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Geography Matters: Understanding the Lay of the Land

Valerie Rempel

I

It was the end of the semester, the last day of class, and we were wrapping things up in a survey course on North American religious history. Students had talked a bit about their research projects, I had tried to finish up one last lecture and show one more piece of film, but we were really done. Still, the clock gave me the advantage, so I asked the question that I sometimes ask on the last day: “What did you learn this semester?”

They were silent, heads tilted, eyes gazing into space or down at their laptops as they mentally reviewed the semester’s worth of material they had tried to absorb. Or maybe they were just sneaking a glance at the clock. After a pause, one of the students, the quiet one who had spent most of the semester hugging the wall and holding his thoughts to himself, said “Geography matters.” The class, a bright group of seminarians who had worked hard and well throughout the course, burst into laughter, and I joined in. His dry delivery was a little different from mine, but we all recognized the line I had used over and over throughout the semester.

Military historians have always known that geography matters. Battles have been won and lost because of the contours of the land and the vagaries of its climate. But until I actually started teaching history, rather than just studying it, I don’t I think I fully appreciated quite how much I believe that geography matters.

The North American story provides multiple examples. Why, for instance, did southern slave owners in the United States find it easy to justify the “peculiar institution” with biblical support, while northern abolitionists used scripture to oppose the practice? The slave trade flourished in the south partly because the region was economically dependent on cotton and tobacco, crops that required warm climates and were labor intensive. The owners’ way of life depended on the cheap labor slaves provided. The northern states had far different farming patterns and little need for slaves.

What they had was flowing water that provided cheap energy and helped turn the northern region into a center for industry. It is far easier to read the Bible as a text of liberation when you have no need of slave labor, and far easier to read it as a text accepting of slavery when you do. Geography matters.

“Geography matters,” is, I suppose, my way of saying that *context* matters. As historians we revel in the context, the lay of the land. We work hard to understand the various influences that shaped people, events, and movements. We immerse ourselves in the period or subject we are studying, trying to understand motivations, influences, and the events themselves. If we are successful, we begin to develop an almost intuitive understanding of people and movements. Like detectives, we follow not only the clues but our hunches, always knowing that what we are following may lead us to a dead end or to some serendipitous discovery.

For students, however, the context of historical acts or actors is often abstract and difficult to fully appreciate. Students inhabit such a different world from that of the past that they need help in imagining some other reality. And unless they can do so, I think they will miss a much needed sense of connection to the past. They may fail to recognize how studying history can inform the present and offer examples either to emulate or avoid. My job as a teacher is to help acquaint them with that earlier landscape – to sketch it out and even color it in, so that they begin to realize and take note of the complex interweaving of impulses and events that create history.

Richard P. Heitzenrater has described this process of organizing and presenting historical material as “research, conjecture, and analysis,” or, as he quotes his grandson, historians “‘look it up,’ ‘make it up,’ and ‘spice it up.’”¹ This process of making research accessible, “spiced up” for a broad and varied audience, is part of what motivates me when I teach and, for that matter, when I write. I want to help people gain some sense of the past, to make that leap of imagination so that they can begin to more fully understand and appreciate the people and movements of an earlier age.

Making that leap is so important, because the temptation in presenting Christian history is to make it holy or, to extend Heitzenrater’s categories,

¹ Richard P. Heitzenrater, “Inventing Church History,” *Church History* 80, no. 4 (December 2011): 738.

to “clean it up.” This is the kind of historical study that glosses over less admirable actions or resorts to a simple “God made it happen.” Both do a disservice to the church and to God. The church has always been made up of very *human* beings with the accompanying flaws and character traits that distinguish all of humanity. To deny that is to deny what we are or have the potential to become. It is not just “those people” of a different culture or era who have the capacity to act with either extraordinary faith or apostasy. Attributing all human action to God seems equally troublesome. Human acts, especially failures, can too easily be dismissed if they are somehow simply a part of God’s mysterious will. God does not need our protection, as if by brushing over the less admirable actions of our forebears we will help preserve God’s good name.

