

History in Focus

7. Rethinking the Liberal Protestants + A History Survey

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Daniel Story

I'm Daniel Story. This is *History in Focus*, a podcast by the *American Historical Review*. Today we'll hear from Andrew Preston on his September issue article, "The Limits of Brotherhood: Race, Religion, and World Order in American Ecumenical Protestantism." And in Part Two, Pete Burkholder and Dana Shaffer discuss the 2021 public opinion survey "History, the Past and Public Culture." Both segments, among the many things they cover, each address, in their own way, the question What is history? This is episode 7.

Historian Andrew Preston researches American foreign relations in the twentieth century, often in intersection with American religion. Perhaps his most noted work on this intersection was the 2012 book, *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith: Religion in American War and Diplomacy*, in which Preston contributed to a wider scholarly shift on America's Liberal Protestants that recast them as more than mere props for American imperialism. Ten years later, that scholarly conversation continues, and with this latest article, Preston offers a revision of sorts to that earlier shift, especially on the subject of race.

Okay, let's start by having you introduce yourself.

Andrew Preston

I'm Andrew Preston. I teach American History at the University of Cambridge in the United Kingdom. And I teach history, mostly in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. I teach about American foreign relations, the US and the world, politics, and American religious history.

Daniel Story

Fantastic. Okay, take me if you would Andrew into the world of early twentieth century American Christianity. Who were the players? What were the dynamics?

Andrew Preston

In the late nineteenth, early twentieth century United States, Christianity was dominant, but within Christianity, Protestantism was very much dominant. It was the de facto established religion, even though of course, the First Amendment separates church and state and there is

no official church in the United States, culturally, politically, even legally, in a lot of senses, that was the norm. So the players in late nineteenth, early twentieth century American Christianity were very much Protestants, and not just Protestants, but liberal Protestants who were trying to reconcile faith and science, and were liberalizing American Protestantism, and beyond the shores of the United States were trying to liberalize Protestantism in general. Liberal Protestants were really the elite of both the church and the state and culture and business and all sorts of aspects of American life.

Daniel Story

Yeah, I think you say in your piece, about the Liberal Protestants, that if you were in some kind of position of influence in politics or society, more than likely you belonged to that group?

Andrew Preston

That's absolutely right. I quote from David Hollinger, who teaches history at the University of California, Berkeley, and has written a lot on Ecumenical Protestants, other aspects of Liberal Protestantism, and he makes that observation. And I think he says something like if you were in charge of something big and something important in the first half of the twentieth century, you were almost certainly an Ecumenical Protestant or a Liberal Protestant.

Daniel Story

Yeah, so for better or for worse, we should care about this group of people,

Andrew Preston

We should absolutely care about this group of people, because this group of people, if they're not actual ministers, or church officials, we're talking about, you know, Teddy Roosevelt, or Franklin Roosevelt, or other major politicians, presidents, secretaries of state, secretaries of war, leaders of business, and so on and so forth. And even if some of these people weren't the most theologically minded, or spiritual, or pious, they were culturally very much part of that Liberal Protestant milieu and drew on those ideas of Liberal Protestantism. I've argued in other work of mine, that you can't really understand the politics of someone like FDR, or Harry Truman, without taking into consideration the role that their religion played in their in their lives, even if they weren't praying every Sunday or seeking God for guidance on political issues. It was absolutely part of their worldview, their intellectual makeup, and therefore it was very much a part of how they decided policy, including foreign policy, which is where I come to it.

Daniel Story

So that helps us understand Ecumenical Protestants' place in American society, but take us a little bit deeper into the group itself. Who were the Ecumenical Protestants? What were some of their goals? Where did they stand on issues of their day?

Andrew Preston

Liberal Protestants (Ecumenical Protestants) were very much concerned with politics in the here and now—that's what made them liberal or modernist or ecumenical. It was about solving problems not just in the hereafter, but in the present day, and improving social and political conditions. And at that highest order, that highest level of politics, is the international, it's questions of world order. And Ecumenical Protestants were very much concerned with questions of world order: How do we organize the world? How do we create a new world system that prevents the outbreak of major wars, or any wars for that matter? And how can this international system, based on Ecumenical Protestant lines in large part, how can it not only prevent wars from breaking out, but how can it also improve race relations, and improve social conditions, and improve educational levels for poor people worldwide?

