John Dickson (Studio)

Apparently, the collective noun for historians is ‘argumentation’.

An Argumentation of Historians.

That’s what Producer Kaley says. She showed me a History Today online article that makes that claim, as well as a dodgy Wikipedia list, but no authoritative, or primary, source.

She also showed me a BBC article that no one really *decides* what is a legitimate collective noun. As we learned in our English Language episode earlier this season, English evolves with its own momentum.

I would like to start the ball rolling on a new collective noun. I propose *not* an ‘argumentation’ of historians but an ‘investigation of historians’!! Here’s hoping that takes off.

Still, many would say that an ‘argumentation’ of historians is a more apt description. After all, historians have argued from the beginning.

The ‘father of history’, in the view of many scholars, was Herodotus of Halicarnassus. 400 or so years before Christ, he wrote about the legendary Greek and Persian wars–except he was trying to distinguish between the legends of the bards (like Homer’s Illiad) and the events as they happened. Here’s his opening line (speaking of himself in the third person):

“Herodotus of Halicarnassus here displays his inquiry so that human achievements may not become forgotten in time, and great and marvellous deeds - some by Greeks, some by barbarians - may not be without their glory.”

Herodotus calls his project an ‘inquiry’ or ‘investigation’. The Greek word he uses in the opening line is *historia,* which gives us the word ‘history’. History, in this original sense, is an investigation into past events, put together into a glorious story.

But then along comes an Athenian general named Thucydides - 25 or so years the junior of Herodotus.

Thucydides thought Herodotus was too flowery and too willing to report tales. He wanted to report just the facts. His topic was the great war between Athens and Sparta, and he was near enough to the events to engage in a more rigorous ‘historia’ or investigation. He admitted that his project was a little more boring — but boring is good, because the truth is more important than a good story.

So … a good story … or the truth?

It’s a debate that’s been going on since the birth of history-writing.

American historian Peter Novick once said that “history is like trying to nail jelly to a wall - unsatisfying and messy.” There’s something there, of course, some facts, some real events … but then there’s also a lot of ideology at play … some of it quite wobbly (to extend Novick’s jelly metaphor).

It’s no wonder that many today have given up on history – not just as a subject at school and university but also as a way of knowing anything real about the past.

My guest today reckons this is a problem. We are living in an ahistoric age, she says. We don’t care about tradition. We are sceptical about the past. And if your version of the past doesn’t suit my current outlook, no worries … I can revise or erase history. After all, it’s the past: Why would it matter??

I’m John Dickson and this is Undeceptions

INTRODUCTION

This season of Undeceptions is sponsored by our friends at Zondervan Academic. You can get discounts on their special MasterLectures video courses and free chapters of many of the books we talk about here on the pod by going to zondervanacademic.com/undeceptions.

Every episode of Undeceptions explores some aspect of life, faith, history, science, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten. With the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to 'undeceive ourselves', and let the truth 'out'.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: We can think of history as a kind of academic discipline, that's one thing. Um, but I actually think we need to think about history as something that we, that we inhabit and that we pass down as like regular human beings because history is about how we make sense of the past and how we're able to actually engage with the past in such a way that passes down these stories that makes life meaningful.

I mean, there's no human civilization or culture which has existed for any period of time, which manages to do so without some kind of sense of who they are in time.

John Dickson (Studio)

That's Sarah Irving-Stonebraker, Associate Professor of History and Western Civilisation at Australian Catholic University in Sydney. Sarah's a friend of the pod - she was a guest in our very first season, Episode 9 called *Dominus Illuminatio,* which is part of the motto of the University of Oxford (it means 'The Lord is my Light'). Sarah was a research fellow at the University

of Oxford, after completing her Doctor of Philosophy in History at the University of Cambridge.

Sarah's new book is called *Priests of History: Stewarding the past in an ahistoric age.* It's a cracker!!

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: My approach to history is actually shaped by the fact that, well, the reason why time is meaningful, And we understand that we're kind of, you know, we're beings who are abounded by time because we're mortal and we're finite. And yet at the same time, we are just drawn to this sense that there is something which is beyond time.

The reason why time is meaningful is because we have a God who is in fact a God who, who creates everything and who acts in time. So I actually approach history now, I didn't always, um, because I didn't grow up a Christian, but I actually approach history as a Christian and understand how we actually make sense of the past in terms of how we're actually supposed to kind of steward it, how we're supposed to tend and keep the past.

John Dickson: Some might hear that, Sarah, and think, ah, you're just biased historian?

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Well, so, um, yeah, gosh, look, we all have biases, I suppose. Um, and all that means is that we all come to our understanding of the past with some kind of like a background set of ideas and assumptions. Like we all have a worldview, in other words. I think the question is really like, what is this worldview? What are those set of assumptions and, um, how robust are they? How compelling are they?

John Dickson (Studio)

Historians are sometimes viewed as little more than “journalists” of things past. I don’t mean to criticise journos, but a recent Gallup poll found just 19 percent of Americans rate journalistic integrity as “very high” or “high” — I’d be fascinated to know if the public thought any better of historians! Are they just out for a good story!!

But there are good journalists. And there are good historians.

Good historians are always worrying about bias—in the sources and in themselves—but they begin their research with the surviving evidence, and they constantly strive to submit their accounts of the past to that evidence. Despite post-modern claims to the contrary, historians are trying to describe what was once true and real. We aim at objectivity about the past, even while recognising that all intellectual endeavours have a human element.

John Dickson': What drew you to history in first place?

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: I've actually wanted to be a historian since I was about, um, eight or nine years old. Um, my family went to England, um, on a trip. And Um, we went to all the kind of, you know, the ruins of medieval monasteries and castles and villages and towns old enough to be in the Doomsday Book of William the Conqueror. And I remember around the time of my ninth birthday, actually, deciding that when I grew up I wanted to be a historian. And so that kind of, yeah, that, that passion kind of, Yeah. Drove me from my life.

