

History Is Not What It Used to Be

Dr. Justo L. González

AETH

Robert E. Webber Lecture
Wheaton College
Wheaton, Illinois
September 29, 2022

History Is Not What It Used to Be

Good evening. I am honored, grateful, and surprised to be here.

Honored, by the mere fact of being able to speak at this institution, with its long and admirable record of service to God, church, and community.

Grateful, because for health reasons it has been three years since we travelled anywhere, and Wheaton has made every possible effort to make our visit possible. Thus, I may well say to Wheaton: “Thanks for beginning to open the world to us once again!”

Thirdly, I am also surprised—although this is not a new surprise, but one that recurs constantly. It is a surprise of long standing, because some 68 years ago I would have said that history was my least favorite subject of study. I would even say that it was my most unfavorite! Of what possible use were all those names and dates? Why did I need to keep straight the difference between King Charles I of England, another one by the same name, but king of France, and a third Charles I of Spain, who happened to be also Charles V?

Then, when I first arrived at seminary, I was encouraged to read Barth’s *Church Dogmatics*. From the very first page, I was amazed by the number of theologians he quoted and whom I could not even identify. Very soon I was convinced that, if I wished to do theology in a responsible way, I

had to know the history of theology. Although at that point I did not think much about it, I now realize that six years after that first encounter with Barth, I was writing a doctoral dissertation on Bonaventure, a theologian whom I first met at the very beginning of Barth's *Dogmatics*!

All of this means that the first question I would like to raise, even though very briefly, is simply: "Why history?"

To that question, our first answer must be theological. My brother was a professor of Old Testament, and my mother once quipped: "When are you two going to study somebody who is not dead?" To this, Jesus has responded: The God of Abraham is not God of the dead, but of the living. The God of Augustine and Monica, of Macrina and Basil, of Dame Julian and St. Francis, is not God of the dead, but of the living. We study them, not out of an antiquarian curiosity, but because in God they are our brothers and sisters.

Then, there is a second, wider answer: We must study history because, as Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset repeatedly asserted last century, there is practically nothing human that can be said without telling a story. Each of us is not only who we are, but also in a way who we have been, and what our ancestors were. There is still in me something of that young man who abhorred history. And there is also in me, in my culture and my language, much that my ancestors have bequeathed to me, and which is both my inheritance and my burden: words and ideas; values and prejudices; conflicts and reconciliations, dreams and nightmares—most of

them long forgotten, but whose consequences are still present every day of my life. If I am really to know myself, as Socrates suggested, then I must know my history.

Yet, there is still an even wider answer: It is history that allows us to move into the future. What scientists often do is to look at the future through the past. Economists discuss whether there will be a recession or not on the basis of past experience. And on the same basis chemists tell us what will happen when two substances combine. **(Pull pen)** How do I know that if I let go of this pen it will fall? I know it because I have seen similar events thousands of times, and because thousands of generations have also seen them. **(Drop pen)**. And behold, it works! History does not repeat itself. This same pen has never dropped in the same place and in exactly the same way. Nor will it ever. But history does have patterns. And those patterns teach us never to let go of something we do not want to drop.

And finally, but most importantly, history is important because at the very center of our faith stands a historical event, God in Christ, reconciling the world unto Godself. By necessity, a historical event cannot be known if the story is not told and somehow passed—either orally or in written form, from generation to generation. As believers in Jesus Christ, we do not really need all those more abstract explanations: we can simply say that the need for history is clearly expressed in two old hymns that supplement one another: “Tell Me the Old, Old Story,” and “I Love to Tell the Story.” In a way, this is what our faith is all about: about hearing the story, about telling the story, about living by the story, about trusting the end of the story.

Here endeth the first question, “Why history?”

But this is not the end of the matter, for this is not all that constantly surprises me about history.

I am also constantly surprised that history is not what it used to be. History is not a given that you learn and is already there. History is about what happened, but it is not all that happened. History is the past as seen from the present as the historian sees and experiences it, and even from a future for which the historian hopes or which the historian fears. In a word, history always has a perspective; history is not the bare past; history is the past as the historian reads it—often as the historian wishes to read it.

Early in 1992, as the time approached for the fifth centennial of the so-called discovery of America, we went to Spain and visited some of the places connected with those events. They were preparing for a great celebration, for an unforgettable remembrance of the past glories of Spain. There was an air of pride and festivity. Then, a few months later, we went to Mexico City. There, right in front of the cathedral, at the very center of the city, at the place where five centuries ago conquerors held masses in celebration of their victory, there was a large sign: “October 12, 1492, Day of National Mourning.” One past, but two different histories!

