

# A Rationale for WA Baptist Church History

Ross M. Woods, Nov. 2023

## Abstract

The article considers the sources of history, and compares technical history (i.e. undisputed facts) with the interpretation of sources and the development of theory, including competing theories and interpretations. It then gives five reasons for a rationale to study the history of Western Australian Baptists. These are to establish what happened, make sense of that which is historically defined, establish identity, learn from history, and understand how people see the world.

We need a rationale for the study of history of WA Baptists. History is the interpretation of the past. It was once confined to the study of written sources but now includes oral history, that is, interviews with people to elicit knowledge.

### **The sources of history**

Church history is based on various kinds of sources, but, unlike many other fields of history, WA Baptist records are all relatively simple and recent. They were written in English and the earliest sources date from the late nineteenth century. Unlike biblical history, one has no need to learn and compare other ancient languages, establish the dates of documents through ancient writing styles, or review archaeological reports.

The first kind of source is written sources from the past, so archivists have a very clear rationale for their work. One needs food in order to eat, and for the historian, archives are food. Besides normal organisational documents and publications, statistical information is sometimes helpful. For example, as a whole denomination, WA Baptists are growing even though most Baptist churches are small and dying. All the growth is in a minority of churches.

The second is reminiscences and oral interviews. Consider how much knowledge is lost when an old person dies. In some

cases, personal reminiscences are simply the best sources available.

The question of anecdotes soon arises. They have a bad reputation among researchers because they are often unreliable as evidence. In other cases, they represent “the beliefs of the person giving the anecdote.” Even if they are not true, they can be studied as local folklore that people use to maintain their organisation's culture and identity. (Woods, n.d.)

The third source is the views of other historians, especially those that are published. For example, Richard Moore wrote two general histories of Western Australian Baptists (1991, 1996). In the preface to the latter, he stated that it builds on the former but is not its replacement, because they were independently researched and are complementary. Sooner or later, it might be beneficial to compare them and see what more might be learnt.

### **What actually happened?**

Known, undisputed facts are “technical history” and are only the business of the historian if it is possible to question them and give evidence supporting a new set of facts.

When history is concerned with the facts of what actually happened, it is the task of comparing and interpreting limited sources of limited accuracy. Key documents

are often missing. Those that remain often have errors and normally reflect the writers' assumptions, role at the time, biases, culture, and purposes of writing. Oral sources have similar limitations. (Evans, 2018, p. 25.)

Consider these examples:

1. A family historian must compare various records such as birth, marriage and death certificates, emigration records, newspaper articles, photographs, school records, and perhaps family Bibles. Some of them might contain errors and omissions.
2. How should one interpret sources that are very subjective and biased, such as personal diaries and unrealistically flattering biographies? Yet they are essential when they are the only existing records.
3. Some history gets lost in myth. Was King Arthur a real person? If he was, when did he live and where was Camelot? To what extent can one examine mythology to seek the truth of past events? Some myths are more like anecdotes, giving more information about the teller's assumptions than about what actually happened.

### **Re-examining source documents**

Writers could sometimes re-examine the "facts" themselves. Sources can change; old sources might be discredited or reinterpreted, and new sources might be discovered. Source documents are seldom, if ever, complete and unbiased statements of events. For example, people deliberately manipulate stories to prevent embarrassment, usually by omitting any unsavoury and embarrassing details. In other cases, they do not disclose the real reason and give the reason that sounds good or is politically acceptable. The minutes of a business meeting might record a heated argument as "considerable discussion" or omit it altogether and note only, "The matter was deferred to the next meeting."

One cannot accept only one report as the final truth on its topic. When examining

original sources the following kinds of questions come to mind:

1. What kinds of people write history? Would history be different if different kinds of people wrote it?
2. Could previous writers have asked different questions?
3. What did they omit or de-emphasise? Why?
4. What did they emphasise? Why?
5. Could they have selected different source material for their essays?
6. Could they have taken other perspectives?
7. Did they make any mistakes?
8. Could they have interpreted the "facts" in different ways?
9. Could they have presented something very different if they had been writing for a different audience?