John Dickson': And your dad historian too.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Life. And my dad was historian is, yep. Is a historian too. Is a historian.

Yeah. But you know, one of the wonderful things, just getting back, um, you know, a moment ago about, you know, some of the things you're bringing up about people having different perspectives, um, different backgrounds, different biases, is that, you know, even within my own family, I have some of the most, you know, fruitful and beautiful conversations with my dad, who has a completely different approach to understanding history, um, to the one that I have. And actually, I think one of the things that we need to do more than ever in this, you know, sort of contemporary age, which I think is really profoundly ahistorical, but, um, is we need to actually have conversations about history in which we learn to actually, you know, understand where other people are coming from, but to disagree well about the past, right?

To understand that we can look at the past and see something of its complexity and actually learn to have conversations in which we engage with that and disagree peacefully about it.

John Dickson (Studio)

History has often been a battlefield of the culture wars. Competing narratives seek to become the official versions.

In March 2015, a black South African student threw a bucket of excrement over a statue of the 19th century British colonialist Cecil Rhodes, which held pride of place at the University of Cape Town. He viewed Cecil Rhodes as a symbol of colonialism and the violence that accompanies it. His actions sparked protests across South Africa, spreading to other parts of the world including the University of Oxford.

Rhodes was devoted to the British colonial project, and drove the annexation of vast swathes of land in southern Africa. Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) and Northern Rhodesia (now Zambia) were named after him. When British rule ended in those countries, so did the Rhodesian name.

On his death, Rhodes left the equivalent of US$17 million to the Oriel College at Oxford University, where he had studied as a young man. A statue was erected in his honour at the College.

For many years - even before the protests in South Africa - many students and academics (including many historians) have called for its removal.

Instead, the College has erected a plaque next to the statue. It reads:

READING

"...Rhodes, a committed British colonialist, obtained his fortune through exploitation of minerals, land, and peoples of southern Africa. Some of his activities led to great loss of life and attracted criticism in his day and ever since. In recent years, the statue has become a focus for public debate on racism and the legacy of colonialism. In June 2020, Oriel College declared its wish to remove the statue but is not doing so following legal and regulatory advice."

John Dickson (Studio)

Of course, the plaque did little to assuage those who wanted the statue removed. It also managed to incense others. A different history professor objected to the wording on the plaque, telling *The Daily Telegraph* that the plaque should be …

READING

"... balanced and measured … it should look at the whole of Rhodes' career explaining properly who he was and what he was trying to do. One needs to explain where he stands in the context of the attitudes of his day. He believed he was bringing benefits to Africa. We might now argue that he did more harm than good but one has to understand what his intentions were. He is portrayed here as some sort of devil incarnate."

John Dickson (Studio)

It's complicated! Should the statue have come down? Should the plaque outline the good *and* the bad?

On the one hand, says Sarah, these highly politicised protests show the passion some people have when it comes to history's symbols and what they represent. On the other, we are losing the ability to grapple with the ethical complexities of the past - the entwining of good and evil - in the same historical figure. History then becomes a cartoon, made up of goodies and baddies, mostly baddies.

John Dickson': You claim that world now is an ahistoric age. Okay, so what do you mean?

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: What has really struck me is, particularly in about the last five to ten years, is just how disconnected our contemporary societies seem to be from history, from the past, in the sense that we don't know why history matters. It kind of seems irrelevant.

We tend to be fairly ignorant of history. We tend to kind of reduce history to ideology too. So in some we tend to kind of, uh, be unable to engage meaningfully with the past.

John Dickson': Okay. you don't just mean. that fewer students are history at high school?

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: No, though I think that is an important part of it. That's a kind of symptom, I think. I think, okay, there are probably three things that I would identify as being kind of indicative of this kind of ahistoric age. Um, the first is this kind of sense that history and the past is **irrelevant** to our culture. And in particular to like what we think of as, you know, life. Like when I talk to my students, um, about what they think a good life is or what basically I say to them, you know, what does our culture say is the kind of life worth living?

They basically all say something along the lines of, you know, it's about finding and then being your true self. Right? So our culture is basically saying, look, life is all about self invention and self fulfilment. But to that project, right, history is kind of irrelevant because we're basically kind of autonomous beings who live this life of relentless self creation.

And so the idea that there might be a kind of givenness to our identity, a kind of givenness that might stem from having inherited histories, transcendent narratives, stories, inheritances, traditions that are passed down and helped to shape us, that kind of idea is kind of important. is, is anathema to that kind of culture.

We are basically kind of proudly authentic, but ultimately rootless. So that's the first thing, a kind of irrelevance.

John Dickson (Studio)

In 2023, a survey of close to 700 school kids across Australia found that two thirds of them thought the ANZAC story - long considered foundational Australian history - was “boring” and “irrelevant” to their lives.

This historical apathy made headlines, with one of the researchers saying that the students were less interested these days in “traditional” and “nationalistic” stories.

ANZAC — for my international listenders — stands for Australian and New Zealand Army Corp, and the term was first used to refer to Aussies and Kiwis who fought alongside each other in the First World War.

On April 25, 1915, about 16,000 ANZAC soldiers landed on the shores of Gallipoli in modern-day Turkey, or Türkiye. They came under relentless fire. Our soldiers had hardly been sent into battle before — many of them were farmers, pretty good at shooting rabbits and kangaroos but not humans. The hard-fought, 8-month campaign was ultimately a failure. Half the ANZACS died.

But the event cemented the Australian self-perception — some might say ‘myth’ — of a people willing to sacrifice, willing put up with pain cheerfully, and, especially, of a people who will stick together to the bitter end. This is the Aussie idea of ‘mateship’.

But here’s the thing. Today, almost a third of Australians were born in another country. And commentators have begun to question whether this foundational history — this national myth — has relevance anymore!

As a culture changes, it loses connection to its past. It drops its own history. The question is already being raised in Australia: Should we bother teaching about the ANZACS at all?

