

THE WALDORF APPROACH TO HISTORY

The Waldorf approach to history for children in the middle school years is based on their need to empathize with the actions of historical figures. Pre-teens and young teens tend to live very much in their feelings and they can relate to the human stories of people from the past. At the same time, and without ever moralizing, one can, by carefully choosing one's stories, uplift the child's emotions by telling or reading stories of people worthy of emulation. Hildegard of Bingen or Saladin are two figures which come to mind for this study.

Of course, there will be many historical figures who are not particularly worthy of imitation but another part of growing up is to realize that life is rarely black or white. The deplorable actions of people in the past should be recognized for what they were – but should also be kept firmly within the context of the culture and the historic period. People of 1000 or even 500 years ago were not like us and so although we cannot condone the pillaging of the Vikings or of the Mongol army, we can recognize that things were different then. And we can also acknowledge the positive which eventually came from the negative – in this case the cultural advances Europeans gained both from the Viking and Mongolian peoples. As young teens and pre-teens can so easily slip into judgment or cynicism, it is good to show by example – by the conversations you have with your child – that history and life are usually more complicated than they might sometimes seem.

The Waldorf approach to history is also essentially a *symptomatic approach*. This means that one would try, via biography and via vivid descriptions of geography, culture and society, to give broad *symptoms* of the historical period being examined. So one is not obliged to give a long and tedious chronology – instead, one could pick individuals (Charlemagne) and movements (the Crusades) which characterize the times.

By taking this approach one is freed from feeling the need to cover everything that happened during the Middle Ages! And when looking over this book you'll see I certainly skipped a lot – for instance, there is no mention of Germanic history involving Otto and Frederick Barbarossa. The Scottish Wars and the development of Russia get just about no mention either. Bearing that in mind, if any of those subjects appeal to you, you could skip some that I give and then make this study truly individualized and meaningful to you and your child.

One thing though – I think it is very important to present non-European parts of the world *before* presenting European contact with them. If one only talks about, for instance, China and India in relation to their contact with Europeans, then a child can be left with a very one-sided approach to world history.

Please refer to Christoph Lindenberg's *Teaching History: Suggested Themes for the Curriculum in Waldorf Schools* for more on how Waldorf teachers work with themes from history.