

Names and Dates

By Urmila Devi Dasi

THE ELEVEN-, twelve-, and thirteen-year-olds raise their hands with questions.

"Do we need to know the difference between the Constitution and the Articles of Confederation?"

"Will there be questions on the test about the Revolutionary War?"

"Do we really need to know this stuff?"

During the years I helped write the American history textbook used in many ISKCON schools, I also often asked myself, "Do our children really need to know this stuff? What will they *do* with their knowledge of history?"

Srila Prabhupada told *gurukula* teachers that students must know the most important facts of their country's history. The children should not appear to be fools, he said.

So we teach our children history. But we obviously have a different view of what history is about. As devotees of Krsna, the main way we identify ourselves is not with our nation but with the Supreme Lord who lives eternally in the spiritual world. And the material world with all its nations is just a flash in eternal time. So when our children learn history, they see it in a different perspective.

But although we are spiritual beings, we are born into this material world, and that means being born in a particular country. So we have to deal with that. People commonly allude to historical persons and events. So our children should be familiar with what is assumed to be common knowledge.

Moreover, as future teachers of Krsna consciousness, our children need to have not only a theology but a vision of how that theology can apply to present domestic and international problems. By studying how to apply spiritual principles to past events, they can more easily analyze modern problems and propose solutions with some depth of understanding.

For example, in our American history course we ask the students, "Name the problems that arose between the Native Americans and the pioneers. In what modern situation do we find the same kinds of problems? What spiritual advice can we give in such situations? Use one quote from Prabhupada's books."

When studying America's Civil War, we assign the following essay: "Srila Prabhupada teaches us how to relate to different types of people from a spiritual point of view. One should help and teach those less advanced, make friends with equals, and serve those more advanced. Materially, people generally exploit those who are lower, try to criticize and tear down those who are equal, and are envious of those who are higher. Show how the dealings between the

North and the South after the war were on the material platform. Describe in at least one hundred words how relationships after the war could have been resolved from a spiritual point of view."

Studying history also gives our students a scriptural basis for their attitudes toward concepts such as civil rights and democracy, institutions such as labor unions, and events such as wars and revolutions.

Let's take the example of labor unions. When studying scripture the child learns that people are most happy in a simple agrarian society where *varnasrama* is the social system. Then the student learns how his nation rejected such a life for industrialization. He learns how industrialization drew workers from farms and cottage industry to the factories, where exploitation of workers through long hours, low pay, and dangerous conditions sparked the need for unions.

The study of history does more than influence our children's attitudes about major trends, events, and governments. Our children can better understand contemporary society when they know the cultural and historical influences that shape it. For example, because Srila Prabhupada understood how the cruelty and degradation of European kings led to revolutions, he knew that a modern Westerner would associate "king" with tyranny and exploitation. When he presented monarchy as the ideal system of government, therefore, he often emphasized the contrast between Vedic and medieval kings.

Our children can use knowledge of history to give examples of the truth of scriptural predictions about the results of good and bad work. For example, they study how greed for gold, whether in the California and Alaska gold rushes or in Spain's conquests in the Western hemisphere, led to ruin, cruelty, and personal disappointment.

The students can also learn from good and bad examples of historical figures and gain inspiration to serve Lord Krsna. We may wonder how a materialistic person, no matter how great, could be a devotional inspiration. But Narada Muni, the great sage and devotee, said, "Does not a thing, when applied therapeutically, cure a disease that is caused by that very same thing?" So mundane qualities, when used to serve Lord Krsna, can become glorious. Our children examine, Does this famous person have some quality I could also use to serve the Lord? If so, is there an example of a devotee who has used this quality?

Here are some examples of inspiration from American history: John Hancock is famous for his bold signature in defiance of the British king. A child may suggest Hanuman, who boldly allowed the demon Ravana to capture him so that Hanuman could assess the demon's weaknesses and set the city on fire. Patrick Henry is famous for saying he would rather die than live without liberty. A child may think of Haridasa Thakura, who kept chanting Krsna's name even when the local government official had him beaten for practicing Krsna consciousness. Nathan Hale is known for devotion to his country. The Vedic king Prthu is famous for working for the welfare of all of his citizens. We might think it difficult to find devotional inspiration from the traitorous example of Benedict Arnold. Yet Ravana's brother Vibhisana became a traitor to his nation to serve Lord Rama.

Finally, when our children study history they can gain a perspective on current events. How many great wars, heroes, and civilizations are no more than names in a history book? And what to speak of ordinary people, who are forgotten after a generation or so? Our children should learn to see beyond worldly events, knowing that these events are ultimately insignificant.

Our children gain this perspective not only from the way we study history but from how much time we give it. Prabhupada told us, "Don't bother much." So rather than what I was subjected to in school—practically ten years of names and dates—we concentrate our study during the two or three years when children can apply some depth of thought to history. We also focus on what Dr. Bruce Wilkinson in "The Seven Laws of the Learner" calls the "irreducible minimum." Our children need to learn only those facts that will enable them to understand history and apply that understanding. We don't want to teach children facts for the sake of facts.

Could our children realize these goals from merely any history class or textbook? Yes, but a materialistic history book will present only a materialistic understanding.

Although a Krsna conscious study of mundane history can help our children in their practical life and spiritual realizations, the greatest benefit comes from direct study of genuinely important history. That history is found in scriptures such as the *Puranas*, *Ramayana*, and *Mahabharata*. By learning the histories of Lord Krsna and His devotees, our children will gain not only knowledge and its application but spiritual wisdom and bliss.

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