Who Makes History? American Religious Historians and the Problem of Historical Agency

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I am honored to be part of this panel at the American Society of Church History celebrating Grant Wacker’s contributions to the writing of American religious history. I admire Wacker’s scholarship for many reasons: he is not only a beautiful writer who knows how to bring the past to life, but he is also a remarkable researcher who has unearthed a treasure trove of source material about the past. All of his work is characterized by a deep empathy for the people that he studies, whether religious leaders like Augustus Strong and Billy Graham, or the ordinary men and women who joined the Pentecostal movement in the early twentieth century. Although Wacker is a historian rather than a philosopher, his research is animated by questions that go far beyond the typical ones about how or why historical events occurred. This is what I most admire about him: his willingness to grapple with profound questions about individual agency, the meaning of religious experience, and ultimately the nature of the human condition.

But it seems to me that this kind of history writing, especially in its attention to individual agency, is under attack today on two different fronts. On one side, poststructuralists question the reality of human freedom, while on the other, advocates of “deep history” and “big history” argue that historians should focus more on long-term historical processes than individual stories or particular historical events.
Since the 1960s, American historians have been preoccupied with questions about whose stories are worth recovering. Whose lives should we remember, and why? Or to phrase the question differently, who makes history?

If we could travel back in time to the first meeting of the American Society of Church History in 1888, most of the historians there probably would have been puzzled by this question. It would have seemed obvious to them who made history: history was made by great men who had changed the world through the power of their ideas. In 1888, when Daniel Dorchester published *Christianity in the United States: From the First Settlement Down to the Present Time*, he focused on the stories of white, male, Protestant leaders like George Whitefield and Charles Finney. Dorchester discussed virtually no African-Americans, Native Americans, or women of any race in his book, and he treated religions outside of the Protestant mainstream as marginal to his narrative. Dividing American religion into three categories—Protestantism, Romanism, and Divergent Elements—he lumped together Jews, Swedenborgians, Millerites, Spiritualists, Mormons and Shakers as curiosities who had little effect on the development of American religion.¹

The rise of social and cultural history during the 1960s and 1970s had a dramatic effect on the American historical profession. In the forty years since then, American historians have challenged earlier assumptions about whose stories are important, and they have published thousands of articles and books exploring the lives of those who were once ignored, whether immigrants, slaves, or women. Rather than assuming that historical change comes from the top down, they have shown that it is also comes from the bottom up. The result is that historians have dramatically broadened their cast of

characters. In a strange reversal, the groups that Daniel Dorchester once described as “divergent”—including Catholics, Mormons, African-Americans, and Pentecostals—have moved to the center of the field. Today there are far more books and articles published about Pentecostals than about Presbyterians. Instead of assuming that the largest religious groups have always been the most influential, historians have gained a deeper appreciation of the way that small, radical groups like the Spiritualists served as agents of religious change.

The concept of agency was a central concern for historians writing in the 1970s and 1980s, and it remains one of the most important foundational questions for historians writing today. As scholars have tried to integrate new characters into their books, they have been determined to show that groups that were previously viewed as marginal—whether African-Americans or women—should be understood as important historical actors who made things happen. Since the 1970s many historians have written narratives celebrating the agency of ordinary people in making history. These books have often been emancipatory in tone: they tell the stories of people who created change despite the power arrayed against them.

This kind of history remains the dominant model in the field today. Most graduate students chose to write small, focused dissertations that recover the voices of those who were marginalized by earlier generations of historians. On the positive side, the result has been a wealth of new knowledge about the rich diversity of American religion and a new appreciation for the way that individual men and women have shaped the past.
Human Agency and Big History

But the “new history” has not been without problems, and the assumptions behind it have been challenged on two fronts. First, many historians have been influenced by postmodern theorists like Michel Foucault and Pierre Bourdieu, who have exposed the fragility of individual agency by emphasizing the networks or fields of power in which all humans are imbricated. Foucault has been particularly influential among historians because of his sophisticated understanding of power, which he views as productive as well as repressive. Rejecting older notions of power as being centered in institutions or government regimes or involving the control of one class over another, Foucault defines it as discourse: the language and knowledge that exist all around us in the everyday world, the habits and routines that determine our understanding of what is “right” and “natural.” Because power comes from “innumerable points,” its tentacles are invisible and inescapable, enveloping us without our conscious knowledge. Without being openly threatened or coerced, we internalize dominant discourses as the “truth.”

