The Importance of Doing History for Effective Ministry in the Twenty-first Century

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Seeing where we are going by examining where we have been is not a profound concept. Indeed, it is one we live by tacitly every day. The act of remembering, whether something that transpired in our lives long ago or in the last moment, is such a habit that we often do it unreflectively. Yet the habit of remembering is what "doing history"[1] is all about and is integral to the historian's calling. Remembering is embedded in the very drama of history, and this act of remembering can greatly impact our attitudes to the present and the future.

Memory and Ministry

Anglican historian Frederica Harris Thompsett writes, "With the clarity of historical perspective, we can also temper the arrogance of our present-mindedness, shedding new light on problems we had thought were ours alone. Looking backward widens our vision, displaying the achievements, struggles, failures, and wisdom of other ages."[2]

The historian's vocation is to remember and to bring the treasures of the past into the present to better understand potential futures. As Thompsett writes, "Historical knowledge can free us to face the future with fresh perspectives and renewed hope."[3] For the pastor, communicat-

1. The phrase "doing history" speaks of the calling to not only remember and record but also to allow that process to inform the present and perhaps even the future.

2. Fredrica Harris Thompsett, *Living with History* (Cambridge: Cowley Publication, 1999), 2.

3. Ibid., 6.

ing "fresh perspectives" and giving "renewed hope" for the future through remembering the past is also important. Pastors who are not concerned with the histories of their flock, not cognizant of the particulars of their individual or family stories, will quickly find their ministry severely limited. People expect a pastor to care, to remember, to let their ministry be shaped by that remembering in a specific context. Why is it, then, that the calling of academic historians and the calling of pastors often run on parallel tracks, perhaps never intersecting? Fostering the awareness and study of history in our churches—not only for those called to be professional historians but for every pastor—is something that warrants greater consideration. Of course, not all in the ministry are called to be trained in the exacting methods of historians, but all are called to learn to remember more effectively.

There is a broader context as well, and that is global. The world continues to change by the day, bringing people from many nations to other nations not their own. Ministry in churches is increasingly cross-cultural, with people having stories and backgrounds very different than our own. What we may have learned in school about history, even the history of our own nations, is now more and more inadequate in the twenty-first century world. The stories are expanding, becoming more complete. But many pastors simply do not know the histories of the people they serve. There is an acute need for vocational historians to come alongside pastors to help form learning communities that can bring greater understanding. Not every pastor needs to be a historian of global Christianity, but all should know who they can call on for help in understanding our increasingly changing context. That person may already be in their congregation or place of learning, simply waiting to be called on to serve in a local church or school. Or they may be nearby in another place of service and can be brought in to give classes or personal tutoring.

A person who exemplifies this service from the academy to churches is Mark Noll, longtime educator at Wheaton College and more recently at the University of Notre Dame. An esteemed church historian, Noll has been on a journey of broadening, which he describes in his book *From Every Tribe and Nation*:

> Consequently, it was necessary to push back against the instinct to treat my own Christianity as simply normative Christianity. Yet once coming to realize that the Christianity I embraced was also a local cultural expression made it

> easier, at least conceptually, to appreciate the development of Christianity in shapes very different than my own.[4]

Appreciating the broad and diverse history of this global story can change how we look at our lives and our nations. In my own journey, I have seen how the calling of a historian and the calling of a full-time Christian worker can go hand in hand. I have been a missionary in Asia for the past thirty-seven years, having grown up in the Evangelical Covenant Church and still deeply connected to that denomination. My involvement among Muslims in South Asia for most of those years increasingly led me to look at models of ministry from the past. More recently it led me to complete a PhD in the history of Christian-Muslim relations while continuing to be involved in field work in Asia.

In this way, historical research has become a vital part of my ongoing ministry in Asia, and, while not always easy to reconcile the two callings of historian and missionary, my study of history has brought increased depth to my ministry. It can do the same for pastors, teachers, and Christian laypeople, whether or not one is led to do a higher degree in history. A critical factor is the desire to learn the stories of the past and the tools needed to find and engage those stories relevant to a particular ministry context. Another critical factor is the need to ask questions of history, whether the media being asked is a book or the living history represented by a person in a church or school.