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: So the second thing is **ignorance**. Um, I think increasingly our culture tends to be, when I say culture, you know, we live in a global world, but I'm particularly talking about the kind of contemporary sort of liberal, post liberal cultures in the contemporary West.

Um, but we tend to be increasingly, I think, ignorant. of history and even, um, you know, historical literacy I think is really on the decline.

So for example, you know, in the public sphere in the media. We often have discussions about the relationship between politics and religion or the individual rights and dignity of every kind of human being, sort of human rights as it were.

Um, the extent to which governments might have jurisdiction over or kind of encroach upon the private lives of individuals. Um, constitutional limits on the rule of law, all these kinds of ideas, they didn't always exist. They didn't exist in other civilizations. Um, they have very particular histories, and yet we talk about them so often, and yet, you know, And yet we do so without any kind of historical grounding or literacy.

Sort of universalize from what we see in front of us. And just turn it into ideology. Um, and I think the part, so the thing you mentioned before about, you know, history enrollments declining, there's empirical data to kind of back up the ignorance thing too. So, you know, history enrollments, history majors kind of declining.

Um, and also some really interesting empirical data coming out from the U. S where they measure like, you know, what is the kind of general knowledge that different generational groups over time have about history? Um, and that is really on the decline as well. So historical ignorance, I think in a way that in previous generations we didn't have.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: And the third one is **ideology**. Um, and so with ideology, this is the kind of, you know, sense that history, basically, we tend to reduce to an ideological battleground. And I think this is so tragic. Um, you know, we talk a lot about the culture wars these days and really the culture wars, you know, exacerbated so much by the way that the digital world works and by the way that social media works, the culture wars tend to reduce, um, You know, when we do talk about history in the public sphere, it tends to reduce it to this kind of, almost, Manichaean sense that historical figures or movements or phenomena, like empires or whatever, are either beyond redemption, you know, black or white, good or evil. And so we're unable to disagree well about the past. We can't understand that there are ethical complexities in the past. And I think even more so today, in our ahistoric age, we tend to reduce history just to ideology.

John Dickson (Studio)

History classrooms have become a battlefield in the culture wars.

In America, for example, many progressives fear the US history curriculum is a whitewashed fable, suppressing uncomfortable truths about slavery and race. Out of this concern was born the famous 1619 Project, which reframes American history by saying the real founding of the country was not 1776 and the Declaration of Independence but 1619 when the first African slaves were brought to Virginia.

Conservatives in America rallied to rebut the 1619 Project, worried that teachers and students will be swept up in a hyper-critical obsession with race.

In March 2024, researchers from the American Historical Association published an article in Time Magazine telling everyone to calm down.

We'll link to the full article in the show notes, but here's their message for teachers of history:

READING

The friction of recent culture wars offers a unique opportunity for teachers and other historians to clarify what's exciting about history—and how it's distinct from ongoing red-versus-blue conflagrations. Ultimately, what history teachers teach their students about (cause and consequence, structure and agency, context and complexity, contingency and continuity) bears little resemblance to what partisan culture warriors argue about ("who we are as a nation" and how we should feel about it). The former trains the mind for judgement, the latter for propaganda.

John Dickson (Studio)

If I'm honest, I find that a bit wishy-washy and a bit patronising, as if the goal of history is to stand in judgment over our forebears — when I think we should at least be open to them standing in judgment of us! — but the basic point here is solid: history shouldn't be about contemporary politics.

John Dickson: I think some people are wary of the discipline of history precisely because can't you make it mean anything? So why bother?

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: You sound like a, yeah, like you're kind of channeling a certain kind of undergraduate student there. No. Okay. So history as a discipline, um, has all kinds of established methodologies. You read source, I mean, gosh, John, as you, you know, as you know, and as you have written about so well, right, we engage with the sources. There's a

kind of an analogy between the way that we deal with evidence and the way that forensically, you know, legally you deal with evidence, you weigh up and you think about the reliability of evidence.

John Dickson: People forget that, don't they, that there is a fact-ness to history. Yeah, are things that are just there, letters, laws, inscriptions, yeah. Remains. And you have to deal with it. So that there's an objectivity to history, even we bring ourselves to that.

John Dickson (Studio)

Fredrich Nietzsche once said: “No, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations”.

Against positivism, which halts at phenomena - "There are only facts" - I would say: No, facts is precisely what there is not,
only interpretations. We cannot establish any fact "in itself":

You sometimes hear, “There are no facts, only interpretations.” History is whatever you make it. It’s all ideology, nothing solid.

I feel like replying, “Tell that to the first enslaved Africans in America. Tell it to the people who lost their lives in the American War of Independence, or the ANZACS at Gallipoli.”

The truth is … both facts and framing have to be recognised in good history. There’s a recursive relationship between the two. There are facts to explore—whether letters, inscriptions, wider archaeology—and when the historian has explored all of the available facts s/he then proposes a theory, a story, that best explains the facts in context. But that story must always be submissive to new facts or to new theories that better explain the facts.

History isn't purely factual, like mathematics. But it is 'scientific', in the sense that the existing data is what gives rise, or should give rise, to our understanding of the past, and that data always takes precedence over our theories.

A small example from my own field … In the Gospels, we frequently read statements like in Matt 4: "Jesus went throughout Galilee, te**aching in their synagogues**, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom."

The mention of synagogues was always intriguing to historians, because no evidence had been found of synagogues in the first part of the first century. There were synagogues outside of Israel from that period and there were synagogues within Israel from a much later period. But none had been found that could be dated to Jesus' own time and place.

We could say with confidence that by the time the Gospel writers wrote, 30-60 years after Jesus, there must have been enough synagogues for it to make sense that Jesus preached in synagogues. But we couldn't say for sure that Jesus really preached in synagogues.

Maybe this was a true remembrance of Jesus' ministry. Maybe it was an innocent retrojection into the story of Jesus. And maybe it was a deliberate attempt to make Jesus seem more Jewish than he really was. All of these options were on the table, and in the text books … right up until 15 years ago (which is basically 'yesterday' in ancient history).