Foucault’s ideas have helped historians to see the layers of power lying under elements of life that have been portrayed as standing outside of history, such as sexuality, gender, and race. He clearly intended his work to be emancipatory. But his ideas have also made it difficult to imagine men and women as self-conscious historical actors who are not imprisoned within the matrix of power relationships that define and limit them.

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Rejecting the humanist view that there is a stable, inviolable “self” that transcends history, Foucault argues that the self is the product of rules and disciplines that shape us without our conscious knowledge. There is no “selfhood,” but only “subjectivity”: the codes that define selfhood at a particular time and place. In other words, individuals do not make history as much as history makes individuals.

There is a kernel of truth in this vision of the constructed, unfree self, and it is clear that historians must find new ways to write about the relationship between individual agency and structural constraint. This is especially true because of a second and more recent challenge to the way history is written today: the attempt to expand the conventional parameters of the field. Daniel Lord Smail, for example, a historian at Harvard, is an advocate of what he calls “deep history”: he argues that we should break down the barrier between pre-history and history by beginning our narratives 40,000 years ago in the Paleolithic period. He wants historians to survey the entire history of the human species in order to encourage the public to think big about problems like climate change.³

David Christian’s “big history,” as he calls it, is even larger in scale. Christian, a historian at Australia’s Macquarie University, wants historians to teach the history of the entire universe from its origins 13.8 billion years ago, and he has identified eight “threshold moments” that should serve as the organizing points for our teaching, beginning with the Big Bang and ending with the “modern revolution.” Humans do not appear in his story until the sixth threshold, long after the birth of the stars, the

development of new chemical elements, the emergence of the earth and the solar system, and the beginnings of life on earth. Christian’s TED talk, “The History of Our World in 18 minutes” impressed Bill Gates so much that the curriculum is now online, and Gates is funding a pilot group of “big history” courses in high schools in Australia and the United States. Christian believes that the specialized way that we teach history today fails to help students understand either the complexity or the fragility of life on earth. Combining cosmology with history, he urges historians “to survey the whole history of the universe.”

Most recently, Jo Guldi and David Armitage have echoed this cry for “big history” in their book The History Manifesto, which urges historians to focus on “long term history” instead of specialized studies of particular times and places. Echoing the common complaint that the humanities are in crisis, they argue that historians should write books that are more relevant to problems like economic inequality and climate change. In their words, “Long- durée history allows us to step outside of the confines of national history to ask about the rise of long-term complexes, over many decades, centuries, or even millennia: only by scaling our inquiries over such durations can we explain and understand the genesis of contemporary global discontents.” Guldi and Armitage are sharply critical of what they call “microhistory,” an imprecise term in their book which seem to mean any history that covers a relatively short timeframe. “In 1900,” they explain, “the average number of years covered in a doctoral dissertation in history in the United States was about seventy-five years; by 1975, it was closer to thirty.”

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According to their periodization, the years from the 1970s to the present represent the nadir of the historical profession. “Microhistory was not invented to kill historical relevance,” they write, “but, as we shall see, even historians are haunted by the law of unintended consequences.” They argue that if historians want to make an impact on public and political issues, they should analyze “big data.” The future of historical research lies in digital analysis, which will make it possible to identify long-term historical processes across centuries. They are confident that big data will help to solve the problems that we face today. In other words, even though they are critical of “microhistorians,” they share the same desire to write emancipatory narratives. They argue that long-term history will give people a greater sense of their free will and their capacity to create change.