In December 2018 I spent three weeks in Rwanda, a nation that just twenty-six years ago was convulsed in a horrible genocide, with more than 800,000 of its citizens murdered. As part of a team from our mission leading a leadership training seminar, I was deeply drawn to this nation and its people. While there, I visited a 101-year-old genocide survivor, who had twice been left for dead in a pile of bodies during the horrors of 1994. As we spent time in his home listening to his stories, I was impacted again by the importance of "living history" as personified by this man. Sadly, there are few opportunities for his story to be shared with a younger generation and in the churches so prevalent in that nation. But, thankfully, there are several excellent museums and memorials of the genocide in Kigali and the countryside, fostering the memory of

4. Mark Noll, *From Every Tribe and Nation: A Historian's Discovery of the Global Christian Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014), 166.

what happened and presenting the challenge to prevent it from being repeated.

Traveling much further back in time, an example of a little-known encounter from the history of Christianity comes from thirteenth-century Asia. This brief but important encounter of an Asian church leader and the king of England in September 1287 in the Gascony region of France brings out issues of liturgical practice and power dynamics between East and West.[5] Moreover, it offers a poignant glimpse of two very different perspectives of the "other."[6] In our own twenty-first century context, accelerated global migration makes this example of hospitality to the stranger or the "other" increasingly important.

In the following section I explore the dynamics of this thirteenth-century encounter between two Christian leaders, particularly the celebration of the Eucharist meal between them. We will see that in the giving of communion by the Eastern leader to the Western, or from Asian to European, two different yet interconnected kinds of discourse or relational dynamic were taking place. The first discourse was at the level of the symbolic image of the "other"—in this case the Asian prelate, Rabban Sauma, engaging in an act representing the power of a sacrament of the church toward the king of England, representing secular power. The second kind of discourse centered in the actual roles, identities, and intentions of each, with Rabban Sauma having come to Europe with a primarily diplomatic agenda. Both kinds of discourse are exemplary of the possibilities for East-West power dynamics to be upended and indeed reversed by seeing the "strange and unfamiliar" with new eyes and meaning. This certainly is an important way that a story from the past can speak to situations we face in ministry today.

There are many stories like this from Asian history, or the one above from contemporary Africa, to be discovered from all over the world, stories that can enhance a ministry of pastoring in cross-cultural contexts.

5. For many in the modern church, whether East or West, even the idea of there being an important Asian church leader in the thirteenth century may be a new and surprising thought.

6. The "other" refers to those who are different, whether religiously, ethnically, or politically. It was not of course used in the same way in the thirteenth century but is used here intentionally to relate to contemporary contexts.

Encountering the Other: A Thirteenth-Century East-West Christian Exchange

Historical Context. Since the emergence of Genghis Khan in Mongolia in the early years of the thirteenth century, the Mongolian Empire had spread across parts of China, Central Asia, and Russia, as well as briefly into Central Europe. In 1258 Genghis's grandson, Hulega, sacked Baghdad, ending Abbasid Muslim dominance. A potential alliance between the Mongols and European Christendom against the Muslim world was invoked more frequently, yet with more potentiality than reality. Hopes for a common victory against the Muslims were dashed by the defeat of a joint Mongol-European force by Egyptian Mamluk armies in 1260 at Ain Jalut near Nazareth. Over the next three decades, however, the hope for a continued alliance and final victory persisted.

By 1278 the desired Mongol-European Christian alliance was a fading hope, but it was important enough that ilkhan Arghun (literally subordinate Khan, one of four) sent a Mongolian Turk (possibly an Ongut) Church of the East priest named Rabban Sauma to Europe, with Kublai Khan's consent.[7] The purpose of the journey was to meet with religious and secular leaders to further explore whether the alliance could still be a reality. His trip to Europe was not his first journey, as he had traveled extensively in Asia nine years before in 1278 with Rabban Markus, a Uighur who became the patriarch of the entire Church of the East in 1281 and was renamed Mar Yaballah III. That journey had lasted more than two years and included visits to Baghdad, Arbela, Nineveh (Mosul), and Church of the East monasteries in Iraq after taking the southern branch of the Silk Road across China.[8]

The second primary party in this East-West encounter was Edward I (1239–1307), king of England. Known as the "Hammer of the Scots" for his brutality in suppressing rebellions in the north and "Longshanks" for his tall height, Edward joined the Ninth Crusade in 1268, arriving in 1271 in Acre after a series of delays.[9] Edward's forces joined the Mongols

7. "Rabban" means priest or prelate in Syriac.