Daniel Story

You just mentioned race relations. What was the group's racial makeup and what was their sort of track record on issues of race?

Andrew Preston

Ecumenical Protestants, on the whole, were white and middle class or upper middle class, or indeed upper class. There were some African American churches who were involved in the Ecumenical Protestant project, especially as time went on into the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, and deeper into the postwar period. But for the most part, Ecumenical Protestants were white, and certainly their leadership was white. Now, the interesting thing here is that they were, of white groups in the early twentieth century, they were one of the first to come out quite strongly in the late nineteenth teens and early 1920s against Jim Crow, against segregation, and indeed against other forms of what we would now call systemic racism outside the South in the rest of the country. The Federal Council of Churches, the FCC, set up Race Relations Sunday in the early 1920s for all of its constituent denominations to be able to observe on a regular basis the sins of racism. And they called it a sin, and they frequently called it a sin. And so this was one of the problems of, at first, domestic US society that they wanted to overcome. And then, by extension, these Ecumenical Protestants then became very critical of imperialism overseas, and not just the British Empire, not just the French Empire, but also the US Empire. And they became critical of imperialism on anti-racist grounds. And so race was very important, and race

relations, and what we might now call an anti-racist politics was very important to Ecumenical Protestants at a time when almost no other elite whites or any whites for that matter were taking this kind of anti-racist politics.

Daniel Story

So the narrative arc of your piece rests on the coming of the two World Wars, culminating in the formation of the United Nations in 1945. Can you just take us through those years and talk about the role that Ecumenical Protestants played through those major world events, as well as some of the ways that the group itself sort of evolved and changed?

Andrew Preston

Yeah, of course. So in the years before World War I, Ecumenical Protestants were at the center of American pacifism and the American peace movement. They weren't the only ones who were pacifists, but they were very prominent within the peace movement. And when the United States joined World War I in 1917, Ecumenical Protestants converted almost entirely to the cause of war in order to make the world safe for democracy. And if the United States had to go to war, the ultimate goal was the establishment of a League of Nations, which ecumenists saw as a direct analog to their own Federal Council of Churches. And there's a lot of evidence, some of which I cite in the piece, that's not a coincidence. That was one of the sources of ideas for the League of Nations. That was not even remotely close to the only one, of course, but they were certainly there. And they were at the forefront of these conversations. That, of course, doesn't work. The US doesn't join the League. There's a lot of disillusionment in the interwar period, but ecumenists still were attached very firmly to the cause of international peace and of campaigning against war. And then World War II breaks out. And it's the rise of the Nazis and the tensions that lead to the world crisis of the late 1930s, and the outbreak of a war, that lead a lot of ecumenists to adopt a much more, as they call it, realistic position. This is the birth of Christian Realism in the United States. And so they became much more pragmatic, and they're much more willing to embrace American power, even military power, as a means that will help achieve this the noblest of all ends. And the goal is to revive the League of Nations, which they helped achieve in the establishment of the United Nations, but they feel that they've learned the lessons from the experience of World War I, and they're deploying those lessons in the World War II settlement, which makes them much more willing to compromise, much more willing to recommend that government officials compromise on certain principles, and they're more realistic about exactly what kind of peace they're going to be able to achieve. It's not a total peace. The world may not be made safe for democracy, but they want to achieve what they can. But in doing so, in prioritizing the United Nations, they

ended up compromising quite a few other ends that they have. And one of those is on racial equality.

Daniel Story

Right, and here you bring in W.E.B. Du Bois.

Andrew Preston

Yeah, so Du Bois is a really interesting figure, because he had quite complicated views about religion, very thoughtful, informed views, but views that didn't come down very hard on one side or the other, at least not over a consistent period of time. He was active as a Black Internationalist. He was active as an anti-imperial campaigner. And of course, he was very active in campaigning against Jim Crow segregation, but also systemic, against systemic racism in the country as a whole and not just in the South. And so, for Du Bois, and for a lot of other Black Internationalists, the domestic and the foreign, racism at home, racism abroad, were intertwined goals. They were different facets of the same goal in trying to eradicate prejudice and to improve the status of African Americans or of non-white peoples around the world. All those views about race and religion kind of collide for Du Bois at the San Francisco conference in 1945.

