

**Timothy Widjaja-TH605 FALL 2020**  
**Review &Response of Carl F Trueman’s,**  
***History and Fallacies*, excerpt “ The Past is a Foreign Country”**

**Introduction**

The study of history is literally looking back into the events of the past. As historians, understanding the context of an event in its purest form and essence is worth striving for. Carl F Trueman’s work, *History and Fallacies*, excerpt “ The Past is a Foreign Country”, critiques the many pitfalls that students of history may have in terms of perspective and lens. Trueman warns of the specific tendency of historians to interject thoughts, ideals, and values, into a time or event in history. The problem with these thoughts and ideals is that they may have not been present or known during those moments in history. Trueman goes through the many forms of anachronistic pitfalls and cases in the excerpt.

**Types of Anachronistic Failures**

Trueman begins by bringing up the word “liberty” and how it can have different notes of taste through the ages and cultures ( p. 140). For Trueman, a man living in this modern era, sees liberty as a means of self determination where humankind has the right to vote, the right to worship, the right to have as little government influence over his life and so on(p. 140). Trueman confesses that this indeed is an effect of being brought and educated in a twenty first century liberal democracy (p. 140). For church leader Samuel Rutherford, who’s work was long before John Locke and Thomans Jefferson, had a completely different view on the word “liberty’. For this old Presbyterian, “liberty” would mean that the government would stay out of church governance completely (p.140). For Rutherford, “liberty” for man to do whatever he pleases would most likely be an offense. The point that Trueman is trying to make is the achronistic

mistakes can occur when historians don't realize the words may carry different connotations, tones, and tastes over time. One must strive to understand how words are actually used.

Trueman brings another version of anachronism and that is to compare and contrast events with modern developments. Much like the ignorance in understanding word meaning in context, modern development is the pitfall of comparing thoughts and ideas of the past with the present as its final form of development. Trueman uses the idea of "liberty" once again for an example (p141). "Liberty" for Rutherford the early Presbyterian was the church being free from government. The idea presented by Rutherford may have influenced John Locke and Jefferson in the future, but historians shouldn't compare "liberty" to what it was throughout the generations. Instead, Trueman suggests that students should understand Rutherford by fully understanding the idea of "liberty" without the invasion of different time periods muddying the waters of Rutherford's true interpretation.

Furthermore, Trueman warns historians of Anachronism and the history of ideas. The point that Trueman clarifies here is that historians must be aware that ideas of a certain era and event space may not be coherent at all with each other (p.147). For example, Trueman mentions that a person could buy a theology book expressing a certain point of view from this era, but contain quotes and sayings from Augustine, John Calvin, and Karl Barth to support their thesis. Not to say that there's no commonality between them but between these three quote worthy scholars, they are generations apart. Their ideas may look the same but are steeped in completely different religious climates, world authorities, and a plethora of contextual factors (p.147).

### **Was Luther a Racist?**

To clarify even further, Trueman brought up the Reformation's hero, Martin Luther. Martin Luther is famously known for his boldness in protesting against the Catholic church, but

many know of his “infamous” position toward his work on his position on Jews (p. 165). The words that Luther used would mark him as a racist and would have him kicked out of any evangelical church today. However, Trueman brings up these controversial pieces of Luther and displays it in its pure form. Trueman investigates the context of the world and climate that Luther lived in. Apparently, anti-Jewish writings and sermon were quite the norm in the church tradition far before Luther’s work (p. 178). The confusing part is that Luther wrote a work on Jews that encourages folks to bring them into the fold of Christ. The question is, which work is exceptional and which work is not? If one were to look at the times that Luthers wrote these works with proper respect to his time, one could conclude that the work where he encouraged people to bring Jews into Christianity was the exceptional one (p.178).

### **Personal Response**

Trueman’s reminder to steer clear of anachronistic pitfalls reminds me of an illustration of a local church nativity play. The sheep and shepherds are all in place, but for some reason, the angel on high is wearing a Casio watch and Joseph is wearing glasses. The interjection of modern lenses and current themes are as awkward to the study of history as the nativity above. The purpose of the excerpt is of great importance for the historian today. The way we look at history must be free of our preconceptions. A proper study of events and culture must include what happened in its purest form. The reporting of history is not a postmodernist activity where reporting is completely relative to the observer. The events should be displayed for their proper time, philosophies, values, and political climate. In conclusion, I completely agree with Trueman.

I do believe that the reporting of history should be done with the fullest picture to be strived for, but there is also another use for looking back in time, and that is to learn lessons. To

merely look at the past just to know the unadulterated facts is good work but can be quite sterile. Fruitful analysis of history helps humankind to study successes and failures by understanding history with the same intent of someone reading fables, lessons and reflection. Without this type of approach, humankind is bound for failures that could have been avoided in the first place. Reporting of history should be done without anachronistic failures, but I believe learning from history may take some bending of Trueman's guidelines.

### **Conclusion**

Trueman's warning of the pitfalls is necessary for all historians to hear. A complete representation of the history report is needed for a pure exercise of this discipline. Without anachronistic failures, we can properly derive the lessons we need for our modern day.