8. The two monks' journey is described in a Syriac document from the thirteenth century titled *History of the Life and Travels of Rabban Sawma, Envoy of the Mongol Khan to the Kings of Europe, and Markos, Patriarch of the Nestorian Church in Asia*. It was translated into English by E.A.W. Budge in 1928 with the title *The Monks of Kublai Khan* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1928).

9. This is the same English king who defeated and brutally executed William Wallace, as depicted in the movie *Braveheart*.

under ilkhan Abaqa to attack Aleppo, blunting an offensive of Muslim armies led by Baibars, who had defeated the previous Mongol-European alliance in 1262. Edward was nearly killed by a Muslim assassin in June 1272. He returned to Europe to news of his father's death and an unstable England and was officially crowned king August 1274. His Gascony meeting with Rabban Sauma would take place thirteen years later. As historian Marc Morris writes, "The rise of the Mongols had been, without question, the single most astonishing event of Edward's age; it still remains one of the most remarkable occurrences in the whole of human history."[10] Edward would spend the rest of his life with the backdrop of potential alliances with the Mongols against the Muslims; his interest in retaking the holy places of the Middle East was seemingly unflagging.

A Eucharistic Encounter. The Asian journeys of Rabban Sauma and Rabban Markos and the later European trip of Rabban Sauma are recounted in the Syriac *History*, "one of the most important Syriac works known to us, for it contains a mass of historical information which is found nowhere else,"[11] according to its translator E.A.W. Budge. After Rabban Sauma's visit to Paris in 1287 and his favorable reception there by King Philip IV, the monk-diplomat took a twenty-day journey from Paris to the region of Gascony, to a city that might have been modern Bordeaux. According to the *History*, the people of the city came out to meet the delegation from the East, wondering who they were. Rabban Sauma and his companions replied, "We are ambassadors, and we have come from beyond the Eastern seas, and we are envoys of the King, and of the Patriarch, and the King of the Mongols."[12]

The local people then informed Edward I of Rabban Sauma's arrival, and a letter of authorization from ilkhan Arghun (called a Pukdana) was presented along with gifts. The king "rejoiced greatly, and he was especially glad when Rabban Sauma talked about the matter of Jerusalem." Edward responded, "We the kings of these cities bear upon our bodies the sign of the Cross, and we have no subject of thought except this matter. And my mind is relieved on the subject about which I have been thinking,

10. Marc Morris, *A Great and Terrible King: Edward I and the Forging of Britain* (London: Windmill Books, 2008), 97.

11. Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan*, 8. Budge credits Chabot as the first scholar to make the history of these two monks' journeys more widely accessible in Europe, after its first copying in 1887 in Urmiyah (modern Iran).

12. Ibid., 8.

when I hear that King Arghun thinketh as I think."[13] The anonymous chronicler recounts that then "the King commanded Rabban Sauma to celebrate the Eucharist, and he performed the Glorious Mysteries; and the King partook of the Sacrament, and made a great feast that day."[14]

The narration of this encounter ends with Rabban Sauma asking Edward to "show us whatever churches and shrines there are in this country," so that the delegation can bring descriptions of them to the "Children of the East." King Edward sends the Asian visitors home via Rome with gifts, money to cover the expenses of their journey, and a message to the Mongol ruler and his subjects that "there is nothing more wonderful" than that there are not two different confessions of faith but only one that "confesseth Jesus Christ; and all the Christians confess it."[15]

It must be recognized that this account was written by a chronicler of the East, perhaps emphasizing the favorable reception of Rabban Sauma's group by the king of England for his own purposes and audience. The reception included both King Edward receiving communion at Rabban Sauma's hands as well as a confession that the Nestorian version of the faith was "one" with Edward's own. This would have most likely brought a greater sense of legitimacy and sense of equal standing to those in the East who would read the document. It may have also been thought to increase the possibilities of King Edward and his French counterpart allying with the Mongol Empire against the Mamluks, the central purpose of the envoy's journey to Europe.

