

We can't pretend Americans have always favored religious freedom

Bill Tammeus | Mar. 6, 2013 A small c catholic

The 18th-century French writer Voltaire, rarely short of words or insight, once declared history to be "no more than the portrayal of crimes and misfortunes."

There's much truth in that, but only if historians don't turn into myth-makers who prejudicially select what to include.

Consider, for example, [the anti-Catholic bias](#) [1] found so frequently among non-Catholic citizens in this nation's early years. I recently was surprised to discover that a 19th-century Presbyterian I've long admired was an eager purveyor of such trash.

Indeed, if you read [the Wikipedia entry](#) [2] on Elijah Parish Lovejoy, you will discover he was both an abolitionist and a defender of freedom of the press (indeed, Lovejoy, a Presbyterian pastor, was martyred defending that freedom in 1837), but there's not a word there about his anti-Catholic smack talk.

I happened across evidence of the latter in a terrific four-volume history of Abraham Lincoln called *Lincoln and his World* by Richard Lawrence Miller. In the second volume, "Prairie Politician: 1834-1842," Miller describes the way Whig Party members (Lincoln was one) were accusing President Martin Van Buren, a Democrat, of being "part of a Roman Catholic plot to overthrow American democracy."

For some time, Miller writes, "Elijah Lovejoy has been sounding alarms in his *St. Louis Observer* newspaper, 'Popery is spreading in our country to an alarming degree, and this too entirely by foreign influence, and by the aid of foreign money.' " He then railed against "the influence of foreign Papists."

I would not describe Lovejoy as the crazy uncle in our Presbyterian basement, though clearly these words and sentiments are an embarrassment today. Rather, I suspect Lovejoy's reputation got cleaned up as part of a much broader attempt at historical myth-making, one that seeks to promote the lovely idea that America always has been a bastion of religious tolerance and freedom.

Sometimes the difference between history and myth is slim, indeed. But even though there can be much truth in myth, history that repeats the myth without offering the necessary corrections of the record can -- and often does -- cause disastrous memory failure.

That's what happened to Lovejoy and, more broadly, to the collective American memory about our alleged allegiance to religious tolerance.

Kenneth C. Davis, author of *Don't Know Much About History* and *A Nation Rising*, got it right in [this Smithsonian piece](#) [3] a couple of years ago, when he wrote that talk of our people's long commitment to religious freedom, pluralism and tolerance "is an American myth. The real story of religion in America's past is an often awkward, frequently embarrassing and occasionally bloody tale that most civics books and high-school texts either paper over or shunt to the side. And much of the recent conversation about America's ideal of

religious freedom has paid lip service to this comforting tableau."

Indeed, I bore witness to this historical amnesia in 1994. A year after [the deadly fire](#) [4] at the Branch Davidians' Mount Carmel home outside Waco, Texas, I spent time there researching what happened and concluded in a series of articles for *The Kansas City Star* that "at Mount Carmel the government, almost willfully disregarding the sanctity of religious liberty, blundered its way to disaster. ... It was incredible overkill that, evidence shows, could have been avoided."

My writing then was not a defense of the indefensible actions of David Koresh, the Branch Davidian leader. Nor is Miller's writing a condemnation of Elijah Lovejoy's admirable stances in favor of press freedom and against slavery.

But if we are to write accurate history and -- more to the point -- learn from it, we must not leave out what Voltaire called a "portrayal of crimes and misfortunes."

Abe Lincoln himself had plenty of idiosyncrasies and shortcomings. To leave them out of a historical portrait of him not only would be misleading, but also would fail to offer the reassuring message that even broken, faulty people can do heroic deeds.

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[1] <http://americamagazine.org/issue/281/article/last-acceptable-prejudice>

[2] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elijah_Parish_Lovejoy

[3] <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/history-archaeology/Americas-True-History-of-Religious-Tolerance.html?c=y&page=1>

[4] <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/waco/>

[5] <http://billtammeus.typepad.com/>

[6] http://www.amazon.com/They-Were-Just-People-Holocaust/dp/0826218601/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1299296756&sr=1-1

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