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The Sign of Satan in American Thought

On April 14, Dr. Paul Boyer, Merle Curti Professor of History Emeritus at the University of Wisconsin, delivered the latest in the Harrison Distinguished Lecture Series. His topic was "666 and All That: Bible Prophecy and American Culture." After his lecture, his host Tony Harkin interviewed him.

Harkin: Your talk focused on the ways recent American foreign policy has been shaped by the biblical prophecy beliefs of leading politicians and decision makers. What is the place of the historian in addressing such potentially "controversial" topics, and what approach should one take in doing so?

Boyer: Yes, as the old etiquette books advised, politics and religion are two topics that should be avoided in polite society. Yet my work on contemporary Bible prophecy belief and its political implications plunges into both areas. (So, too, did my earlier work on nuclear weapons in American culture, which addressed the moral debates over the U.S. atomic bombing of Japan in 1945 and the ethical issues involved in U.S. nuclear policies during the Cold War era.) In my work on these sensitive topics I have tried to avoid passing judgment or expressing opinions on matters of either religious belief or political ideologies. I have also tried to separate my personal views on these issues from my role as a historian. (Such a separation is never entirely possible, especially on "hot button" issues like these, but it is a goal that I think historians should strive for.) What I have tried to do in writing and lecturing on these controversial and potentially divisive issues is to present as clearly and fairly as possible the differing belief systems and political positions at issue, and their implications, and to offer historical perspectives on topics that have urgent contemporary resonances. Thus I began my book on Bible prophecy belief in contemporary American culture (and my WKU Harrison lecture on the same topic) with a brief discussion of the origins of the apocalyptic worldview in the most ancient civilizations of Mesopotamia and its subsequent history down through the centuries—a very long running start, indeed, but I think an essential one.

Harkin: What do you think is the current state of historical understanding in the American public today, and how does it compare to its status when you began your career? What, if anything, do you think professional and public historians can do to increase appreciation of the significance of the past?

Boyer: To paraphrase Dickens, it seems like the best of times and the worst of times so far as public interest in history is concerned. On the one hand, it is booming. Biographies of the Founding Fathers, Lincoln, Truman, etc. have become best-sellers, as have books on perennially popular topics like Salem Witchcraft, the Lewis and Clark Expedition, the Civil War, World War II, etc. The History Channel and "History Detectives" on PBS attract
many TV viewers, as do specials such as the John Adams mini-series based on David McCullough’s biography. Historical re-enactors, including Civil War buffs and French Voyageurs in my own Wisconsin, gather in great numbers.

On the other hand, while nostalgic and antiquarian interest in the past is thriving, the level of knowledge or interest in the less “sexy” aspects of our history—the great social, economic, and demographic changes that lie beneath the surface froth of specific events or dramatic moments, seems far lower. The level of historical awareness that actually shapes our public discourse seems quite superficial and selective. The battles over the Second Amendment, the debates over whether the Founders envisioned the U.S. as a “Christian nation,” and the question of how the Constitution should be understood on such issues as the power of the states versus federal authority, etc. often involve highly politicized and polemical appeals to “history.” So while “history” as popular entertainment is booming, the level of serious engagement with history at a deeper level, or as a way of illuminating contemporary public discourse, seems fairly low.

Still, American history textbooks today are far more comprehensive than they were forty or fifty years ago. In those days, the textbooks still mainly focused on military, diplomacy, and political history, with an overwhelming emphasis on a narrow sliver of the population (elite white males). The scope of today’s textbooks is incomparably more inclusive. Bringing the new historical perspectives and the results of recent historical research on formerly neglected topics to a broader public in an engaging, accessible way remains the great challenge. Historical museums and sites such as the immigration museum on New York’s Lower East Side, the Ellis Island site, and the Lowell National Historical Park in Massachusetts have a crucial role to play here. Public historians who work at such venues are an increasingly important part of the profession.

Harkins: You are considered a “public intellectual,” appearing regularly on television, radio, and film documentaries and writing editorials. What is the importance of the “public intellectual” and what, if any, are the pitfalls to avoid?