But even this possibility of Eastern bias in the *History*'s narration of the account does not negate the very real difference of perspectives involved. From the writer's perspective and Rabban Sauma's, King Edward was the "other," a leader of European Christendom with whom the Mongolian Christian was negotiating for specific help against a common enemy. From this perspective, the administration of the Eucharist by an Eastern Christian was an act of legitimization of that faith and mission as not lesser than the European "other." It is perhaps noteworthy that there is no extant account of the encounter from Edward's perspective.[16] If such

13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Though biographers do mention the meeting if not the communion celebration, e.g., Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 211.

an account were available, would it corroborate the king's receiving communion from the Eastern prelate, thereby confirming an equality? Or would it be limited to the king's giving gifts to the delegation, confirming an expected protocol?

Discourses of the "Other." Two very different perspectives are involved in this encounter, each part perhaps seeing their counterpart as the "other." Each was not completely seen as "strange and unfamiliar," as Rabban Sauma had been on a journey west nine years before with Markos. King Edward, while not having been as far east as China, had been in the western end of Asia only thirteen years prior. Each individual brought his unique perspective to this meeting in France, and these contributed to two possible kinds of discourse.

At the symbolic level, the celebration of the Eucharist from the hands of Rabban Sauma to King Edward represents a reversal of power from West to East. In some ways, this was arguably a reality in the geopolitics of this period, as the strength of the Mongol Empire, though beginning to wane, was still cumulatively stronger than the kingdoms of Europe taken together. The strength and reach of the Mongol ruler Arghun, and above him Kublai Khan, were evidenced in this Church of the East priest-diplomat being sent to the kings and religious leaders of Europe. It was realized symbolically in this giving of the sacrament. Was King Edward's receiving of communion at Rabban Sauma's hands a symbolic acknowledgment and acceptance of Arghun's desire for an alliance? Another potential symbolic representation of these power dynamics was theological. As quoted above, the Syriac historian describes King Edward affirming that there are not "different confessions of the faith, but only one that confesseth Jesus Christ, and all the Christians confess it." If Edward really did say these words, his act of receiving the Eucharist from a Nestorian priest would have symbolically and decisively confirmed his words.

For some, the idea that the ancient Church of the East was a heretical version of Christianity, often termed "Nestorian" in the West, had been confirmed by visits to the Mongol court by Europeans such as John of Plano Carpini in 1245–1247 and William of Rubruck to Karakorum in 1254 among others. Their tales and descriptions of Asian Christianity, at times lurid and often strange to European ears, echoed a fascination in the thirteenth century with the question of whether a great and powerful Christian ruler named Prester John lived in Asia, perhaps in the Mongol

Empire itself.[17] This idea was encouraged by Marco Polo's accounts of his own journeys in 1275 to the Mongol court as well as other parts of Asia. Christopher Dawson, referring to encounters like that of Rabban Sauma, writes, "In the first place it shows that the ancient theological antagonisms which had divided Eastern and Western Christendom had now become half-forgotten."[18] But does an English king receiving communion from a supposedly heretical Asian Christian mean these divisions were gone? This is unlikely, as the *History* recounts that just weeks before Rabban Sauma had been questioned intensely by the religious leaders in Rome regarding his faith.

In the account, after answering a series of detailed questions on Nestorian Christology, Rabban Sauma states clearly the objectives of his journey: "I have come from remote countries neither to discuss, nor to instruct men in matters of the Faith, but I came that I might receive a blessing from Mar Papa (the Pope), and from the shrines of the saints and to make known the words of King Arghun and the Catholicus."[19] There were still many questions in the minds of European Christians, then, about the version of the faith practiced to the farther East. Travelers' descriptions only a generation before could only have served to reenergize a sense that Nestorian Christianity was not only "other" and "strange" but even outside the True Faith.