1945 United Nations Assembly in San Francisco Promo Film

San Francisco, April 25th, 1945, the place selected by history to be the scene of the great adventure of our times. The attempt by men and women of freedom-loving nations to create a plan for world peace.

Andrew Preston

For a time he and other Black Internationalists and anti-imperialists saw white Ecumenical Protestants as their natural allies. And that was actually an understandable view to take for the reasons that I said earlier. If you want to get something done on empire or on racism, these are the people you want to be partnering with. And yet, when push came to shove in San Francisco, the American delegation decided to make a fair number of compromises in order to bring other countries on board to be willing members of the UN. And those compromises meant that the United States, or more specifically the American South, would be protected against international oversight about how African Americans were treated at home. And the key figure here is John Foster Dulles who would later become Secretary of State. He's a white ecumanist. He was a Presbyterian. A leading figure in the Federal Council of Churches even though he's not a minister...

John Foster Dulles speech

This assembly of the churches has worldwide significance. That is because we represent both great diversity and great unity. Such a combination attracts the attention of men everywhere, for it is a combination that is needed to save men from disaster.

Andrew Preston

...but he headed up the FCCs wartime body that wrote a very extensive report that planned for an ecumenical world order that would solve world problems and help overcome national tensions and national divisions in the postwar era and set up, as they called it, a just and durable peace. But Dulles, who helped write that report during the war, then compromised on that ecumenical vision in San Francisco by allowing for the codification of what was called domestic jurisdiction in the UN charter, so that nation states would be able to claim domestic jurisdiction to stave off outside interference against injustices that were going on in that country. Dulles was happy to sign on to that, and he did so in order to get the UN passed and to make the UN basically a viable body. But it outraged a lot of people at the time, and in retrospect, it looks like a pretty sordid compromise indeed, even if the result was to get enough countries, like South Africa, and like the Soviet Union, willing to sign on to UN membership. One thing that a lot of historians have overlooked, or at least not given the emphasis that I think that it deserves, is that these Liberal Protestants, were also evangelists—they were very much keen on spreading Christianity. And if you look at what was achieved in the UN charter, and then in the Human Rights charter of 1948, they choose to prioritize freedom of religion over racial equality, partly because they're able to do that because freedom of religion was something that was very easy to do in the context of the early Cold War, and it dovetails very nicely with how America wanted to wage the Cold War and the reasons that it was waging the Cold War against the atheistic, godless communists in the Soviet Union. But it was also not just a pragmatic maneuver, but it was also a matter of conviction for them to prioritize religion, and if that meant sacrificing racial equality for the time being, then they were more than willing to do that.

Daniel Story

And those compromises seem to speak to the title of your article, the limits on their conception of a world order, or a brotherhood.

Andrew Preston

Exactly. The article is titled "The Limits of Brotherhood," and brotherhood was one of the favorite, probably the favorite, watchword of Ecumenical Protestants, that they wanted to create a brotherhood at home and, especially, around the world. And it's a very universalistic

vision, it's a very peaceful vision. But I argue in the piece that actually in a way that the Ecumenical Protestants themselves just didn't appreciate, they just didn't realize that vision had certain limits. And those limits stemmed from their own experience. They saw something like the freedom of religion as a universal principle. But it was actually when you when you drill down a very particular parochial vision of an American, Liberal Protestant. And they just saw it as a kind of universal phenomenon. Now a lot of people do that, a lot of people feel that the beliefs that they hold are actually universal. The thing is, in this period, American Ecumenical Protestants then had the means to make their particular vision universal through things like the United Nations and American foreign policy in the Cold War. And so there are all sorts of limits of this, in one sense, a very attractive worldview that then had certain bounded limits that they couldn't appreciate, because they didn't even realize that they were limitations. And I think that's the ultimate limit upon Ecumenical Protestantism and their vision for world order.

Daniel Story

So I think one of the other things that your article does well, similar to many AHR articles, but I think you do it especially effectively, is set this research and this argument in the context of the broader scholarly conversation that you're speaking to, in particular, how some of your past work relates to this current work, and this kind of taking a second, or maybe even a third, look at this subject. Can you talk a little bit about that process and how this piece fits into that broader conversation among historians over recent years about the Liberal Protestants and their place in American society?