In 2009 archaeologists discovered a lovely pre-AD 70 synagogue in the Galilean town of Magdala, the home of Mary Magdalene. Later the same year they confirmed another at nearby Khirbet Wadi Hamam. And then in 2016 they discovered a third pre-AD 70 synagogue at Tel Rekhesh, near Mount Tabor.

And then, weirdly, just in 2021, they found another first-century synagogue in the town of Magdala, 300m from the one they found in 2009. It turns out

that not only did some Galilean towns have a synagogue … some Galilean towns had more than one. No one was expecting that.

It's probably fair to say that no one today still argues that the repeated mentions of synagogues in the Gospels were innocent retrojections into the story of Jesus, let alone deliberate attempts to make Jesus seem more Jewish than he was. These theories have to submit to the actual evidence. The theory that best explains all of the data — both the testimony of the Gospels and the archaeological record — is that Jesus was a Jewish synagogue preacher.

This is what I mean by the recursive relationship between evidence and interpretation, facts and story. History isn't just a list of facts. That would give us no understanding about what those facts mean. Nor is history just 'story', let alone propaganda. When our story of the past is contradicted by an accumulation of facts, that story has to bend and bow, and sometimes break.

Speaking of 'break', we'll be back in a minute.

BREAK 1

John Dickson: What does it matter? mean, we're wanting progress. Why do have to keep looking back?

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Oh, goodness. You know, any society, it should strike us actually that any, any kind of revolution that wants to kind of completely obliterate a society begins by obliterating history and by starting again. So if we have any kind of sense of the kind of, you know, phrases that you just use about progressing and thinking about the future, we can't

do this at all without realizing how we've been actually formed by the past and what it might teach us.

John Dickson': What do we gain? if all a love and appreciation of the discipline of history, or just practically, the past.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Yeah. I think, like, when you look at culture, you look at society, different cultures. Parts of society are going to gain different things.

I mean, I think broadly as a whole, you look at a culture like Australia or like America, and there is a sense in which, you know, we are now grappling with a generation that I think, Jonathan Haidt quite accurately used the phrase, the anxious generation. There is a lack of rootedness, a lack of, of grounding.

Now for Haidt and people who are doing that kind of sociological and psychological research, There are different kinds of approaches to that. to dealing with that kind of rootlessness and disconnection and mental health epidemic. But actually, broadly speaking, as a society, we need to ground ourselves in history in order to understand the grounding from which we have actually came in order to understand who we are and how we are formed.

Now I have, I happen to be a Christian, as I mentioned. And so what I'm actually also really interested in is thinking about, okay, like, how can we make sense of history? How can we engage well with history in such a way that we can actually steward it and learn from it? So for example, can it help us to engage with one another in such a way that helps us overcome the culture wars? And I think, I think we can actually.

John Dickson: You say that have special role in stewarding, recovering, reminding people of history. can we just focus on that idea? What role do you think Christians this?

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Well, I think Christians are called to steward the past, to tend and to keep the past, and what I mean by that is that, well, the whole idea of like stewarding the past, of tending and keeping the past, is a metaphor that comes, to us from this idea of what priestly work is, because I, yeah, I love this idea that, um, Christians are called to be, well, we talked about in the New Testament of being, in terms of being a, a royal priest priesthood.

So priestly work is this work of tending and keeping. And that involves kind of two things. The tending work is a kind of more progressive idea that you kind of uncover, with relationship to the past. Um, you tend to kind of uncover and cultivate the stories of the past that we don't actually know about, including stories that, you know, Might sit quite uncomfortably with us.

Stories which might involve sin in the past, like we deal with that and we uncover that and pass it down and to tend it. But then the keeping part of the past is the more conservative aspect of, of actually kind of preserving, like conserving the past and passing down that kind of cultural heritage. And so in that sense, there is kind of two aspects of this, the kind of the tending and the keeping.

John Dickson (Studio)

Sarah talks about tending and keeping history in the same way the scientist Robert Boyle talks about tending and keeping nature. Boyle was hugely influential on Sarah as she began to look into her own worldview at university, and whether it held up to scrutiny.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: There's a kind of story behind that metaphor, um, which is that. When I was kind of thinking through, you know, thinking in

this context, when I was writing this book about, you know, how do we, how should Christians actually approach the past? I was kind of reminded, um, of my own kind of story and how I began to kind of think about history as a historian, um, back when I was doing my PhD in Cambridge, because, you know, like I mentioned, I wasn't a Christian, um, at the time, but I was reading a lot of I'm spending, you know, long summers kind of reading the work of various natural philosophers in the 17th century.

But one in particular, Robert Boyle, um, one of the founders of what we now call modern science. Boyle, in his scientific works, kept kind of talking about this kind of image of being a priest of nature. And so here's Boyle writing works that we expect to kind of think of as scientific. And he's quoting Psalm 8.

And so for Boyle, what this means, he's not a historian, he's what we now call a scientist, but for Boyle, what it means is to be a priest of nature is to be somebody who studies the creation, the natural world in order to kind of bring praises to God. And I remember, you know, sitting in Cambridge, kind of reading that, being an atheist and kind of finding really compelling and beautiful this sense that Boyle had this understanding of why his own, kind of vocation in life, like why his own discipline was so meaningful for him. And I would sit there as an atheist thinking, you know, here I am kind of devoting my life to history, but like, what is, what does this actually mean? And I was kind of aware that atheism couldn't provide me with that same kind of meaning.

John Dickson:-I mean, I remember you telling me, know, mm hmm. people like Boyle messed with your head. Because He's smart. he's science, yet devout. he kept on more like Yep. I remember you telling me you started reading old sermons when you were in Oxford. So, tell, tell us something of that story.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Yeah, yeah, sure. So, um, I arrived at, at Cambridge first of all, to do a PhD, um, with, you know, very kind of horrible straw man caricatures of Christians. Um, and really, like you mentioned,

Robert Boyle, one of my favorite people,he basically began to unpick every kind of assumption I held about, you know, Um, about Christianity and what, what Christians actually believed.