A second possible level of discourse lies in the actual roles and identities of each participant in this encounter and what intentions and goals arose from those roles. Edward I was in the position of power in the encounter, hosting Rabban Sauma and his delegation as well as issuing a "command" for Rabban to serve him communion. His role as king gave him secular dominance over his counterpart, but Edward was also a diplomat by experience, having learned at least some negotiating skills both in Europe, in preparation for the Ninth Crusade, as well as in the last Crusader stronghold of Acre in Western Asia. What intentions or goals did the English ruler bring to this meeting in Gascony? We do not

17. The legend of Prester John persisted for centuries. It was never resolved whether it referred to a Christian ruler in Asia, or perhaps East Africa, or was simply a fantastical account perpetuated by travelers like Polo.

18. Christopher Dawson, *Mission to Asia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980), xxix.

19. Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan*, 63.

know, but certainly some kind of alliance with the Mongol Empire was not contrary to his long-term interests.

For Rabban Sauma, the agenda was much clearer due to his being sent as an envoy by Arghun. The goal of his journey was to achieve some kind of agreement from the European powers, both secular and religious, to join forces again and wage war on the Mamluks especially. The stunning defeat to this power perhaps still rankled in both East and West. Twenty-five years later, the collective energy for revenge was still seemingly present for Arghun and the Mongols and presumably for European Christendom as well.

Rabban Sauma had a variety of roles and experiences that he deployed in his European journey. Colleen Ho of the University of Maryland argues that he embodied eight different roles or identities: monk, teacher, pilgrim, traveler, Nestorian Christian, Ongut, diplomat, and subject of the Mongol Empire.[20] Though Ho's focus here is Rabban Sauma's earlier trip with Rabban Markus, she suggests the primary identity he employed in his 1287 journey was as a "humble Christian pilgrim," perhaps combining this with the role of diplomat to achieve his purposes. Could this have been to disarm the king of England and achieve an alliance? A few weeks before the Gascony encounter, Rabban Sauma had received communion from the pope in Rome. Did he expect to receive it again in Bordeaux but from an English religious leader? Did it surprise him when the king commanded him to serve the Eucharist instead? We do not know the answers to these questions, of course, but they are interesting to ponder nonetheless.

What were the outcomes of this meeting in 1287? The Mongol ruler seems to have been happy with Rabban Sauma's journey and efforts, as he appointed him personal chaplain upon his return to the capital and built him a chapel not far from the royal court. In an interesting letter from 1288, the pope reminds ilkhan Arghun that he had promised to receive baptism at Jerusalem the following year when the proposed Mongol-European alliance won the city back from the Muslims.[21] In 1289, Arghun wrote again to the Western leaders, proposing a joint

20. Colleen Ho, "Rabban Sauma: A Medieval Eurasian Traveler and Diplomat of Many Identities," unpublished paper given at the 2016 conference at University of California, Santa Barbara, "Shape Shifters in History."

21. Dawson, Mission to Asia, xxx.

campaign in Palestine for 1291. In this letter, written two years after Rabban Sauma's European journey, the Mongol ruler writes, "By the power of the Eternal God under the auspices of the Supreme Khan, this is our word: King of France! By the envoy Mar Rabban Sauma you have announced 'when the troops of ilkhan open the campaign against Egypt, then we will set forth to join him.'"[22]

But these great intentions for a grand alliance would never materialize. In the end, offers from Arghun met with little to no response. Western powers had become embroiled in Sicily, in a dispute between the pope and Charles of Anjou. Interestingly, the only European leader to take any interest in the Mongol alliance in these final years of the century was Edward I, who in 1289, just two years after his meeting with Rabban Sauma, "took the cross" and continued to attempt to unite Western Christendom for another crusade.[23] But it was all too late, as the last Crusader stronghold at Acre fell to the Egyptians May 18, 1291. By this time the Mongol ruler was dead. His son Oljaitu had assumed rule and would convert to Islam within a few years. The great Khan himself, Kublai, died in 1294, the same year as Rabban Sauma, effectively bringing to an end a period of Mongol dominance descending from Genghis Khan. According to Samuel Moffett, Arghun's death in 1291 was "the last high plateau in the history of the Nestorians in Asia."[24] Rabban Sauma's life spanned much of that thirteenth century, a life lived within the influence of the Mongol Empire to which he belonged.

