

Guest editorial: Studying history is essential for the strength of our democracy

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Donald Trump recently told a large crowd at Regent University in Virginia Beach, Va., that if elected president he would defend religious liberty, champion evangelical values and repeal the so-called Johnson Amendment forbidding clergy from using their pulpits to endorse political candidates.

His message drew loud cheers from supporters gathered at the university founded by televangelist and former GOP presidential candidate Pat Robertson.

Within earshot of Trump's voice, in a building adjacent to the Regent chapel, sat several hundred Christian historians, most of them evangelicals.

They were at Robertson's university to attend the biennial meeting of the Conference on Faith and History. The topic of the conference was "Christian Historians and the Challenges of Race, Gender and Identity."

When Trump took the stage at Regent, Susan Fletcher, a historian who works for the Christian parachurch group The Navigators, was lecturing on how she talks about race with visitors to the Colorado Springs, Colo., organization. A session titled "The Inclusive Classroom" included papers on how to incorporate women and people of color into Christian college American history classrooms.

These thoughtful and nuanced presentations, and many similar sessions, stood in stark contrast to the way the GOP presidential nominee talks about race and gender.

While I am sure that some of the evangelical historians at Regent will cast their vote for Trump in November, I think it is safe to say most of them will not.

Many share certain Christian beliefs—the primacy of a born-again experience, the inspiration of the Bible, the need to evangelize the world, to name a few—with the evangelicals at the Trump rally. But these historians articulated a view of race and gender in the United States that led them to disqualify Trump as a viable presidential candidate. Not all evangelicals think and vote in the same way.

Many conference attendees talked about the Christian doctrine of the *Imago Dei*, or the belief that all human beings are created in the image of God and thus have inherent worth, regardless of gender, race or social standing.

As Christian students of the past, they strive to tell the stories of all human beings. The goal of such teaching and writing is not political correctness but a fundamental belief in the dignity of individuals. Everyone's story counts.

When Trump disparages women and people of different races and religions, he dehumanizes them. He sends the message that some human beings are not as important as others. In the process he fails to recognize the *Imago Dei* in all of God's human creation.

Historians know a few things about this kind of dehumanizing rhetoric. We have studied its manifestation in the past and are trained to recognize it in the present.

For example, historians have the responsibility to remind the country that "Make America Great Again" is a historical statement that should raise a lot of questions among American citizens. When was America "great," and do we really want to return to such an era of "greatness"?

If America needs to be made great again, then at what point did it lose its greatness? Although historians are not always in the business of moralizing about the past, they are in the business of explaining what happened in the past as honestly and as thoroughly as possible.

Any politician who wants to make America great again must come to grips with the fact that African-Americans were slaves and the victims of Jim Crow laws. Women were second-class citizens in a patriarchal society that did not give them voting rights. These were the kinds of themes explored from a Christian point of view rooted in the *Imago Dei* at the conference.

Historians can remind us what happened in the past so that we can make a more informed decision about whether or not we want to return to the golden age of “greatness” our candidates want to restore.

History helps us judge whether this golden age was truly “great” for all Americans. The study of the past is thus essential to citizenship and the strength of our democratic experiment in self-government.

John Fea is chair of the history department at Messiah College in Mechanicsburg, Pa. He blogs daily at www.thewayofimprovement.com. Follow him on Twitter @johnfea1