So for one thing, I was sitting there, you know, kind of reading Boyle in Cambridge and realizing that, you know, the more that Boyle was talking about the Psalms and the more that he was writing books called, um, you know, *A Disquisition and Things Above Reason* and talking about theology, I couldn't actually dismiss that anymore.

READING

So in the World, where there are so many inanimate and irrational Creatures, that neither understand how much they owe to their Creator, by owing him even themselves, nor are born to a condition enabling them to acknowledg it; Man, as born the Priest of Nature, and as the most oblig'd and more capable member of it, is bound to return Thanks and Praises to his Maker, not only for himselfe for for the whole Creation."

Robert Boyle, 1663

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: And then it's not just Boyle that, you know, his whole circle of people in the 17th century. Um, every single one of them that I read was profoundly influenced by their faith. So this wasn't just a window dressing. Um, and moreover, it revealed to me that this kind of assumption that I'd, you know, held for a long time growing up, that this thing called science and religion were sort of inextricably opposed, - that, that couldn't be maintained either.

But then, you know, it was still many years away from me becoming a Christian. But then, um, after my PhD at Cambridge, I had a junior research

fellowship at Oxford and one day I kind of realized that my, um, the desk that I always sat at in the library was in front of the theology section. And I think the reason why I picked up, um, a book of sermons that day was that I had briefly attended, um, a series of lectures that, um, the well known atheist philosopher Peter Singer had been giving in Oxford, um, lectures that I kind of expected to present a very kind of, um, compelling atheist vision of human ethics, but actually which kind of pulled the carpet out from under my feet, as it were, because I realized that, um, my deepest moral intuitions, um, about the kind of innate equality of human life and the dignity of all human life just weren't sustained by atheism at all.

And so I was kind of in this, um, at sea as it were in Oxford and kind of pulled out a book of sermons one day and began to read. And to be honest, I think I was too arrogant even at that point to kind of read the Bible. Um, and so I was reading sermons and actually began to realize that the picture they painted of who God was and also who humanity was … oh my goodness, this idea of, of this kind of brokenness, not only of every human being and of every society and every civilization, but also the kind of profound brokenness in the depths of the human heart. That, that explanation of the kind of fundamental character of human life and human society was, profoundly compelling and I think what that did was make me realize that I basically dismissed Christianity arrogantly as if, um, as if I actually knew something about it without actually having known anything about it at all. Um, and then not long afterwards, maybe about a year or so, um, I moved to Florida [00:33:00] to take up a post as an assistant professor at Florida State University.

A friend there, um, gave me C. S. Lewis's Mere Christianity. And that book began to kind of unpick at every, every kind of assumption I'd held as well about Christianity. And I found myself one Sunday morning deciding that I was going to go to church by myself. And I remember kind of having this moment too where I kind of wondered whether what, Okay, so what we might call metaphysical naturalism. So this idea that the only things that exist are matter in motion, and actually, to be honest, as an atheist, that's what I believe to be true about the world, right? That there is no spiritual

reality. There is nothing transcendent. Um, the only things that exist are a matter in motion. And I remember as I kind of approached, um, the church in downtown Tallahassee that morning, it was just kind of empty and silent and just wondering whether or not there was actually anything else.

And then I walked into church and the church that I went to, um, engaged in the Lord's Supper that morning. And there was a hymn by Ralph Vaughan Williams, and there was, so it was strongly kind of a historical, a historically kind of richly grounded service. I just sat in the pews and listened and was, you know - profoundly moved actually even I haven't said this in many places, but I'll say it here even to the point of tears to be honest because there was an experience there of a God who loved me and from whom I realized I was always running away and Who was who was welcoming me home or is inviting me to come home and to recognize what a sort of broken person I was and what kind of forgiveness that through the Lord Jesus. He was actually offering me. And so there was something about that liturgy, to be honest, of the Lord's Supper and hearing these words, you know, this is my body broken for you. That, and, and blood poured out for the forgiveness of, of sin, um, that invited me into this story about a God and who, who saves a people in history and who renders time and human life meaningful.

For a long time, I really had to think through like, what does this actually mean? What does my faith actually mean for how I practice history? Realizing, I think, how, you know, a historical, um, our own culture is now and thinking as a Christian and as a, as a professor of history at uni now, um, thinking about, well, hold on, this is not what God tells us about history, um, History is this vast treasury. It's incredibly rich. And I think that actually if we steward the past well, if we tend and keep it, we engage with it. I think it holds these profound riches for us.

John Dickson': Many Christians today are striving to be relevant to society. So they shun tradition, which they see as regressive, backward. You see it differently. Is this just because you're a young fuddy duddy?

Producer Kaley (Studio)

Hi, Producer Kaley here, just chiming in to say that when Research Al heard the tape of John saying ‘fuddy-duddy’, he said “What the heck!” He’s brilliant but he’s a Millennial … and John … isn’t!!

For those, like Al, who don’t know the word ‘fuddy-duddy’, the Oxford English Dictionary tells us:

fuddy-duddy (noun, slang): An old-fashioned person an ineffectual old fogy. Earliest known usage 1904. First OED evidence is from 1904. Origin unknown.

It's a 'Band 3' frequency word in the OED. Bands run from 8 (very high-frequency words) to 1 (very low-frequency). Fuddy-duddy typically occurs about 0.02 times per million words in modern written English.

Forgive me. Undeceptions only approved of my full OED subscription a few weeks ago … and it is WAY too fun!!

Back to our two fuddy-duddies!!!

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: It's just because I'm excessively nerdy. Um, Okay, so a couple of things. First thing is, I don't know that, um, tradition for tradition's sake is not kind of what I'm on about. Um, actually, I think what I'm trying to say is that there are incredibly rich, um, practices historically throughout Christian history.