### **Different interpretations: the emergence of theory**

Even then, the facts of events are not always available to the historian. The historian might need to compare various sources to create a theory of what happened. For example, there were no local records and no significant archaeological remains of the kingdom of Sriwijaya. In 1918, George Cœdès pieced together other sources of information and concluded that a major kingdom called Sriwijaya had been located in Sumatra and surrounding islands, and had thrived for five centuries during the middle ages.

Competing theories emerge when different interpretations all have support in the sources. The historians' task is then to compare and evaluate them. As Westad said in his preface to a new edition of the *The Penguin History of the World*, "I am of course aware that new interpretations and new knowledge of history will be added constantly ... history it is often said is not what it used to be ...." (2014, p. xiii; see also Evans, 2018, p. 25.)

Marx's theorised that history is the struggle between oppressed workers and capitalist oppressors.

Adm. Chris Barrie found that the North Vietnamese and the Allies interpreted the Vietnam war very differently. In a discussion with a former North Vietnamese commander, he found that the North Vietnamese thought that they were fighting for a free homeland while the Allies thought that they were fighting against the spread of communism. (Barrie, 2021.)

Medieval law had its own way of interpreting events to decide guilt or innocence. “Another way of deciding was to have the two sides, accuser and accused, agree to fight one another - or have two champions fight on their behalf.... God would make sure, people thought, that the champion fighting for the side whose cause was just would win.” (Anon. N.d.)

Another kind of trial also depended heavily on interpretation. “In trial by cold water, a person would be dunked into a cistern. If they sank, they would be declared innocent, because the water had accepted them. If they floated, they would be declared guilty.” (Neal, 2019.)

The postmodern view of history arose in the 1980s and has posed some useful questions for Baptist history. It has asked, “Whose story is being told? Could the story also be told by those who have so far had no voice?” The fascination with human experience has shifted history to an emphasis on “people stories” about how people lived and the kind of people they were. These have offered genuine benefit although they have not replaced rigorous historical method.

### **History as an ongoing discussion**

The task of history cannot be an individual effort because it requires different minds. For example, a child in an orphanage and a house parent in the same orphanage might have very different stories of the orphanage, even if both were equally true. The young people in a church might see the events of the church quite differently from their parents, and select different events in support of their views. In fact, they might be concerned only with the youth group and much less interested in the wider church.

Historical study naturally multiplies itself; many research topics generate new topics. One must specify a narrow topic in order to be able to say anything worthwhile, but this in itself creates the possibility of other topics. One must also work from one set of assumptions, and often one viewpoint, and from one set of idiosyncrasies, but this creates the opportunity for others to introduce different assumptions, viewpoints, and idiosyncrasies. People make mistakes for others to correct; when anything is created, someone else can review and analyse it. When two things are created, someone else can compare them. History is a communal effort that requires different minds.

### **The rationale**

The Westralian Baptist has five reasons for a rationale to study the history of Western Australian Baptists.

What happened? The first is to establish exactly what happened, as discussed above. While Moore’s work of 1996 contains some interpretation, a very considerable proportion is the collation of factual material.

Make sense of that which is historically defined. To ask “Why is it so?” is often to ask an historical question. When something is historically defined, it is only understandable through its history. Even if it is not historically defined, the historians’ questions still apply to anything that had an origin, could change, could go out of fashion, or could disappear. It is easy to find examples of things that are historically defined:

1. The place names of Western Australian represent its history:
  - a. Some names are indigenous (Coolbellup, Gwelup, Mundaring)
  - b. Some are British (Perth, Guildford, York).
  - c. Subiaco is Italian, because Benedictine monks settled in the area and named it after the birthplace of their Order.
  - d. Several are historical people (Fremantle, Busselton).
  - e. One is a ship (Esperance).

