

Controversial Topics

Ross M. Woods, Nov. 2023

Abstract

This article considers the role of controversial topics in the study of history, based on whether a journal should include divergent views and views that might be unpopular and create animosity. The article argues that a journal should be a forum presenting a range of views, based on academic freedom and the need to tell a truthful, complete, and useful history. It also suggests principles and boundaries for the handling of topics.

The history of Western Australian Baptists contains several kinds of controversial topics. Consider the example of theological tensions, such as the debate between open and closed Baptists, and the characterisations of “Calvinist,” “liberal,” the role of women in ministry, “inerrancy,” and “neo-fundamentalist.” Another example is weak and dying churches, the members of which strongly dislike open discussion of their dilemma. Yet another example is divisiveness, when disagreements threaten to split the church or to cause large numbers of members to leave.

Controversial topics are relevant to historical study in at least two ways. First, the way they are handled is a matter of editorial policy. Which articles can be accepted and which cannot? What image do the journal’s owners want to project? What do readers want? How should a responsible historian approach issues about which others might disagree? To what extent is a journal a forum where people present and discuss divergent views?

The problem comprises at least two issues: Should the journal include divergent views that will generate discussion? Should it include views that might be unpopular and create animosity?

The need for a forum

A journal that presents stimulating fresh ideas gives readers a way to learn. It is

neither helpful nor honest if it is only a means of consolidating existing prejudices and assumptions.

The price of being in a denomination is that it has a range of views. Baptists can acknowledge that we have not always agreed on everything, even though we have more to bring us together than to divide us.

Academic freedom and freedom of conscience both allow a range of views. If the journal were to be a voice for only one view, who decides on the “one view”? When is it unethical to ban other views and put a gag on certain topics? When only one view is permitted, why even discuss it? It is propaganda rather than honest enquiry.

Some uncomfortable topics are part of telling a truthful and complete story. Their omission would create an inaccurately flattering picture. It is not completely honest to treat the past like a funeral, saying only good things about the deceased.

“Where is the story?” In other words, what will make a topic useful and worthwhile, and why would anyone read it? What is interesting about it? Any story needs a challenge to overcome or a problem to resolve. If the journal can only include completely innocuous and uncontroversial articles, it might not be saying anything at all.

The limitations of a forum

A forum needs to follow some principles and work within boundaries.

First, avoid some kinds of topic altogether. This is the simple, best option for unedifying problems from which no good outcome is foreseeable. Discussion might only exacerbate unnecessary animosity.

Second, disagreement can be polite, tactful, factual, and sensitive. The tone of what is said is particularly important. It is better to present the strengths of one's own view than to disparage those whose opinions are different.

Third, the discussion of dying churches is difficult but sometimes necessary. The problem is the pain of those people who might lose their churches; they naturally dislike discussion of their pain, especially if they perceive it to be tinged with personal criticism or blame. Discussion requires empathy.

Other churches, such as small and rural churches are sometimes discussed disparagingly as if they were unhealthy, when they might in fact be quite healthy. In particular, rural churches are different from city churches, being naturally more conservative and located in towns that are often losing population.

Fourth, what comprises a balanced view? If the journal dealt with only views from within the Baptist family of churches, does the journal give a fair presentation by containing voices for both pro and contra views?

Unfortunately, however, even balance has risk. If the journal contains both pro and contra for a view, proponents of either view might accuse the editor of bias; the journal did not endorse their particular view and included the view of the other side. Frankly, this is probably a risk worth taking.

Six, some other factors might never be rules but could be relevant considerations in particular circumstances:

- Could a topic be detrimental to anybody now living? Have all people related to the controversial topic already died?
- Is the topic politically acceptable? In what circumstances would the owner close the journal or replace the editor?
- Where is the dividing line between history and topics of current relevance? Does that mean that anything relevant to today is out of bounds? Or does it mean that it loses its historical focus and becomes a current affairs column?

In conclusion ...

A journal needs to be able to allow and discuss divergent views, and sometimes even unpopular views, but it must do so in a way that maintains standards of decorum and promotes unity and mutual respect.