Ironically, Guldi and Armitage have been widely criticized for presenting “big data” that is inaccurate. According to Deborah Cohen and Peter Mandler, they have misrepresented the data, which on closer examination reveals that the average number of years covered in doctoral dissertations has increased rather than decreased since 1976. All historical evidence—including statistics—must be analyzed and interpreted with care.

Whatever its statistical weaknesses, The History Manifesto is a bracing read, and in some ways I am sympathetic to Guldi and Armitage’s desire to “think big.” Even though I agree with postmodern critics like Jean-Françoise Lyotard who complain that “metanarratives” are in fact always partial, I also believe that historians have a responsibility to write general, synthetic accounts that make history accessible to an

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5 Jo Guldi and David Armitage, The History Manifesto (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 37, 8, 11.
But Guldi and Armitage never acknowledge that the years that they identify as the low point of the historical profession—the 1970s to the present—are the same years that historians self-consciously tried to expand the field, creating new narratives of working-class immigrants, slaves, women, and religious groups outside of the Protestant mainstream. Guldi and Armitage attribute the narrowing of the field during the 1970s and 1980s to professionalization, but historians seem to have retreated from grand narratives for intellectual reasons as well, especially their desire to avoid privileging the stories of elite white men. Perhaps most important, historians who wanted to write about previously marginalized groups—for example, African-Americans—had to devote themselves to intensive archival research in order to recover their voices. Contrary to what Guldi and Armitage imply, many historians hoped that their work was the first step toward expanding our understanding of the past. In other words, they narrowed their timeframe in order to ask larger questions, not smaller ones.

In parts of *The History Manifesto*, Guldi and Armitage praise the “Short Past,” as they call it, for helping the public “to contextualize enormous forces like racism or nationalism as constructed developments rather than as a natural social order somehow predestined to shape human minds for eternity.” Yet in most of their book, they dismiss the history writing of the previous forty years as narrow, irrelevant, and even “sentimental.” Short-term history fueled “a movement towards empathetic stories of past individuals with whom even non-professional readers could identify; such ‘sentimentalist’ accounts risked the charge of ‘embracing the local and personal at the

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expense of engagement with larger public and political issues’ even as they often earned their authors fame and popularity within and beyond the academy.” “Microhistory,” they allege, “made the documenting of the victim under mainstream society the rule….” Since Guldi and Armitage rarely identify historians by name, it is not clear whose work they are criticizing, but my own sense of the field is that historians have been far more interested in demonstrating the agency of marginalized groups than in lamenting their “victimization.”

My concern about “big history” is similar to the concern I have about the postmodern understanding of selfhood: it threatens to eclipse individual agency in favor of highlighting the larger structures that shape us. Instead of asking “who makes history,” Guldi and Armitage want historians to ask a different question: What are the long-term processes that have shaped history? This is an important and valuable question, but if historians focus primarily or solely on analyzing big data, or if they follow the examples of David Christian by beginning their stories with the Big Bang, the result could be that individuals recede from history. In some ways this could be a useful corrective to “great men” history: a long-term perspective can help us to identify the way that human lives are interconnected and interdependent. But it will be difficult for historians to discuss more than a few great leaders if their ultimate goal is to trace large-scale changes over hundreds or thousands of years. To their credit, Guldi and Armitage recognize this problem. “We live in an age where big data seem to suggest that we are locked into our history, our path dependent on larger structures that arrived before we did,” they write. Later they also acknowledge that “questions about how to preserve subaltern voices

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through the integration of micro-archives within the digitized record of the *longue durée* form a new and vitally important frontier of scholarship.” Yet even though they hope that “big history” will give readers “a sense of destiny and free will,” the danger is that without attention to the “micro,” an analysis of long-term historical processes will have the opposite effect.⁹ Despite their desire to give individuals a sense of their ability to create change, their model of “big history” leaves little room for exploring the lives of individuals.