2. European surnames are inherited and usually many centuries old.
3. Architecture, art and design are based on historical trends, and Western Australian architecture has always followed the international trends of its time. Some Perth churches were built with steep roofs, even though the original purpose of the steep roofs was that snow would fall off.
4. The Australian ethnic mix represents a history of indigenous people, colonists, and different waves of immigrants and refugees.
5. The Australian education and legal systems are based on those of England, the former colonist. The Westminster system of government is a system based on that of England, and the federal system is based on that of the USA.
6. The original English language was Breton, but it was marginalised during the Roman invasion and then replaced during invasions by Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Danes, Vikings, and Normans. The latter added French, Latin and Greek to the mix. English then absorbed words from many other cultures with which it came into contact.

*Identity ("Who are we?")* The next reason for studying Baptist history is to find and establish an identity and promote loyalty to that identity. Identity can be defined in terms of beliefs, practices, "heritage," significant leaders, and institutions.

It is not only churches that use history to establish identity. The search for identity applies to denominations, families and whole countries. Governments frequently (perhaps normally) create historical fictions to establish a national identity. For example, Europeans divided ethnic groups into "civilised" and "uncivilised", which was essential to the rationale for colonialism. Japan still does not teach the history of World War II in schools to its younger generation.

*Learn from history.* Although historians have had some difficulty with causation (cf. Evans, 2018, pp. 146f), other disciplines are more willing to draw conclusions from the

past. Almost every kind of human endeavour asks "What did we do and was it successful?" For example:

1. Did the educational strategy improve learning outcomes?
2. Did the business plan work?
3. Was the advertising campaign successful?
4. Was the event successful?
5. Did the battle plan contribute to victory?
6. Did the medication effectively treat or cure the illness?

The problem is not so much with causation itself, but with the complexities involved. For example, a set of facts can have competing interpretations. Effects can be mixed; a business plan might increase a public profile but not increase sales. Effects can have unintended consequences.

WA Baptists still have lessons to learn from their history. A review of changes and controversies could help further define the meaning of "Baptist." The study of ministry practices has much to offer. Why and how do churches grow, change or die? What are the lessons for rural churches? When churches change, what changes and what stays the same? How and why did those changes come about? Why are practices that were once considered "basic Christian obedience" now considered legalistic? What made major leaders different from other people and why were they "successful"?

*Understand how people see the world.* Post-moderns want "people stories." What was life like for ordinary people or ordinary church members? They were people like us, but somehow different. What was their worldview? For example, Western Australia was once predominantly rural, living standards were lower, life expectancy was lower, travel was difficult, acquiring education was difficult, and work was predominantly manual. What were the effects of those ways of thinking?

Western Australians now see their state as a place with an historical identity. Not so long ago, they saw their state as a frontier in a "new country" with no history of its own and strong links to Britain. In the

1960s and 1970s, the people of Perth wanted only modern buildings and let developers demolish many significant historical buildings of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras. The best of the remaining examples are now declared heritage buildings. Western Australians now accept that a race of people

lived here before Europeans, and the frontier mindset has largely gone.

### Conclusion

Historical study is more than collecting facts. Historians need to address the reasons for studying history, interpret their sources, develop views of their meaning.

### References

- Anon. N.d. "The Knight with the Lion" <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/sll/disciplines/english/lion/justice.shtml>.
- Barrie, Chris. "Conversations", ABC Radio, Thursday 18 Mar 2021, 11:00am.
- Evans, Richard J. 2018. *In Defence of History*. 2018 ed. (London: Granta).
- Moore, Richard K. 1991. *Baptists of Western Australia: The first Ninety Years (1895-1985)* (Perth, W.A.:The Baptist Historical Society of Western Australia).
- Moore, Richard K. 1996. *'All Western Australia is my parish': A Centenary history of the Baptist Denomination in Western Australia (1895-1985)*. (Perth, W.A.:The Baptist Historical Society of Western Australia.)
- Neal, Jeff. 2019. "Law & Order in Medieval England." <https://today.law.harvard.edu/law-or-order-in-medieval-england/>.
- Roberts J.M. and Westad O.A. 2014. *The Penguin History of the World*. 6th ed. (London: Penguin Books).
- Woods, R. "Ethnography", n.d., <http://worldwideuniversity.org/library/ethnography.htm>.