Of course, to study and begin to understand historical events is always to be confronted, even confounded, by the question of how we discern God’s acts in human history. One of the central confessions of the Christian faith is that God continues to be involved in, even fascinated with, creation and all that is in it to the extent that God promises to ultimately “save” it. However, sorting out which are the acts of God is at the very least challenging and mostly impossible to ascertain with any confidence. Albert C. Outler’s presidential address to the American Society of Church History in 1964, reprinted in 1988, presents a case in point. His musings on the unexpected stumble of emperor Theodosius’s horse, an incident that led to the emperor’s untimely death and subsequently to the defining Christological work of the Council of Chalcedon, illustrate how seemingly inconsequential events can shape or reshape history’s trajectory. While attributing the Definition of Chalcedon to the stumble of a horse may appear to oversimplify things, it still stands that these seemingly disparate events are linked and thus support Outler’s observation that “historical existence is a tissue of laws and choices and chance.”²

For students, especially Christians studying the history of Christianity for the first time, that can be a difficult realization. Even in a survey course they begin to encounter some of the complexities of historical and theological narratives – the “tissue of laws and choices and chance” that come together

² Albert C. Outler, “Theodosius’ Horse: Reflections on the Predicament of the Church Historian,” *Church History* 57, Suppl. (January 1988): 11.

to form the story. Many find it disconcerting to learn something of the twists and turns in the church's history and especially in its theological deliberations. Is it accident or divine intervention when the horse stumbles? Is this even a question for consideration? Students also find it hard to accept the reality of power struggles, the persecution of people they recognize as Christian by others who also claim allegiance to Christ, or the institutionalization of racism, sexism, or some other form of oppression that is unacceptable by today's standards and reading of the biblical text. I am reminded of a mature student, back in the classroom after significant years in ministry, who looked up from his notes and asked plaintively, "What am I supposed to think about this?"

What, indeed? Tempting as it is, I do not see my role as a seminary professor primarily in terms of telling students what to think. Instead, I want to help them consider how and why various events took place and to begin to realize that human beings have built the church's structures and developed its theological constructs. I want them to wrestle with the implications of historical occurrences, and especially to understand something of the dynamics at play so that they begin to see that the course of history is not inevitable – at least not in the sense of a predetermined set of events or ideas. Not then, not now. I am aware that my Reformed sisters and brothers may view this differently, but I am persuaded that while God is working toward an end of God's choosing, the paths to that end are infinitely variable.

Students find this especially difficult, I think, in a historical theology course. Our strong preference for biblical theology at Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary, along with my own training as a historian, has resulted in a core course that is more historical theology than systematic theology. It is designed to acquaint students with the theological tradition itself – its categories, vocabulary, and critical thinkers – and to help them develop their own skills in theological reflection. I have frequently observed that they have difficulty understanding varying viewpoints on doctrinal positions they take as givens. These are students so shaped by a Christian tradition made up of views that have "won" theological debates and someone's coherent presentation of those views that they find it hard to see how anyone could have supported any other position. Sometimes they need help in sorting out why someone would even ask the question that we are

spending valuable class time exploring.

To that end, I frequently divide the class up into “Donatists” and “Catholics” to debate the necessity of a pure priesthood, “Arians” and “Athanasians” to outline and then argue the relationship of Jesus to God the Father, “Easterners” and “Westerners” to create appropriate images that describe the Trinity, or Lutherans, Zwinglians, and Catholics to try to explain exactly what happens when we observe the Lord’s Supper. I ask students to write fictitious letters to the pope, to argue various views on theodicy or atonement theories, or even whether to link or keep separate baptism and church membership.

Part of my role as a teacher in this environment is to help them get on the other side of the argument so that they can begin to grasp another way of looking at the issue. Here again, it soon becomes apparent that geography is important.

One simply cannot fully understand the debates that occupied earlier generations of Christians or the tensions that arose without a sense of where people lived. It becomes important to know not only that an “Eastern” church exists but something of the physical and political realities shaping the alliances that formed and eventually established a separate branch of the church. Politics and geography emerge again in the rise of Islam as a force helping spur development of a euro-centered “Western” church. In a contemporary context, Christians in South America may still want to call for separation from the Catholic Church, given the deep connection between the Church and oppressive political regimes, while North Americans find themselves linking with Catholics who have been shaped by the renewal movements in a post-Vatican II context. Put simply: geography matters.

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Filling in the landscape becomes important for other reasons as well. The work Heitzenrater describes as “research, conjecture, and analysis” is done in order to craft a kind of usable and even plausible historical narrative. Especially for teachers, the narrative needs to be presented, to be made quickly intelligible over the course of a quarter or semester to an audience with varying degrees of interest or prior knowledge of the subject. Because we choose what to

present and how to present it, we exert considerable influence in the shape and content of that narrative. Our own interests and biases easily get worked out in what we include and exclude. While the increasing influence of social history has pushed us to pay more attention to the lives of ordinary people or groups of people traditionally underrepresented in historical narratives, it is still easy (and some would argue, essential) to focus on the big events, especially when we teach survey courses. Unfortunately, this often continues to obscure other key elements of the Christian story.

