

In his chapter on *The Past Is a Foreign Country*, from his book, *Histories and Fallacies*, author Carl F. Trueman, examines how all historians should view the past. He uses the analogy “The Past Is a Foreign Country” to show that historians must learn everything about a place or an event in order to present as accurately as possible the history of that place or event. He notes that history is an important discipline when examining theology or philosophy, and as a result they do not operate independently but are interdisciplinary.

Trueman discusses anachronism not only as one of the greatest “temptations” for historians, but also one of the greatest errors, since present ideas cannot be imposed on the past. He is careful to note that historians should not impose their biases on past history; since these events are from different periods where the customs, language and the places are different. Historians should be honest in their judgment of past societies and use research data effectively in order to understand the past. Societal norms, behavior, language, religion, politics, and all cultural aspects of the period should be examined. All this is necessary since for example language and the meaning of words are constantly changing in their meaning and in translation. Trueman addresses the fact that anachronism can take different forms and uses the meaning of the word liberty to show that this word may mean different things to different individuals. Trueman writes of the word liberty, “ I am inclined to believe this word in terms of self –determination, lack of government interference in my life, the right to live and work where I choose, to vote, the right to spend my money as I wish,...In the seventeenth century, however, prior to John Locke and certainly prior to Thomas Jefferson, the term was used by among others, Presbyterians such as Samuel Rutherford: when he uses it , he means it to refer to the freedom of the church to govern itself,

not to the democratic freedom of the individual to be self determining.”(Pg. 140), hence we have seen the different meanings attached to the word over a period of time.

Trueman also mentions other forms of anachronism in which historians see the past’s agenda in terms of modern developments. Again he uses the idea of liberty; he addresses the fact that Rutherford and Jefferson did not hold to the same idea of liberty. Rutherford’s concept of liberty seemed to move in the direction of what we know today as modern liberal democracy. It is significant, therefore, not so much for what Rutherford did and what he meant but it is significant for the world in which we live today.

Categorical anachronism is another form of anachronism discussed in the chapter, classic examples are; Anti-Semitism and nationalism. Another form of anachronism is the imposing of moral, ethical, and intellectual standards which were not applicable during the time that was studied. Trueman uses the example of the belief in the Trinity as expressed in the Nicene Creed, which was not formulated until AD 381. The anachronistic question posited is: Can Greek Apologist who lived in the second century be held to standards in their time? Is this an act of anachronism?

Trueman discusses another branch of anachronism, the history of ideas; where he believes that historians have done more damage. He noted that “ideas are extracted from their historical contexts...” (Pg.148) and later criteria which were not applicable at the time were used to judge the meaning and significance. Trueman notes that this is especially the case in the fields of history of political thought, philosophy and theology.

Trueman uses “Was Luther a Racist” as an example of this form of anachronism in terms of abstracting ideas from their historical context and placing them either above history or outside of

history. This manner in which categories of moral thought and ethics can be imposed on earlier time periods can disturb one's understanding of the person, or the period that is the subject of the study. Trueman does not see any problem in a historian having moral commitment or political engagement, however one's personal commitment should not undermine the understanding of others as to why specific groups or individuals acted or believed the way they did in the past. Trueman adds that this can be simply done by imposing categories that would not have been comprehended at an earlier juncture. He proceeds to use the question of Martin Luther and the Jews to show what he terms "one good example of the tricky nature of such a historical task." He cites Luther's hatred of the Jews and his partial responsibility for the stream of German anti-Semitism which ended with the Holocaust.

Luther's 1543 treatise, *On the Jews and Their Lies*, was a scathing attack on the Jews. One can certainly come to the conclusion that Luther was a racist, after having read Example Two: Was Luther a Racist? Certainly, one can after only reading this one passage from his treatise "First to set fire to their synagogues or schools and to bury and cover with dirt whatever will not burn, so that no man will ever again see a stone or cinder of them... Second, I advise that their houses also be razed and destroyedThird, I advised that all their prayer books and Talmudic writings, in which such idolatry, lies, cursing, and blasphemy are taught, be taken from them.... Fourth, I advise that their rabbis be forbidden to teach henceforth on pain of loss of life and limb.... Fifth, I advise that safe-conduct on the highways be abolished completely for the Jews."(Pg. 166-167)

However, one needs to consider the historical evidence, the political atmosphere of the period and the anti-Jewish sentiments of the time before one can understand why Luther expressed those sentiments. Luther's statement, " I have read and heard many stories about the Jews which agree with this judgment of Christ, namely, how they have poisoned wells, made assassinations, kidnapped children, as related

before. "(Pg.171) This statement, is a classic example of an anachronism, and as a result perpetuated the belief that Luther is racist. As a result, Luther has been labeled, in some circles, as the most extreme example in history of a Jew-lover who turned into a Jew-hater.

It should be noted that attacks on Jews and Judaism can be traced back as far as the first century. These sentiments expressed by Luther, clearly show that Luther is writing from what he has heard about the Jews without personally interacting with them since these events occurred during a different historical era. What he heard was the prevalent, ongoing anti-Jewish sentiments which were in the writings of European culture.

In responding to Trueman's "The Past Is a Foreign Country," I can agree with him that history, theology, and philosophy are all interdisciplinary and not separate and apart. With that taken into context, it would eliminate or ameliorate the way others look at history. Historians, like many of us, are biased; therefore, historians ought not to use their present time to explain ideas and concepts of the past. The past is indeed a foreign country, since we know nothing of its history, religion, or politics until we visit and immerse ourselves in its culture. Historians must remove the temptation to impose ideas, values, and categories that did not exist during the periods they are studying or have studied.