Andrew Preston

Yeah. So in 2012, I published a book on the relationship between religion, American religion, and American foreign policy. It was called *Sword of the Spirit, Shield of Faith*. And in that book, I made the argument that an earlier generation, or actually with several generations of historical scholarship, had misinterpreted the Ecumenical Protestants, because the traditional view was that religion was, in the late nineteenth and into the twentieth century, a prop for war and empire. And that's pretty much all it was. And that's certainly not untrue. You can find all sorts of evidence to support that argument, but as I was doing my research for my book, I realized that that was only part of the story and that, actually, a lot of American Christians, American Protestants, including missionaries, who were all over the world, based all over the world, were actually much more cosmopolitan, much more liberal, much more pacifist than their reputation suggested. And actually, they were among the most prominent critics of empire. And so this older view that saw missionaries really as imperialists and American Christians really as imperialists, I thought was, that's only part of the story. I don't want to take

full credit for this development in terms of seeing American Protestants in this period as more complicated than we appreciated. There were other historians who were writing on this around the time that I was, and some had written shortly before me, and others have continued to write after me. So I was part of a wave of correcting this older historiography. In recent years, on rereading my own work, reading some of the newer literature that's continued to come out after my book, and then in revisiting the sources, I felt that I had something more to say on this topic that I didn't think I had anything more to say on. And in grappling with my reinterpretation, I realized that I was grappling with myself, and that I was critiquing myself. That only came to me quite late. That probably says something about the narcissism of scholars. And that took quite a, quite a while, and some pushing from the AHR editorial staff, from Alex Lichtenstein and others, to say, you need to make this clear. And they didn't say it, but I think the subtext of what they were saying was, we're not sure if you realize you're having a debate with yourself, but you're having a debate with yourself. So I revised the piece quite extensively, and with the encouragement of the AHR, and it was a very positive experience for me. And hopefully, I think I hope that my article will stimulate debate, and hopefully I'll have a contribution to this ongoing debate.

Daniel Story

So sometimes the conversation is with oneself?

Andrew Preston

Absolutely. You know, an historian, whenever they write whatever they write, and they think that's the authoritative version for all time, I don't think any historian worth their salt would believe that, but if an historian believes that, then they're fooling themselves. Because I look back, not just with the work on religion and foreign policy that I've done in the past, but on other aspects of religion or on foreign policy or something else that I've written some of it, I reread and I think, oh, dear, I just don't, I just can't see that now. And then a lot of it, I reread and I think I think I got it. I think I got it mostly right. Or at least I wouldn't necessarily change my views; I might modify them, or make them a little more subtle based on research that's come out since then. But on this one, I thought, I'm glad I was part of that correction about a decade ago and continuing. But I wanted to say, actually, maybe we should check that a bit. Maybe we should just pull that back just a little bit or at least reconsider it.

Daniel Story

Well, Andrew, thank you very much for your time.

Andrew Preston

No, no, thanks for inviting me on. This is good.

Daniel Story

That was Andrew Preston on his September 2022 article, "The Limits of Brotherhood: Race, Religion, and World Order in American Ecumenical Protestantism."

In the Fall of 2020, the American Historical Association and Fairleigh Dickinson University partnered to conduct a national survey in an effort to better understand the American public's views and opinions on history. Titled "History, the Past, and Public Culture," the survey was meant as a follow up to the 1998 landmark study by Roy Rosenzweig and David Thielen, titled "The Presence of the Past." The results of this latest survey were released in 2021 and are available in full on the AHA's website. A few weeks ago, I spoke with the two leaders of the survey, Fairleigh Dickinson Professor of History Pete Burkholder and AHA Deputy Director Dana Schaffer.

Thanks to both of you for taking some time to talk to me. Do you want to start with some of the context for the survey? I know you mentioned the Roy Rosenzweig and David Thielen study from 1998, and you kind of link your work to that a little bit. But what would you say is the reason that you dived into this work now?