Learning from History: Encountering the "Other" Today

This thirteenth-century encounter shows us that power struggles between East and West are not new. In fact, learning that the church in Asia was extremely widespread until the late thirteenth century gives us new appreciation for the diversity of the body of Christ throughout history, a diversity too often overlooked. Countless other stories could be unearthed, shedding new light on how the church has negotiated power between different parts of the world. There are records of many encounters in history between diplomats of different empires meeting to negotiate alliances. Less common is such an encounter between a

22. Ibid.

23. See Morris, *A Great and Terrible King*, 262–65.

24. Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia: Beginnings to 1500, Vol. 1* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998), 435.

sovereign king and a religious envoy, particularly across the frontiers of East and West. Even more unusual is one centered on the celebration of a sacrament of the church in the Eucharist meal.

This little-known encounter from the thirteenth century, so filled with issues of power dynamics and ministry across contexts, is an example of how history can be learned and reflected on for our contemporary contexts and future engagement. Resources from the past provide a wealth of materials that aid our engagement not only with the "other" around us but also with those who are like us in ethnic or social background. Helping those most like us to understand those who are different is a crucial need in ministry today. Historical lessons, when used with sensitivity and clear evidence, can help build new bridges of engagement in our churches.

As we seek to bring the historical calling alongside the pastoral calling, several important encouragements can be adapted from Thompsett's book *Living with History*. Thompsett offers these as tools for "discussing controversial matters"[25] related to history in her own Anglican tradition, for example the role of the Anglican Church during the United States Civil War and the silence of Anglican slaveholders. I am broadening these points as more general encouragements as we work to integrate history and effective pastoral ministry.

First, historians and pastors need to seek similar ground through their distinct callings. It is important that we do not leave historians and their professional labors in separate enclaves with no connection to local church ministry. We need to identify common ministry challenges and find stories that bring history to bear in providing hope, warning, and alternative possibilities for the future. In my example above, I explored various power dynamics that open (perhaps surprising) common ground for discussing power shifts happening in our world today, sometimes right in our churches or denominations.

Second, we need to initiate and continue conversations across diverse ministry settings. History is not boring, not in the least, but rather presents exciting opportunities for valuable conversations and learning opportunities. The case of Edward I asking to receive communion from an Asian Christian leader in the late thirteenth century is potentially paradigm changing. These stories can lead to fruitful conversations across very different ethnic and cultural divides.

25. Thompsett, *Living with History*, 173.

As a third encouragement, we need to allow our understanding to broaden. As seen in Mark Noll's journey, the commitment to grow beyond his cultural context broadened his scholarship to a global Christian story. Our changing world today—not to mention the often-changing demographics in local churches and places of learning—demand this commitment to continually broaden our perspectives. Learning the stories of history helps in a broadening of outlook and attitude and can lead to practical changes in how we see various "others."

Fourth, we should recognize that even within the historical evidence an event can be viewed from different perspectives. As we engage with different callings and perspectives, at times we will come to different conclusions, even when looking at the same evidence. While this can be frustrating, it is very common in our diverse world, and we must cultivate patience. We do need well-researched evidence as we study history, but we must always recognize that there are different interpretations of that evidence.

Fifth, we need to allow our imaginations to be engaged by alternate futures. As Thompsett has rightly stated, "part of thinking through a difficult issue is imagining other possibilities for the future."[26] Doing history allows us to imagine and embrace different ways things can happen in the future, based in a past that may have been unknown to us before. The surprising encounter between the two leaders described above demonstrates that power dynamics in the thirteenth century were not always what we might have imagined. Recognizing other pasts opens space to imagine other futures as well.

Finally, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, we need to continually ask questions. Doing history, whether as a professional calling or as an act of remembering to which all of us are called, is the art of asking questions. This is arguably the heart of historical research, asking questions of the material that leads to further questions. But isn't that also a key to effective ministry?

Doing history as an act of remembering can and should go side by side with our pastoral ministries. In our changing contemporary contexts in the United States and globally, we need to bring these ministries together more than ever before.

26. Ibid., 176.