Boyer: I can’t really claim to be a “public intellectual,” at least in comparison to other scholars who regularly comment on public issues (e.g., the economist Paul Krugman or the presidential historians Michael Beschloss or Robert Dallek), not to mention such past figures as the economist John Kenneth Galbraith, the historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr., or the anthropologist Margaret Mead. Even my modest media exposure over the years has never been something I consciously sought. But some of the topics I’ve worked on—obscenity, censorship, and the First Amendment; Salem witchcraft; American thought and culture in the Nuclear Era; the public-policy implications of Bible prophecy belief—have involved matters of considerable public interest. So I have received quite a few media calls over the years and written articles and Op Ed pieces for newspapers and periodicals. I hope I’ve brought some historical perspectives to a broader public, but I have

Pardon Us For Bragging a Bit

We are always proud of the accomplishments of our History graduates—and especially if they not only studied with us but also worked in our office. At the December commencement ceremonies, student office assistant Rachealle Sanford won the Ogden Foundation Scholarship Award for academic achievement and civic engagement, the best of the brightest. Shown here at graduation with History professor Jack Thacker (as the faculty’s longest serving professor he is Western’s mace bearer), she received both a commemorative plaque and one thousand dollars. A native of Franklin, Rachealle was a History-Antropology double major; she spent a semester studying in England; and she is now in Washington training for a career with the Department of Justice.
History Wins Again

Over the years, History has won many Potter College faculty awards; and this year we won two of them. Glen LaFantasie, our Civil War historian, was research scholar of the year; and Eric Reed was teacher of the year.

Juan Romero is our Professor of Middle Eastern Studies. He brings a rich background to his position at WKU. Born in North Africa of Spanish parents, he has lived and studied in Sweden, India, Taiwan, and Japan; and he has just completed his Ph.D. at the University of Texas. The American Academic Research Institute of Iraq judged his doctoral dissertation the best done on that country during the academic year 2009.

Jennifer Walton-Hanley is our historian at the Glasgow campus. She is a native of Ontario, Canada and completed her Ph.D. at the University of Kentucky this year with a dissertation on the American Colonization Society. By necessity the most versatile of our teachers, in baseball terms our utility outfielder, she teaches all the survey courses plus courses on American Women, Native Americans, African Americans, Civil War, and many, many more.

Tammy Van Dyken is our specialist in History and Social Studies Education. She earned her Ph.D. from Notre Dame in 2008, where her dissertation was "Singing the Gospel: Evangelical Hymnody, Popular Religion, and American Culture." She has taught in high school and has recently had a post-doctoral teaching position at Seattle Pacific University. At WKU she will teach courses in American Religion, serve as adviser to History/Education majors, and design summer courses and institutes for high school history teachers.

The risk is that such media exposure and the superficial ego gratification it brings can become a kind of addiction. Also there is a cumulative effect, so that the more one appears in the media, the greater the number of calls or emails from reporters, TV show producers, etc. Sometimes these calls involve matters that are actually quite remote from anything I’ve studied in depth, but the temptation is to respond anyway. Around the time of the Branch Davidian tragedy in Waco, when I received many such calls, I wrote an Op Ed essay for the Chronicle of Higher Education called “Confessions of a ‘Cult Expert’” discussing some of these very problems. The Chronicle later published a couple of letters making the obvious point that I could always adopt Nancy Reagan’s advice and “Just Say No.” So I’ve become more selective in evaluating media requests, declining those where I have little to contribute. Recently, for example, I declined a History Channel invitation to participate on a program on Nostradamus, on the grounds that (a) I know very little about Nostradamus, and (b) the planned program sounded sensationalistic and exploitive, rather than a serious treatment of the topic.
Pronouncements from the Top of the Tree

Greetings Fellow Historians:

As the 2009/2010 academic year draws to a close, the History Department and our alumni can take satisfaction in a successful year. Our number of majors continues to grow and interest in History has never been higher.

This past year the Department sponsored several panel discussions that were well attended by WKU students. On October 16, 2009 – the 150th anniversary of John Brown’s Raid on Harper’s Ferry – members of the History faculty explored the significance of Brown’s Raid in contributing to the outbreak of the Civil War. The lively discussion that followed the presentation proved that Brown continues to be a contentious figure in our nation’s past. In the spring semester, faculty discussed the long and varied career of King George III and that monarch’s impact upon both British and American history.

As part of our educational mission, the Department has decided to take a more active role in supporting the teaching of History in our K-12 system. Our new position in History/Education will allow us to work closely with area teachers to provide our students (and future citizens) with a much needed historical perspective. As the educator Neil Postman has pointed out, “History is the single most important idea for our youth to take with them into the future.”

As always, the department appreciates and relies upon the generosity of our alumni. Your support makes it possible for us to continue to play a central role in the academic mission of WKU and Potter College. Hope to see you in Cherry Hall!

Robert Dietle