Pete Burkholder

I guess this kind of grew out of some work that I was doing. I had students reading the Rosenzweig and Theilen book, and they had run their national survey in the mid 90s to ascertain what Americans thought about the past and how they use it. And I had my students use that book mostly as a methodological exercise to get them doing surveys as a different way of approaching the past. I had them repeating portions of the the survey. They'd go out and do surveys and gather data. And it became evident through the course of doing that some of their data just weren't lining up with Rosenzweig and Thielen. And over the years I was thinking, we should probably redo the survey. It's getting kind of long in the tooth. And I have a, or I had a, colleague, Krista Jenkins, who now works for Pew Research. She was our institutional pollster. And I went to her a few times [and] said, you know, could we redo this? Can we rerun the survey? And she said, yeah, I think we could. So that was our impetus. And I reached out to the AHA, and they were actually very interested from the outset. And I was very pleasantly surprised by that, because the survey ended up being much better as a result of their involvement. And I think it ultimately really helped in our securing our funding as well.

Dana Shaffer

It was actually serendipitous, because we had been thinking a lot about this as well. I mean, it really was the anniversary of the Rosenzweig and Thielen study. It was such an influential survey, I mean. And historians across the board since then have really been thinking a lot about the nature of history and historical thinking. But we really needed new data because, think about the changes, I mean, the Internet, the 24/7 news cycle. So we thought this is a really good time to do this. And Pete approached us, and we thought, let's do it. And we didn't have any pollster expertise on our staff. He and Krista had partnered, and we just thought that was a really good team to work with. So we approached the NEH, National Endowment for the Humanities, with this idea for funding, and we're very grateful for their support. A couple of other reasons that we were excited about this was we're a professional organization, and we represent historians in all professions. And we wanted to do this study to give those historians tools to better engage with the public. So historians, K-12 classrooms and museums, higher education. If they know more about how the public engages with history, then they can do their work better. So that was one of our big goals as well.

Daniel Story

That makes a lot of sense. And somewhat selfishly, I'm looking at this and thinking oh, what can this podcast learn about how the public engages history so we can make a better podcast. So I am grateful that you've done this work. Before we get to some of the results, is there anything more you want to say about how practically you approached doing this in terms of designing the survey, the types of people that you engaged with.

Pete Burkholder

Sure. I mean, it was funny because initially I had thought about just rewriting the Rosenzweig and Thielen survey, then we'd have an apples to apples comparison. But it became apparent that we had new questions. So we held a bunch of focus groups with people. We formed an advisory committee (the AHA was very helpful in doing that). And ultimately, it was actually this online probability panel. So it was, people were doing it on their computers—it would have been way too complicated for people to be doing this over the phone in the way that Rosenzweig and Thielen had done.

Dana Shaffer

We surveyed a little more than 1800 adults. And we have so much data from this survey. And we knew that Pete and I couldn't possibly delve into all of it, so one of the things that we did was make sure that the raw data is up on the website. We have some of our own analysis of what came out, but we really want folks to go on to the website and look at the data and see

what other kinds of things they can come up with. Go to historians.org to view the survey. All the information is there. And it speaks a little bit more about our methodology, and how we went about it. Please go and use the data. That's what we want people to do. We've made it available. And it is there for anyone to take it and play with it and find the results that Pete and I couldn't get into yet. I also want to point out the timing of our survey. We started this process in 2018. We had the back and forth with the advisory committee and the focus groups throughout [20]19. And then we were ready to go in early 2020, and COVID hit and the world exploded. And so our survey, we didn't actually get it out until October of 2020. By the time we got it out, we did tweak a couple of the questions to make sure that we included some of the changes that had happened because of COVID. We realized that, you know, people weren't going out to museums in the past year. So we, so we, you know, adjusted our timeline a little bit. But I would love for someone to go in here into our study and say, what do you think the impacts of COVID were on these answers? But we tried to take that into account.

Daniel Story

Let's talk about some of the things that you've discovered. Maybe a good place to start is this question of what is history?

Pete Burkholder

One of the reasons we asked that is because in Rosenzweig and Thielen, they discuss how they did focus groups, and they decided to use the term of "the past" as opposed to "history" when they pose their questions. And that's fine. But one of the things that my students had found, we created a question asking people whether they thought history in the past were the same thing and very starkly their responses were no, history is one thing, the past is another. So this is one of the reasons we really thought this is important to ask this particular question. And the results that we got tended to be pretty fundamental, they really had impacts across other responses when we ran the cross tabulations.