For example, when I teach the very occasional course on women in the Christian tradition, the response I get most often from students is “Why don’t I know this?” I find students, both male and female, to be consistently indignant about what they perceive as important omissions in their education. Why don’t they know about the deaconess tradition in the early church, or the leadership women offered in the establishment of early house churches? Why don’t they know about female mystics who challenged the authority of the church with their claims of direct and divine revelation? Why don’t they know about the many women who were martyred along with men during the turbulent years of the Protestant Reformation, or the impact women had on the worldwide missionary movement? Why have they never been asked to consider how the modern concept of the nuclear family owes much to 19th-century ideals regarding the appropriate spheres of men and women, or how those ideals continue to influence contemporary debates on the ministry roles of women? It is perhaps too easy simply to say “No one told them.” Presumably, they are enrolled in a graduate program to learn things they do not already know. The point remains, however, that by the texts and films we choose and the lectures we write we are engaged in shaping a narrative, in sketching a landscape. I would argue that we have a responsibility to paint it as completely as possible, so that students can begin to see how present reality is rooted in the past and to gain some appreciation for the breadth of the story and the multiplicity of its characters.

Here again, context matters – this time, our own. The longer I teach, the more I realize how my own social and geographic location informs my work. I become especially conscious of this when I teach a course in Anabaptist and Mennonite Brethren (MB) studies. While I can trace my family roots deep into the Mennonite tradition, I did not grow up in traditional

Mennonite communities, at least not until I was a teenager. I grew up in a “modern” Mennonite home that, outwardly at least, differed little from that of my suburban and later small town neighbors. Furthermore, I grew up in the western half of the US, in Washington and California, before landing in Kansas in my teens. I’ve lived most of my life on the West Coast, and I am primarily formed by the American MB story, which is in turn significantly impacted by American evangelicalism. These realities deeply influence both my experience and my understanding of what it means to be Mennonite, and even to be Christian.

As a westerner teaching in Fresno, California, I live far from the traditional centers of North American Mennonite life. The university that employs me, and even the denominational seminary I am lodged in as a faculty member, serves an increasingly diverse population, both culturally and religiously. I am as likely to have students in my class with Catholic roots as those with Mennonite connections. They are far more likely to speak Spanish than any form of the German my ancestors spoke. In a school claiming Anabaptist perspective and convictions, I actively help students prepare for military service as chaplains. As a result, I have become committed to hospitality as a fundamental value in the classroom, so that students feel free to express and explore the varying perspectives of their own theological traditions. More and more, I find myself trying to help them understand their own religious tradition so that they can critically embrace it. To that end, I am increasingly seeking to develop what Stuart Murray has termed “naked Anabaptists,” i.e., Christians who are shaped by Anabaptist theology and practices even though rooted in other church traditions.³ This perspective is helping broaden my sense of what it means to serve the church, especially as my institution wrestles with the changing denominational climate and an increasingly pluralistic environment.

I was assisted in this development by the practical reality of my first experience in teaching a Mennonite history course. I had expected it to be

³ Stuart Murray, *The Naked Anabaptist: The Bare Essentials of a Radical Faith* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010). Murray uses this term to describe Christians who embrace an Anabaptist reading of the Bible but do not share the historic ethnic trappings of the Mennonite tradition as it arose in Europe and was transplanted to North and later South America. “Naked” Anabaptists may have joined Mennonite churches but are most often lodged in other church communities.

“family talk,” a chance for students who shared a Mennonite heritage and perspective to come together and explore their historical and theological roots. To my surprise, students had enrolled whose only connection to the Anabaptist or Mennonite tradition was the accident of their enrollment at a Mennonite Brethren school in the first place. Like seminaries across North America, ours had become the local seminary, and they had chosen to study here rather than relocate to their own denominational school. Short of talking them out of the class (I tried), I was left to wrestle with how to structure the course in a way that would not waste their time or leave them consistently on the fringe of classroom discussion. I started working harder to contextualize the Anabaptist story within the 16th-century Reformation, so that students from both the “left” and “right” of that movement could appreciate the spectrum of theological views and their relationship to each other.

I began to think of the Mennonite Brethren story as a case study for revival movements, and to try to help students see how early enthusiasms can become characteristics that both help and hinder a group’s later development. I found myself trying to draw parallels between the Mennonite experience in North America and the experiences of other immigrant groups. This prompted discussions around cultural and theological assimilation, as well as boundary maintenance, issues relating to a wide variety of church traditions. In short, the presence of these non-Mennonite students significantly impacted how I began to teach Anabaptist and Mennonite history. And, as it turns out, I think I have never taught the course without the presence of a “non-Mennonite” student.

It may have only been an urge to gently mock me that prompted my student to say that “geography matters” when asked what had been learned in a semester’s worth of study, but I want to believe he said it because he recognized an element of truth. It is certainly not the only thing to pay attention to when studying a people, a place, or a time. Still, I remain convinced that in trying to understand the lay of any land, geography does indeed matter.

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