jewish or Christian
2. Ignoring of orthodox Christianity; concentration of Western Christianity; European history driven by Protestants and by Great Britain, France, and Germany. Therefore, take sides of Luther in indulgences controversy.
3. Judaism--not tolerant as well
4. Treatment of Ottoman Turks as cruel
5. Distinction between magic and religion. Transubstantiation.

Abstract

Many American historians writing about and teaching the religious history of early modern Europe exhibit a conflict between their professional obligation to treat diverse religions accurately and without bias and their cultural heritage as Christians that has often led them to privilege Western Christianity. Relying for the most part on college textbooks, this essay examines the conflict, evident in the treatment of Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and even in the analysis of Protestant denominations and Catholicism. For example, historians regularly and incorrectly refer to Christianity as a monotheistic religion, thus accepting the judgment of the Council of Nicaea. Historians give only a cursory discussion of Orthodox and Russian Christianity in courses and books that claim to deal with Europe as a whole; instead, they devote nearly all their attention to varieties of Western Christianity. The conflict appears in the use of names: the Judeo-Christian deity becomes “God,” while other religions have “gods”; Jewish scripture becomes the Old Testament, as if it were merely preliminary to the Christian New Testament; Jesus becomes Christ, a name given to a Christian lord. Furthermore, textbooks largely ignore Jews and demonstrate a degree of subtle anti-Catholicism. The same time, U.S.

historians offer a distorted interpretation of The distinction between “superstition” and religion, and see Western religions as forces for good in history.

In sum, historians ought to reflect upon their natural inclinations to adopt their own cultural and religious heritage that favors Western Christianity. Indeed, this is only part of a larger problem that sees university historians in The United States treat religion, especially Christianity, as a positive historical force.