



History: History and Faith

What if teaching history included people's spiritual legacy?

Susan taught history and wanted her students to get a sense of the past as something meaningful that shapes our culture—politically, culturally, and spiritually, and can still influence us today.

She asked her students to spend a few minutes journaling as they looked at headlines about major contemporary social, cultural, and political trends that she posted as prompts. Specifically, the students were to note down any historical events, eras, or individuals which the headlines called to mind. Susan deliberately selected headlines that could be linked readily to major controversies from American history; such as abolitionism, women's suffrage, Manifest Destiny, prohibition, civil rights, separation of church and state, the fight against child labor, immigration, and the limits of private property rights. After the journaling, she led the class in a discussion of how these great movements, decisions, and debates from a century or more ago still influence the course of American history and how we consider current problems and trends in our society.

She then chose a few of these headlines and assigned them to small groups of students. Each group was asked to research one of the older controversies that had influenced their present headline, and to identify an individual who had impacted the way in which that issue had unfolded. They were asked to give particular attention to how that individual's beliefs and culture affected and motivated their involvement. This resulted in a group presentation to the rest of the class, connecting each individual's contributions and choices to the present-day headline. These were assessed in terms of how well students had examined connections between beliefs, contexts, choices, and consequences. The presentations and discussion highlighted how people's spiritual commitments had influenced their contributions to historical developments that are still affecting us today.

What's going on here?

Susan saw history as a way of looking at people and their legacy holistically, and she did not limit faith issues to religion class.

She engaged students by focusing on a new emphasis through a research project.

She reshaped her practice by changing what she was assessing and considering the story that the history lesson told about people. She chose to include faith, teaching that spiritual legacy is important.

What does this have to do with faith, hope, and love?

Susan's activities highlighted the role of faith as one factor in the way history develops, and as something that is integrated into life. For Christians, faith is equally integral to all aspects of life; it is not kept in a box marked "religious and private." It impacts all of life, including the public and the political.

What difference does it make?

It is easy to miss the importance of the spiritual in history. Because faith tends to be privatized in our society, that same attitude can be read back into history and result in the spiritual not being given appropriate weight. On the other hand, the role of faith may be exaggerated for partisan reasons in retelling historical events. Susan sought to honor the role of faith realistically.

Where could we go from here?

Faith can be given appropriate weight in other subjects such as art, music, English, and science when considering believing artists, musicians, writers, and scientists.

Digging deeper

In Western cultures there tends to be a divide between the sacred and the secular; religious belief often is viewed as a private hobby that does not impact public life or any parts of the curriculum except Bible class. This attitude has led to the fragmentation of

knowledge into parts often seen as unrelated to each other and God. This division of knowledge is a comparatively modern idea.

Until about a century and a half ago, scientists and scholars commonly assumed that knowledge formed a coherent whole; more precisely, they assumed that all parts of knowledge ultimately could be connected because every area of knowledge focused on some aspect of one single divine creation. J. Turner

The Bible sees the entire world as God's, and God is shown as deeply involved in our world and every aspect of life ([Psalm 24:1](#)). The Bible deal not only with religious issues but also with economics and cultural life, work and politics ([1 Timothy 2:1-2](#); [Leviticus 19:10](#)). Earlier cultures shared more of this biblical attitude. Equally, people are not just minds or bodies; human beings are whole creatures. The Bible sometimes refers to people as "body and soul" or "body, soul, and spirit," with soul and spirit including the will, emotions, and thoughts and our relationship to God ([1 Thessalonians 5:23](#), [Psalm 31:9](#)). History is the history of people and should reflect people in all their fullness.



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