Dana Shaffer

We started our survey with "what is history?", and we gave four different options. And overwhelmingly, and I don't think this is going to be surprising to anybody, 66% of the people surveyed said that they thought history was names, dates, and facts. If you ask the historian what history is, that's not what they would say. And if you delve down a little bit deeper into some of the data, it gets a little more interesting when you break it down by age. For example, although still the majority, the younger of the respondents were less likely to think that history has names, dates, and facts. Maybe that's showing that our education is changing a bit. It's also more pronounced when looking at party affiliation: Republicans are far more likely than other

party affiliations to say that history is names, dates and facts. It's 81% of Republicans versus around 58 to 63% for the others.

Pete Burkholder

I would add just one more caveat. Those people aren't wrong. History does consist of names, dates, and facts. There's no doubt about that. But of course historians would say it's more than the sum of those parts. So that's where we're actually getting the split. And when I ran a faculty at an AHA conference and asked a bunch of professionals how they defined history, not a single one of those professionals chose names, dates, and facts as the best definition for what history is. The vast majority went for the explanation. So there we're really seeing the separation. And that separation is something that Rosenzweig and Thielen had found as well back in the 1990s.

Dana Shaffer

But I think this has real implications for the classroom. Even though they claim that history is names, dates, and facts, most of our respondents said they don't like that. That's why they don't like history. And three quarters of them said that's the kind of history they had in their high school classrooms, [and] to a lesser extent in the college level. And Pete can probably speak a little bit more to this since you're in the classroom on a regular basis.

Pete Burkholder

That three quarters figure, that was true across all age groups. So that would suggest that things haven't been changing very much, whether you're 18, or whether you're 65 plus, about three quarters were saying, yeah, their experience was mostly names, dates, and facts, that sort of thing. By the same token, they say we want to be taught that history is inquiry. And we want to be encountering history, not through interpretation, but through primary sources and artifacts. You got to be very careful, though, with these results, because people will say all sorts of things, and they'll say, I would like to study it this way. But I know as a teacher and a practitioner that when I get students, I introduced them to the murkiness of primary sources, then they might recoil a bit, and then they come back and say, well, just tell us what happened. You know, just tell us the facts. In those sections of the survey where we wrote up what of people's learning experience has been like, how would they prefer to learn things?, mostly, I think, it was negative reaction to rote memorization. And Rosenzweig and Thielen found the exact same thing. So we're seeing a lot of continuity here. If we look at, say, where people like to get their history, where they tend to get their history, it tends to come in mediums that usually aren't associated with the classroom, for example, video form, films, TV. But at the same time, on another question, people are saying those are precisely the sources they don't

trust. So there's a bit of, you know, cognitive dissonance there, I think part of it has to do with what's convenient, you know, people will go to what's easily accessible for them.

Dana Shaffer

It speaks to our screen culture these days. Everybody's on their screens.

Daniel Story

Yeah. And I would guess that in a lot of those instances, it's maybe less than they've gone out seeking to learn history, but they're aware of the fact that they're exposed to historical content through these various mediums.

Pete Burkholder

It is, but interestingly, too, you know, a lot of people, especially younger people, are very actively using social media of one type or another. And yet, they said, for purposes of learning about the past, they're not associating social media with history, nor are they trusting it. Social media came in almost dead last in the trustworthiness of sources. On the other hand, what came in at the very top in terms of trustworthiness was museums, followed closely behind by historic sites. And there, we're just seeing a redux of what Rosenzweig and Thielen had found where these sort of tangible, experiential objects of history are far more trusted than words on a page, because students interpretation is that well, I'm a historian, but I can just write anything I want, you know, and when opinions is good as another. An actual cannonball, well, that's a thing. You know, I can't argue with that.

Dana Shaffer

Yeah, we were getting to the idea that the public really prefers history that they think is tangible, rather than something that they think is mediated. And I think where the disconnect there is that a lot of the public might not understand that objects in a museum are interpreted, like a book is written, but someone had to select what object goes in that exhibit, and what order it goes in, and how it's described. So the interpretation of that isn't as self-evident, I think, to many museum visitors, when there is an actual interpretation going on.

Daniel Story

I was really fascinated by this finding that many people saw history education, or the teaching of history, as important as some of the sort of STEM fields, in stark contrast of the narrative of the decline of the humanities. What do you make of that?