And when I say that, what I mean is like spiritual practices, um, like this thing called Protestant meditation, for example, um, night watches, liturgical hours, things like this, um, incredibly rich historical spiritual practices,

intellectual practices, um, traditions, for example, of engaging with sacredness and beauty, which Christians, um, from a variety of different denominations and traditions have practiced over the centuries, and which I think can be more helpful than ever today in a world in which A, we're kind of ignorant of it, or B, we kind of just tend to, um, I think like, to be honest, almost excavate the world of any kind of sense of God's profound transcendence today.

John Dickson (Studio)

Meditation is a bit of a 21st-century buzz word, and most often linked with eastern spirituality like Buddhist traditions. But in the late 16th century, Church of England bishop Joseph Hall wrote several books on ‘Protestant Meditation’ - to orientate the soul and ignite its love for God.

In her book, Sarah encourages us to try out this practice – Christians have been practising meditation for centuries because it offered a deep and rewarding way to connect with God’s word.

Even if you don’t believe, why not give it a go. Take a passage of Scripture that means something to you and dwell on it in silence. See what this ancient practice brings. You never know what new discoveries come from very old traditions.

Augustine (who also meditated on God’s word, by the way), wrote of his own conversion: “Late have I loved you, O Beauty ever ancient, ever new, late have I loved you!

Sarah Irving Stonebreaker: You know, Isaac Watts used this beautiful metaphor, the vast treasury, um, of the past. If we lean into that kind of vast treasury of the past, um, um, I think there's a kind of richness there that will actually be profoundly attractive.

Um, and the gospel, like, to be honest, and I'll say this as somebody who, like I mentioned, has been an atheist and has become a Christian. The promise of a God who loves you and who has who will forgive you if only you will, you will come to Him and trust in Him. That offer of what Christians call the gospel. That profound and beautiful truth is something which is, which is attractive regardless of what we, of how we try to dress it up. So I think, you know, forget about trying to be cool.

John Dickson': Yeah, I mean, one of the things your book is this confidence that actually eternally true things can be preserved in these traditions that are the most relevant things, if on a level, don't seem relevant They certainly seem cool. But in a sense, the more you strive to be cool for this moment, you're actually going to lose the next moment. Whereas are things that are going to sustain us throughout.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Yeah. I mean, look, here's a pretty beautiful example of that. One of the things that I've found is that giving people the Book of Common Prayer and talking about, and I've talked about this with people who are young and cool, and believe it or not, the, the funny thing is, um, the, the liturgical prayers as a kind of devotional device to this kind of idea that actually there are these long historical traditions of structuring our time and kind of rendering it Um, meaningful and engaging in like, so what's often called the daily offer.

So in other words, you know, set hours during the day where people pray. I've found that that has had such a resonance with people in a way that is just totally surprising.

FIVE MINUTE JESUS

Let's press pause. I've got a 5 min Jesus.

There's an aversion in modern Christianity to fixed prayers, liturgies, prayer books and all that. And it is a very modern worry. Hardly anyone in church history would recognise a modern Christian church service or a modern Christian private prayer time or devotional.

The demise of fixed prayers like in the Prayer Book coincided with the rise of the seemingly superior values of individualism and authenticity. Unless my devotional practices (public or private) are my own—formed by me, expressing who I am in this moment—then they probably lack true significance.

There's a related aversion to anything 'rote'. Rote learning in school went out decades ago — it was thought to externalise knowledge, instead of helping a student imbibe the knowledge through personal discovery.

'Worship by rote' went out with education by rote—rote prayers, it was thought, are a mere shell of religion, not the heartfelt centre.

But I'm with the ancients on this. Ancient pagan writers like Plato, Epicurus, Cicero, Plutarch, and so on, all knew that rote learning could of course be abused, so that a student never moved beyond fixed material. But they also insisted that rote learning was the foundation of genuine intellectual creativity. The person who learnt to recite large portions of Homer's Iliad would, over time, gain an ear for the best Greek grammar and poetry. Those who memorised the best speeches of the most famous orators eventually imbibed what makes for compelling rhetoric so that they could produce their own.

They thought about rote learning a bit like the way musicians think about learning scales and learning the standards of a musical genre. This doesn't hinder authenticity and individuality; it provides a platform for them.

That's how I think about the prayers of the Prayer Book. They are the best of Christian history. They lift me above my own ordinary self. I don't want to pray just according to my ever-changing spiritual mood. Praying how I feel in

the moment might be authentically ‘me’; but I’m not sure the best spiritually resides in me! I’m a pretty low bar. Set prayer lifts me. I’ll put in the shownotes my favourite Prayer Book prayers.

More importantly, Jesus himself taught a fixed, permanent prayer, to be said word for word, by anyone who wanted to be his student.

We call it the Lord’s Prayer, or the Our Father, because it begins, “Our Father, in heaven, hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily break. Forgive us our sins (or ‘trespasses’ in old language), as we forgive those who sin against us. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil.” Then there’s a little extra bit the church added a few decades later “For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.”

There is a modern evangelical aversion even to seeing the Lord’s Prayer as a fixed prayer. This would seem totally weird to just about every Christian from the first century to the 19th century. I mean, one of the earliest Christian documents outside the NT is the Didache — from the end of the first century — and it urges people to say the Lord’s Prayer three times a day.

The modern aversion to this is sometimes justified by reference to the word ‘how’ in Matt 6:9 (Jesus introduces his prayer with the words: “This is how you should pray … Our Father in heaven, etc”).

Some say Jesus just meant, “This is the ‘how’, the ‘style’, the ‘vibe’ of prayer”.

But there’s no ‘How’ in the Greek. It is literally “Thusly you are to pray …”

And in the Lord’s Prayer recorded in Luke 11:2, it is even clearer. Jesus introduces his Lord’s Prayer with “When you pray, say … Our Father in Heaven” etc …

Contemporary culture sometimes dismisses traditions like saying of the Lord's Prayer daily as inauthentic.

I'd say refusing to pray set prayers—and settling only for my own creations—is evidence I believe in my own soul more than external truths.

I've grown tired of chasing authenticity, striving for what is new.

