

Review/Response- "The Past is a Foreign Country" by Carl F. Trueman

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Author Carl F. Trueman opens chapter 3 with the thesis that people cannot analyze history with the agendas and perspectives of one's own times. Current history cannot be read into the past, and he calls that anachronism. He offers a solution that, "The only way to overcome these problems is to spend time learning the language, the dialects, and the manners of the place" (140). It is almost similar to sound biblical exegesis. One has to understand history in its original context as best as possible to create the most accurate theories and hypotheses of the past. Or else, "This can lead to the temptation for us to ask of the past only those questions which seem to be significant in the world of today and perhaps to ignore the many other potential pathways or streams of ideas that ultimately went nowhere but that, in their time, were very significant and could easily have triumphed" (141). And the solution to avoiding biases being harmfully read into the past is simple: be conscious of our biases first and foremost. Awareness is the first and foundational step to overcoming eisegesis of history.

But, Trueman continues to argue that, "Nevertheless, it is one thing to have moral commitments; it is another thing to allow those commitments fundamentally to distort our understanding of why particular individuals or groups believed and acted the way they did in times past" (165). It is okay to have our own opinions and thoughts, but we must be aware of those personal subjectivities and not let it bleed into interpreting history objectively as possible. Next, the author uses these theories and objections against anachronism to properly perceive a monumental figure in Christian history: Martin Luther. Martin Luther has either been highly

praised for being the leader of the Reformation, or he has been severely punished for being a hypocrite and an Anti-Semitic person. But if one studies the historical context of Luther's time, "Luther is here self-consciously positioning himself within an established tradition of anti-Jewish writings upon which he draws" (171). In Luther's days, it was normal to make the remarks he did. And Trueman points to an unpopular observation that, "This raises the interesting question of why Luther changed his mind, the answer to which is actually very germane to the whole issue of Luther and the Jews, yet which could not even be appropriately addressed unless one realized that it was the treatise of 1523, not 1543, which was exceptional by the conventional standards of the day" (172).

What was abnormal in Martin Luther's days was that he wrote a treatise that was so gentle and friendly towards the Jews in 1523. This raises the question of why Luther changed his mind during those two decades? To those that blame Luther for causing the Holocaust and persecution of the Jews many centuries later, it is fair to note that, "Thus, the concepts underlying the very legal basis of what then took place, culminating in the death camps, was biological not religious" (172). Luther did not have a worldview of race in his time, but he had a paradigm of seeing the world through the eyes of religion. And, "Indeed, there can be no doubt that Luther desired to see the Jews converted to Christianity because he was convinced that he was living at the end of time when the eschatological conversion was imminent" (174). Luther's motivations were one of religion and not biological race. It is important not to put the perspectives of race from the 21st century into a time-period where the concept of race did not exist. With these observations, it is safe to note that Martin Luther "was neither the founder, nor the sole example of it in his day and generation" (175). Luther was not a sore thumb or exceptional figure in expressing strong language against the Jews of his time. But his practice

was a polemic that was occurring before he was alive, and Luther was not a pioneer of expressing these polemic words either. This brings Luther's comments against the Jews in better and hopefully in its proper context.

Again, it is important to see, "It runs the risk of seeing Luther as an exceptional figure, in terms of both writing and influence, and it fails to see that the categories with which Luther thinks about the issue (religious) are not those with which, say, Hitler thought about the issue (racial)" (175). The categories of Luther, Hitler, and the 21st century's days are completely different. And, "Only once the conventions of the day are understood can individual actions be judged aright by the standards of their day" (178). Learning the context of the historical figure's day is so important in interpreting history correctly. It truly is like studying a foreign country. There is a lot of hard work, but it is a necessary step for proper historicity.

Carl F. Trueman does a stunning job of arguing against anachronism and providing concrete examples when practicing it. Anyone can say what we want history to say if we do not lay aside our subjectivities in healthy ways. Trueman also does a good job of connecting this to one very specific historical figure which in this case is Martin Luther. Through laying aside anachronism, Trueman shows Luther's true character and portrays Luther in a more candid light.