Then, there is another plaza in the same city. It is called the *Plaza de las tres culturas*—the Plaza of Three Cultures. It sits at the place of one of the decisive and final battles between the Aztecs and their allies on the one hand, and the conquistadores and their native allies on the other.

The inscription that marks those events says that “there were neither victors nor vanquished. It was the painful birth of the mestizo race that is the people of Mexico.”

Which of these three views is true? I must confess that I prefer the third. It comes closer to what I perceive Mexico to be, and to what I hope Mexico will become. But at the same time, I very much doubt that either Cautemoch or Cortez would agree with me! I have no doubt that the inscription in the *Plaza de las tres culturas* is better than the triumphalism of the celebrations in Spain or the anger and mourning of the sign at the cathedral of Mexico. But I also know that it is taking centuries for Mexico itself to come to that conclusion.

There are many other examples to illustrate the impact on history itself of the perspective and interests of the historian. When in the nineteenth century the study of Egyptian antiquity became fashionable for European aristocrats, there were numerous archeological digs along the valley of the Nile. In those digs archaeologists would move tons of debris that had accumulated over ancient tombs of kings and nobility and over impressive temples. There was great admiration for the pharaohs and their architects, and European aristocracy boasted of their visits to places such as Giza and Luxor. But by the second half of the twentieth century the focus began to change. Now archeologists were interested in the life of common Egyptians—in the lives of those who actually and physically built the tombs and temples; in what they ate, how they farmed and how they cooked; in how their social condition impacted their health. Now the new generation of archaeologists had to remove all of the debris that their predecessors had

piled on the sites of the worker villages around the temples. Now there was another history of Egypt—not just the history of pharaohs and dynasties, but also and primarily the history of peasants and workers and day-laborers and slaves, both male and female.

Egypt's past had not changed. But its history certainly had!

Furthermore, that change was connected with what was taking place in the areas where the archaeologists lived. Long before aristocratic Europeans adopted Egypt as a backyard sandlot in which they could do their digging, dramatic changes had begun in Europe itself. In a nutshell, those changes had to do with an increasingly persistent questioning of privilege—first of privilege by reason of birth, then of privilege by reason of wealth or of power. Using a geographical metaphor, one could say that Europe was discovering that mountains cannot exist without valleys, and that the valleys are just as important as the mountains. What was true of geography was also true of history: History could no longer limit itself to the lives and work of the mountaintops. The history of England, Scotland or Spain was not just the history of their kings, their nobility, and their feats. It was also the history of its peasants, of the women and men who sowed and harvested the grain, of those who kept the aristocracy in comfort, of the common soldiers who died at the command of generals. And, as a consequence, the history of Egypt—as told by Europeans—also moved along the same direction.

This means that the position of the historian—or of an entire guild of historians—within a society is an important factor shading what they see in the past, and therefore also the history they tell. Usually, those who hold positions of power and authority can make themselves heard much more easily than others. Those others have to await their turn to speak, or to limit their speaking to marginal conversations from which others cannot profit. As I now stand at this podium, I hold a position of authority. You can listen or not listen; but you cannot speak. You can speak with those sitting next to you. In those conversations, you may talk about what I am saying, or you may talk about the movie you saw last night. But whatever you talk about, you will probably not make yourselves heard as I am making myself heard. And the difference has less to do with what I say than with where I stand.

If I now make use of the privilege of old age by leaving this podium and going over to sit with my colleagues in the panel, things will change a little, but not much. I will no longer have unique authority; but, while I have lost that unique authority, I have gained the shared authority of my colleagues, given to me simply because I am now one of them—and you will still not be heard.

And yet, your views are important, because what you see is not what I see. You see an old man with a funny accent. I see a variety of faces, some very young and some older; some attentive, some intrigued, and some bored. All of this is part of the reality in this room. When we ignore any of that, we lose something of importance, we come to an incomplete and twisted view of what is happening here.

One way to explain some of this is to think in terms of a landscape. There are many different ways to look at a landscape, and therefore many different things to be seen in it. If I am a professional painter, I will try to see the landscape as nobody else sees it. I will try to paint an original, unique picture. This may sell very well. It may make me famous. It may make me rich. It may even help someone see renewed beauty in the landscape. But if I claim that this is the landscape as it truly is, I am deceiving you and deceiving myself, for no one individual, from a particular perspective, can see the whole landscape as it truly is. One will look at the colors; another, at the textures; a third one, at the shapes; and still another, at the light. One will look at it from this mountain, and another from that hill. Each will see a different landscape.