Dana Shaffer

We actually, we didn't ask people whether or not they thought that learning history was important. We asked them comparatively, like how essential is history education, as it relates to some of the STEM more, you know, ostensibly more pragmatic fields, like engineering or business. And so I think 84% of people that responded said they thought learning about history is as important as business or engineering. Now, why is that? And why doesn't that translate into better enrollments for history undergraduates? I'm not so sure. I think what it tells us is that we have a real opportunity that if people do value it, maybe we can market it better. I'm not sure. Pete, what do you think?

Pete Burkholder

The good news is at least people are saying we see value with this. It is important. I think there's a perception that well, you don't make much money in it. I mean, granted, you're not going to get really rich. But when you start looking at income figures, you know, beginning salaries and mid-career salaries, history majors actually do pretty darn well. I think it's a matter of getting that information out there and making people believe it, and I think right now, they're just not, you know there not getting the information or not believing it.

Dana Shaffer

One of the other things that I hoped we could talk about was this idea of teaching concepts that people find uncomfortable. We have states all across the country that have legislation dictating what can and can't be taught in the classroom. And we asked the respondents, is it okay to teach history about the harm that some have done to others, even if it makes you uncomfortable, and three quarters of respondents said it was acceptable. That is, again, across the board. It's regardless of age group, college education, gender, geographic location. 78% of Democrats and 74% of Republicans agree. We have this evidence, but yet, I don't know, it's it's not playing out in the state legislature.

Pete Burkholder

Yeah, it's funny, the CRT wasn't even on the, CRT debate wasn't even on the radar when we ran our survey. That came out a bit later. So it was funny that our data anticipated and even refuted some of the coming feud over that whole thing. And Dana and I have both been published on that very issue in other the forums.

Daniel Story

So you did a number of cross tabulations and hunting around for for interesting or potentially meaningful correlations in your data. What sort of things jumped out at you there?

Dana Shaffer

I found some interesting discrepancies were questions about whether or not people thought certain types of content were covered enough in history education, and not just education but in all types of history. So for example, you have your traditional subjects—men, politics, government, that sort of thing. And top line data show that those kinds of subjects are receiving too much attention. But what's interesting is that also joined in that was LGBTQ history. The LGBTQ history also at the same time was reflected as being underserved. Respondents are saying both that too much attention is being spent on it, as well as not enough. And so I think that's really just more of a reflection of, you know, how that's a really polarizing area of inquiry, at least in the public's mind.

Daniel Story

Who do you think would be most interested or most benefited from looking at and digging into this survey?

Pete Burkholder

I certainly think there's a lot of implications for the teaching of history. Teachers, I think, could benefit quite a bit here. And as I said before, this is not a case, I think, where people should follow our results blindly. But it is good to at least know where people are coming from. But beyond that, I think there's a lot of public policy implications of what we have in here, especially with all the debates that are going on right now over CRT, divisive topics, all the rest. And a lot of those discussions I see really aren't very fact based, they're far more emotional than than data-driven. So I did, you know, ended up sending notices to some media people, when this came out, hoping that this might, you know, hit it big on the news programs? I don't, I don't think it has, but there's still hope.

Daniel Story

So I guess my final question is, when's the next one?

Pete Burkholder

You'll probably be doing an interview with somebody 25 years from now, where they're talking about that old dusty survey that was done by Pete and Dana years and years ago, how outdated it is, and how badly we did with it.

Dana Shaffer

Yeah, remember when people used that thing called the Internet.

Daniel Story

Well, thanks again for taking the time to talk.

Dana Shaffer

Well, we appreciate the work you're doing, Daniel. Thank you.

Pete Burkholder

Yeah, thanks for interviewing. I really appreciate it.

Daniel Story

That was Pete Burkholder and Dana Schaffer on the 2021 public opinion survey they lead titled "History, the Past, and Public Culture." You can learn more about the survey, including sift through the full results at historians.org/history-culture-survey. Earlier in the episode, you heard from Andrew Preston on his September 2022 AHR article, "The Limits of Brotherhood: Race, Religion, and World Order in American Ecumenical Protestantism." History in Focus is a production of the American Historical Review, in partnership with the American Historical Association and the University Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. Episode 7 was produced by me, Daniel Story, with editing assistance from Conor Howard. Engineering and transcription support was by Myles Rider-Alexis. You can learn more about this and other episodes at americanhistoricalreview.org. That's it for now. See you next time.