I'm sick of Christian 'fads'—faddish books, faddish preachers, faddish programs …

I want an anchor. I don't want to be 'at sea'.

I don't want to be captive to my little moment of Christian history—the 'blip' of my culture.

I want to swim in the great stream of the very best of Christian history. Not just the Prayer Book. But, above all, the Lord's Prayer.

Whether you are a Christian or not, I'd suggest saying the Lord's Prayer, with understanding, at least daily. And see what new things this most ancient thing brings.

You can press play now.

John Dickson': So for my skeptical listener, what do you reckon will be the best thing to do? would of them them taking history I mean, we've talked the need for Christians to do it, and you've given a theological reason for that. That's great. But, but you see actual benefits for just average listener taking history as a subject more seriously, reading a little about history, thinking about history? what they get ethically, maybe even spiritually?

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Well, here's the thing. I think if you live a life in which you are kind of rootless and you don't understand or really know much about the incredible riches of history, You don't really know anything about, not only about where you've come from or where, you know, your, your society or your, your nation, your community has come from, but you're also kind of, you're also kind of depriving yourself of the incredible kind of riches of the, the historical, um, processes and the culture that has been created through the centuries. I mean, when you look at the whole history of, say, um, of literature and art and, um, and poetry and music through huge, like, cultural movements like the Renaissance, um, or the Enlightenment in Europe, or when you look at the kind of revolutions which shaped the modern world, like the American Revolution or the French Revolution, there is a kind of, incredibly rich, like long conversation there about some of the most important kind of ideas which we have to kind of engage in, right?

There are incredibly rich conversations about what it means to be human. Um, what is the nature of a good life? What is a life that's lived well? Um, how society, like how ought society be, society to be organized? They're historical, like Plato, you know, back in the ancient world, throughout history from Plato onwards, people have been discussing these kind of profoundly important ideas.

And so actually, if we, even as like a non Christian, we re engage with the past, you actually find that really the most important questions that face us today as a society, like how do we live? Do we have obligations to the poor, to the outcast. Um, what is a life lived well? Is there something, is there a transcendent ground to something like goodness or truth or beauty, morality, ethics?

There are long conversations about this which stretch back for centuries, which we don't even know about unless we actually engage with the past and actually I think C. S. Lewis put it best when he says, you know, if you join a conversation at 11 o'clock, which began at eight, you miss the full bearing of what's being said.

BREAK 2

CLIP - BBC

John Dickson (Studio)

That's a clip from a BBC satirical education video. An English gentleman from the early 17th century is trying to convince you to move to Northern Ireland!

King James I became the first British monarch to rule over Scotland, England and Ireland in 1603. James was a protestant, and wanted to strengthen his rule particularly in Ireland, where he faced rebellion from the Catholic, Irish-speaking population.

He and his advisers hatched a plan to encourage people from England and Scotland to move to the northern part of Ireland. It would become known as the Ulster Plantation. Land was confiscated from the Gaelic Irish peoples and given to loyal British subjects. Thousands upon thousands of Scots and Brits settled in Northern Ireland.

Some would say this was the British Empire developing its colonisation tactics before exporting them throughout the world.

Among those who supported the Ulster Plantation was Francis Bacon – the so-called 'founder of modern science' who also served as Attorney General and then Lord Chancellor for King James I.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: So, for example, one of the most well known statesmen in 17th century England, Sir Francis Bacon, um, Bacon, like during this time, England is establishing colonies or plantations in Ireland and in North America. And so the temptation is, I think, to kind of look at everyone in that era, particularly someone like Bacon, who was, you know, most powerful, uh, his Lord Chancellor, briefly, and to think of him as nothing but an ideological apologist for colonization.

READING

No man can, by care taking, as the Scripture saith, add a cubit to his stature, in this little model of a man's body: but in the great frame of kingdoms and commonwealths, it is in the power of princes or estates, to add amplitude and greatness to their kingdoms.

Francis Bacon, 'Of Plantations'

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: And yet, actually, when you, when you actually uncover Bacon's story and you realize that He writes this. essay, for example, called On Plantations, where he says, I'll quote him, I like a plantation in a pure soil, that is where people are not displanted to the end to plant in others for else it is an extirpation rather than a plantation.

So here's bacon and yet his exhibiting these kind of misgivings about how the British are conducting their colonies. Now, here's the complex thing about that. And here's the really, here's the thing that we can kind of learn from this, right? Because he doesn't fit into our categories. Um, he's not, he's neither an ideological apologist for colonization, um, and he shouldn't be kind of dismissed or canceled from history.

But at the same time, he didn't, he doesn't completely oppose colonization either, right? So when we kind of deal with a, with a kind of historical case, historical figure, like, like Francis Bacon, for example, we learn to actually deal with something of that ethical complexity of the past, those tensions, the fact that they don't fit easily into our ideological categories.

And I think if we can do that, then we can actually kind of recognize that when we, when we have some historical literacy, we can learn to engage with history without kind of reducing it just to ideology.

John Dickson: It feels like like, um, there's humility come from this.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Yeah, I think there really is. Um, and, you know, one of the things that I tell my students at the beginning of every, um, every semester, every kind of, you know, class that you teach, is I basically say, look, you know, when we study this class this semester, we're going to come across, um, people who are going to hold ideas and views that we are going to profoundly disagree with.

But, and this goes for, you know, sort of all kinds of views, right? Um, I'm teaching history that, you know, stretches back to the ancient world at the moment. But here's the thing. Um, what I want you guys to do when we do this is to try to use empathy and cultivate, and I sort of talk about it as an intellectual virtue, try to cultivate a kind of sense of intellectual humility.