This is also true of history. History is like a landscape. Where one sees great pyramids, another sees slave labor. The past is the landscape. History is how we see that landscape. The pyramids are still there. But now we see also the blood and sweat they cost.

However, this is not to say that there is no normative landscape, or that one can put in the landscape anything one wishes, or that one can delete what one does not like. In describing a landscape, I must not claim that I see a freight train floating on the sea. In describing the pyramids of Giza, I cannot say that they are round.

There is a normative landscape, and that is precisely the reason why it is important to take into account a variety of perspectives. If I am interested in shapes, my neighbor may point out something important about the lights and shadows, or about the textures. If she does, and I listen, I shall be learning something about the landscape.

Furthermore, to that other person I am part of the landscape. I cannot see myself or where I stand in the same way as that other person sees me. If I listen to those other perspectives, I shall also be learning something important both about the landscape and about the reasons why I see in it what I see. As Robert Burns would wisely say, "O wad some Power the giftie gie us to see oursels as ithers see us!"

Having said all this, it is time to bring it to bear on the field of church history. I have already mentioned some reasons why the history of the church is an important and even a necessary contributor to a mature faith. So, we may move directly to the question of how perspective relates to our reading of the church's past.

Along these lines, the first thing to be said is that our reading of the past must learn from the biblical reading of its own past. As I read the Scriptures of Israel, as well as those of the early church, I notice something very particular about it: it is what I would call a "non-innocent" history. Most peoples tell their history in such a way as to extoll their glories, their wisdom, and their virtues. Not so in Scripture. There is deep dysfunctionality in the family of Isaac. When the

people have been liberated from the yoke of Egypt by the mighty hand of God, they complain that they don't have onions and cucumbers! Samson is a foolish womanizer. The greatest king of Israel is a sexual abuser and a murderer. Its wisest king sometimes behaves like an idiot. The apostles themselves, after years of living with Jesus, don't seem to quite understand what he is about. In brief, what we find in the Bible is not so much the glories of the people of God as it is the faithfulness of God even to an unfaithful Israel and to unwilling apostles.

This is very different from the way most peoples and nations tell their histories. Our history as we tell it is like a Western movie in which we and our ancestors all wear white hats. I shall never forget an incident some years ago, when I was at the General Conference of my own United Methodist Church, sitting between a Mexican American bishop and a Cherokee pastor. A delegate made an impassioned speech about how our country is just about the only one that has never expanded by forcefully taking the lands of others. As many in the audience applauded, I looked at my two neighbors and saw in their faces a very justified expression of *dejà-vu*.

I shall not dwell on the dire political consequences of such views, on which there is much to be said.

Let's look rather at their impact on faith and how we read and we tell the story of Christianity. As to faith, a false reading of history in which we are innocent, and have always been on God's side, is a denial of our own personal and social sinfulness, and therefore of the grace of God. It

is like transforming the well-known phrase, “There, but for the grace of God, go I” into “Because I don’t go there, I have earned the grace of God.” But grace that is earned is not grace. If we deny our sin we also deny God’s grace; and if we deny God's grace we deny the gospel!

Let it be said in passing that this is the tragedy of that greatest of heresies in our time—a heresy that seems to be making headway not only in our country, but also in many others: the heresy of Christian nationalism.

If with all of this in mind we look once again at the subject of church history, we immediately see many parallelisms. Church history has been tainted by falsely innocent readings of our past, and therefore of our present. The Church History of Eusebius of Caesarea gives the impression that the Empire persecuted the Church due to a simple misunderstanding, and perhaps because of a few evil emperors. So do the histories of his successors Socrates and Sozomen. Cardinal Bellarmine wrote his church history in order to show that Protestantism was a heresy that departed from the entire tradition of the church. And the Centuriators of Magdeburg wrote theirs to show that it was the Catholics who were the heretical innovators.

All these historians, while quite different from one another, had one thing in common: in a way, they all reflected the views of those in power around them. They were like someone lecturing from a podium: people had to listen to them; they and those like them were the ones who knew. Divergent perspectives were simply that: meaningless divergencies.