Looking Forward

As historians wrestle with these questions about human agency and big history, they will almost certainly look to the past for models, and when they do, they would be wise to ponder Grant Wacker’s scholarship. Among other things, Wacker’s work can help us to think about how to conceptualize agency, why we should continue to write “short-term” history, and how to approach the writing of grand narratives.

First, even though Wacker does not write about theoretical debates, his scholarship offers us a useful model for thinking about agency. In the wake of the challenge posed by scholars like Foucault and Bourdieu, it is clear that we can no longer write about individuals as if they have the power to transcend history. Too often, social and cultural historians have exaggerated individual agency because of their desire to write emancipatory narratives, but both postmodern theorists and advocates of “big history” have shown us that humans are caught up in vast webs of power or historical processes that they cannot always see. This is a theme that has been central to Wacker’s

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work. In his first book, *Augustus Strong and the Dilemma of Historical Consciousness*, he introduced us to a late 19th century religious thinker who was deeply shaped by the intellectual currents of his age. An “orthodox rationalist,” Strong was troubled by the growing consensus that all knowledge is forged in a particular historical setting—that nothing on earth stands outside of the processes of history—but he could not escape the force of his own historical moment. By showing how Strong’s choices were shaped by his own historical context, but were indeed still choices, Wacker helps us to see how Strong both made and was made by history.¹⁰

Wacker’s work has also helped us to understand that agency should be understood as relational and not simply as individual. For example, in his most recent book, *America’s Pastor: Billy Graham and the Shaping of a Nation*, Wacker resists the impulse to portray Billy Graham as a figure who towers above history, arguing instead that Graham has been so fully immersed in his age that he has been able to speak to its deepest concerns. As historians try to reconceptualize agency, this insight is crucial. Leaders do not become leaders solely by the force of their own individual genius, but only when their ideas are embraced by ordinary people. In other words, Billy Graham’s agency was dependent on the agency of the men and women who attended his revivals, read his books, and watched his television shows.¹¹


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regarded as an example of “short-term history” because of its narrow timeframe—
twenty-five years—and its limited cast of characters. But this book illustrates why
historians have sometimes chosen the short-term over the long durée. By focusing
intensely on the early years of the Pentecostal movement, Wacker is able to ask profound
questions about the meaning of religious experience in the past. Without romanticizing or
“sentimentalizing” Pentecostals or disguising their flaws, he shows us how and why they
made the decisions that they did. If we agree with “big historians” that historians should
contribute to public conversations about political, economic, religious, and social change,
then we need books like Heaven Below that allow us to see ordinary people self-
consciously trying to shape the world around them.12

Finally, Wacker’s work is not only a model of how to think small, but how to
think big. At a time when many American religious historians have abandoned grand
narratives, Wacker co-authored Religion in American Life: A Short History with Jon
Butler and Randall Balmer. This book is my favorite one-volume survey of American
religion because of its aspirations to inclusiveness. This is not Daniel Dorchester’s vision
of a Protestant mainstream surrounded by “Romanists” and “Divergent Elements.”
“Above all,” Wacker and his co-authors write in the beginning of their book, “the
narrative of religion in America is a story about people. It is the story of women—Anne
Hutchinson, Phoebe Palmer, and Dorothy Day—as well as the story of men—
Tenskwatawa, George Whitefield, Isaac Mayer Wise, and Billy Graham.”13 Although
Religion in American Life will not satisfy historians like David Christian who think that

12 Grant Wacker, Heaven Below: Early Pentecostals and American Culture (Cambridge,
13 Jon Butler, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer, Religion in American Life: A Short
History (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), xii.
our narratives should begin millions of years ago, it introduces readers to the larger forces shaping American religion as well as to the individual men and women who sought historical change.

We historians face great challenges ahead as we try to determine the best way to “do history” in our present age. But because we are aware that agency is not simply individual, but also relational, we also know that none of us write books alone. We are always in conversation with the historians who have written before us. Like many others, I have been privileged to count Grant Wacker as a fellow traveler on my journey of doing history.