Um, that doesn't mean that we can't become moral relativists or anything, not at all. But what we try to do is to kind of understand that people in the past saw things, um, in very different ways than we saw them today than we, than we might understand these things today. And that actually, even by engaging with these kinds of, with these kinds of stories, we cultivate that sense of empathy. We cultivate a bit of intellectual humility. We use, we lose a bit of, I'm going to quote C. S. Lewis again, because I can,, we lose that kind of, remember how C. S. Lewis used this phrase, chronological snobbery, right? Like we lose a bit of that and then we can cultivate something of intellectual humility. And that helps us. I think it helps us be

human, right? Like it, it helps us actually engage with others with whom we might profoundly disagree.

John Dickson': And maybe helps us see ourselves too as the same mixed bag.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Yeah. Yeah, it really does. Um, you know, here, here's another kind of, um, fascinating example of, of what you just said, like how it might help us see ourselves slightly differently.

Um, One of the, one of the stories, like one of the figures well known to your American audiences, Frederick Douglass, um, you know, he writes, but I think actually your British and Australian audiences may not have heard of Frederick Douglass, um, that much, but, so Douglass, you know, a great abolitionist, right, before the American Civil War. And he writes this, um, he gives this speech, writes this pamphlet called *What to a Slave is the Fourth of July?* And in that pamphlet, um, there's a, there's a, um, he calls out that, you know, this profound sin of slavery. And yet he does it without actually condemning America. And he actually says, I do not despair of this country.

READING

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? I answer; a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.

To him, your celebration is a sham; your boasted liberty, an unholy license; your national greatness, swelling vanity; your sounds of rejoicing are empty and heartless; your denunciation of tyrants, brass fronted impudence; your shouts of liberty and equality, hollow mockery; your prayers and hymns, your sermons and thanksgivings, with all your religious parade and solemnity, are, to Him, mere bombast, fraud, deception, impiety, and

hypocrisy -- a thin veil to cover up crimes which would disgrace a nation of savages.

There is not a nation on the earth guilty of practices more shocking and bloody than are the people of the United States, at this very hour.

… Allow me to say, in conclusion, notwithstanding the dark picture I have this day presented of the state of the nation, I do not despair of this country. There are forces in operation which must inevitably work the downfall of slavery. "The arm of the Lord is not shortened," and the doom of slavery is certain. I, therefore, leave off where I began, with hope.

Frederick Douglass, 1852

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: So here's somebody who in the past has more reason, we would say probably than anyone, right? To, to be tempted to completely condemn or to cancel or whatever term we want to call it today. And yet he says, he calls out sin. And yet he says, and yet. I do not despair of this country, and he maintains hope.

Now, just getting back to what you said about, um, history enabling us to see something of ourselves more clearly, the reason that Frederick Douglass can do that is because as a Christian he can see that this, what he calls sin, right, this profound brokenness that lies at the heart, like collectively as nations, but also at the heart of every human being, which is is something which is universal.

So we can identify that there is this thing called sin and yet it exists in all people. God offers to, as Douglas knew so well, God offers to forgive. Um, and there is hope, but he can do that because he sees that sin is universal. And so anyway, look, we can read a story like Douglas, I think, and then, you know, use that to not only kind of see the history of slavery clearly and so forth, but actually to kind of see a model for how to engage with the sin of

the past without just degenerating into this kind of condemnation and culture wars.

John Dickson': As if we're the righteous ones.

Sarah Irving Stonebraker: Yeah, exactly.

John Dickson (Studio)

At the outbreak of WWII, C.S. Lewis made a wry and pointed observation in a sermon at St Mary's Church, Oxford: "Good philosophy must exist," he said, "if for no other reason, because bad philosophy needs to be answered". Lewis frequently pointed out how much bad philosophy there was in Britain at the time, and he believed Christians had a sacred duty to remedy the situation, not by mere "Christian apologetics" but by superior thinking about all intellectual matters. Dr Sarah Irving Stonebraker, herself a one-time academic at Oxford, has written a powerful call to superior thinking on the matter of history. A rephrasing of Lewis' point seems relevant: Good history must exist, if for no other reason, because bad history needs to be answered.

Sarah's argument for taking history seriously is first-and-foremost a call to truth in a post-truth world. We have entered an "ahistorical age", she tells us, in which we are nearly incapable of speaking meaningfully about the past, except perhaps as part of the "culture wars." Commentators today (and some professional historians) are certainly apt to use historical stories to score moral or political points, whether about sex, science, racism, religion, nationalism, the West, or whatever. Some of this "presentism", as Sarah calls it, is valid. A great deal of it is selective and wrong. Good history, of the sort championed by Sarah, will offer clarity and correction. It will refuse to wield factoids as weapons of war. It will invite the voices of the

past to speak for themselves, as if at their own trial. Sometimes we—the modern jury—may find our ancestors guilty as charged. There's a lot of that nowadays! Other times they will prove us guilty of slander and evidence-tampering.

NEXT EPISODE

If you want to find out more about anything you heard on today's episode, head to undeceptions.com. We pop a bunch of articles and videos and links to where you'll find the books we refer to in each episode. It's a treasure trove of resources if you're keen on this topic. There's also a transcript of the episode, if that's helpful to you.

While you're there, would you consider donating to the work of Undeceptions? This is an expensive project to run - we love doing it and have a huge list of topics to cover for the future. I don't think we'll ever run out of ideas. But you could help us keep going by donating - every little bit counts. There's a big yellow 'donate' button on the website. Thank you so much.

If you have questions about this episode, or any of our other episodes, you can send it my way! Send us an audio or text message via the links in show notes and I'll try and answer it in this season's Q&A episode.

See ya.

CREDITS

Undeceptions is hosted by me, John Dickson, produced by Kaley Payne and directed by Mark "Herodatus 'I've got a story to tell and I'm gonna tell it'" Hadley.

Alasdair Belling is a writer and researcher.

Siobhan McGuiness is our online librarian.

Lyndie Leviston remains my wonderful assistant.

Santino Dimarco is Chief Finance and Operations Consultant.

Editing by Richard Hamwi.

Our voice actor today was Yannick Lawry.

Special thanks to our series sponsor Zondervan for making this Undeception possible.

Undeceptions is the flagship podcast of Undeceptions.com - letting the truth out.