In our day, however, things have changed radically. The Protestant histories that I read and studied in school were all written by Anglo-Germanic men from the North Atlantic. The few Catholic histories I read were all written by men, and most of them either in Latin or in languages derived from Latin.

When I went to seminary, the textbook that we used for church history was written by a North American Baptist—a great scholar whom I admired and later came to know as “Uncle Ken.” I remember telling my church history professor that this book, although full of information, gave the impression that all of Christian history leads to the American Baptists. I suggested that he write a different book, one that brought us, Latin American Protestants, into the picture. I also remember that he threw his arm around my shoulders and said, “My son, Protestants in Latin America are too few, and read so little, that such a book will never be published.”

Obviously, although he was an excellent historian, he was not a very good prophet, for today books written by both Protestant and Catholic Latin Americans, Asians, and Africans, are read throughout the world.

What he could not foresee— and what I was even further from foreseeing—was the unexpected shifting in the tectonic plates of Christianity. The map of Christianity in which both he and I grew up was centered in the North Atlantic. It was from the North Atlantic that

missionaries went throughout the world. It was North Atlantic theology that was read and studied. It was in the North Atlantic that the majority of Christians lived.

Today things have changed and they continue to change. The growing edges of most Reformed churches are no longer in Scotland, the Netherlands, or the United States, but in places such as Korea and Brazil. While the presence of Lutheranism in Germany and in Scandinavia is waning, it is growing in Namibia and in Ethiopia. At some point midway between my seminary years and the present, the typical Christian believer became a woman in central Africa.

This is parallel to – and part of – the changes I noted earlier in the field of history. New voices are making themselves heard: African voices, Filipino voices, Korean voices. . .

Furthermore, these cataclysmic changes are not just something that is happening “out there,” in distant places, in what we used to call “the mission field.” Throughout the world, including what we used to call the “First World,” voices that once were silenced are making themselves heard: women’s voices, the voices of the poor, the voices of the oppressed, of the marginalized, the disabled, of those whom “good” society used to consider abnormal.

These voices are witnessing to a different history, to a hereto hidden world, and I daresay to a fuller gospel.

This may well produce fear in some. A shift in the tectonic plates at the very foundation of our lives is deeply frightening. I think I understand something of the terror of those who have long expected their voices to be dominant— and therefore fear changes that they cannot control, changes that seem to challenge much of what they took for granted.

But the truth is that when others point out to us that our perspective on the landscape is not the only one, our own view is enriched; the landscape becomes more luminous; we are able to see what before had gone unnoticed; we come to understand that none of us owns the landscape; we are enabled to learn from one another.

Beyond fear there is a word of hope. I said earlier that history is always written not only from the past and the present, but also from the future. In the case of Christian history, it must be written from a future of hope. I daresay that in order to write Christian history we must do so remembering not only the past, but also the future.

Remembering the future? Yes! Remembering the future! In the well-know book, *Through the Looking Glass*, when Alice says, “I can’t remember things before they happen,” the White Queen comments that “it is a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.” To this one could add that it is a poor sort of faith that only works backwards. Faith requires remembering the past— remembering our past sins, as did Israel, and also remembering God’s past actions,

as Israel also did. But faith also requires remembering the future—remembering God’s promises, which are as true and as unchangeable as any past, and even more so.

Part of the human predicament is that we cannot change the past. We cannot undo whatever evil we may have done. Sometimes we may be able do now whatever good we failed to do then; but even that does not erase our past. If it is true, as I said earlier, that the past still lives in us, it is also true that much of that past is like a millstone tied around our necks.

But even beyond that past the surprising thing, the wondrous thing, the thing that surpasses all understanding, is the sure promise of a new past. The sure promise of a love such, and a forgiveness such, that even our past shall be made anew. The sure promise that we shall learn war no more, that we shall sit each under our own fig tree, that the lion and the lamb will lie together, that the master and the slave will sit together, that there will be no more hatred, no more prejudice, no more privilege, no more inequity, no more iniquity.

This is at the very core of a Christian view of history. Christian history, like biblical history, must be a history that does not seek to hide or forget our past faults. When it comes to the variety of perspectives on the landscape of the past, it must also be a history that recognizes and does not seek to hide resultant pain and fear. But it must also be a history that looks at this very diversity and even confusion considering the possibility and the probability that, even through our present conflicts, this God of ours may well be preparing us for that glorious time when we shall

be part of a multitude that no one can count, from every tribe, and nation, and language, all singing together in a melodious polyphony to the only One who is holy, whose is the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen

