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HISTORY FOR THEOLOGY AND MISSION

In the Cambridge University Library index to the reference section, under the heading 'Historical Sciences' there appears the entry 'Demonology and Witchcraft'. By choosing to hold a symposium today on 'History and the Christian Faith', the Victoria Institute shows that it does not share such an estimate of history's associations. History and faith necessarily impinge on each other. Previous papers have explored other dimensions of their relationship, but this one concerns itself with some implications of recent developments in history. It offers a survey of two contemporary trends in the theory and practice of the subject, examines considerations shaping a proper Christian response and then engages directly with the question: what is the value of history for believers today? Much has been written about the use of history: does it have an Christian use? Can history subserve Christian theology and mission in the contemporary world?

The first of the two broad trends is the decline of Church history, at least in its traditionally accepted form. Church history was commonly regarded, and even more commonly organised, as a discipline distinct from history. The story of the Church was separable from the history of the world and was the concern of a race apart, Church historians, whose task was thought to have undoubted value for the believing community. Nineteenth-century theological colleges normally had only three or four tutors, but one of them was sure to be a Church historian. Many of them, it appears, spent their time chiefly in teaching heresies. But that is entirely understandable: they were explaining to candidates for the ministry what to avoid - that is, they were doing something self-evidently *useful*. A view of Church history as a distinct discipline along these lines still lives on. In volume three of *A History of the Methodist Church in Great Britain*, published this year, there appears a passage discussing the growth of Wesleyan foreign missions.

"The theologian may be permitted to see here the activity of God . . . At the same time, the Church historian will point to the vision and initiative of one man, Dr. Thomas Coke . . . The secular historian will not fail to mention other factors . . .

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Even though, in this case, the subject-matter is the same, it is assumed that there will be entirely different approaches appropriate to the theologian, the Church historian and the secular historian. If the Church historian contrasts with the theologian, there is just as sharp a contrast between the Church historian and the secular historian.

Such an estimate is receding. Historians of Christianity are taking a broader view. Any account of Christian developments, it is increasingly felt, must take note of 'secular' factors. The barriers between 'ecclesiastical' and 'general' history have been broken down, so that the subject-matter of traditional Church history has been allocated largely to the history of ideas or to social history. Thus it is recognised that doctrine has been affected by external influences. 'Nearly all important theological developments', Sir Richard Southern wrote in a review last year, 'are brought about by pressures, social or otherwise, from outside the theological system . . .'.² And a work published five years ago argued that the pattern of Church growth since the eighteenth century in Britain was the effect of external constraints far more than of decisions taken by ministers, evangelists or church members.³ There is room for debate about the relative weight of factors in bringing about any change, but a new consensus is emerging in support of the premise that secular forces must be carefully analysed in any study of the history of the Church.

At first sight the Christian might feel that this is a disturbing trend. There is less emphasis on religion as religion, and it might be suspected that this is nothing other than a secularisation of scholarship in the wake of the secularisation of society. Certainly the Christian would be likely to suspect that the idea of the *usefulness* of the story of the past for believers today had been allowed to evaporate. To that point we must return, but here it should be recognised that there are substantial gains from the reintegration of Church and secular history. First, the primary perception leading to this shift is surely valid. The separation of the religious from the secular is artificial. 'Church history' is very much of an abstraction: 'churchmen' have been people of their age, 'the Church' subject to all the pressures of the times. Religion is not separate from life today; it was no more separate in the past. Christian people were also producers, consumers, political animals. Hence to see Christians as part of their world is to take a step towards the truth. Secondly, the word 'Church', and worse the word 'ecclesiastical', accurately represent a historical practice that has been heavily institutional in its concerns. The very terminology has a deterrent effect on the intended audience. The Christian public, and especially the Evangelical public, know that vital Christianity is not embalmed in institutions, but historians have used descriptions of their task that encourage the impression that the Christian religion is to be identified with its institutional expression. Too often the label has been all too accurate. Ecclesiastical history has often focussed on hierarchies and bureaucracies to the neglect of popular currents in Christian life. It is far harder for the newer historical approach to neglect the weightier matters of the gospel. Thirdly, the separating-off of Church history was damaging to ordinary history. Except perhaps for the Middle Ages and the Reformation, most periods were described by mainstream historians with the religion left out, or tacked on in the manner of an appendix. How

often school history books have relegated Christianity to a tiny 'culture-and-religion' chapter near the end. The effect has been to neglect the Christian presence in the past. The demolition of the barrier between Church history and secular history means not only that the secular is given its place in the account of the Church, but that the Church is allowed to take its due place in the secular. Such a trend is to be welcomed.

The second broad trend can be summarised as the decline of the idea of value-neutrality in history. Its nature can perhaps best be understood by breaking it down into two separate, but closely-related, developments. The first has been an increasing stress on the conceptual in history as an element alongside - and in some measure determinative of - the empirical. Instead of regarding their task as being largely an empirical one of fact-finding, with generalisation based on the facts as the concluding stage of the operation, historians have come to see it as an exercise in creating and defending conceptual schemes by means of empirical support. Conceptualisation, or 'model-building' as it is often called, precedes or at least accompanies the process of assembling data. It is no longer seen as merely the capstone of the edifice. This shift rests in part on doubts about the existence of 'facts'. Whereas in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians, like most other people, believed that there were such things as independent facts waiting to be discovered, the notion of autonomous and discrete facts, hard building bricks for the historian's structure, has been undermined. 'Facts', it has been noticed, depend on the conceptual scheme of the person relating them, whether in the past or in the present. One man's 'execution of rebels' is another's 'judicial murder of freedom fighters'. Values are embedded in the very language used, so that unimpeachable 'facts' can hardly be propounded. This perception was hidden from the compilers of *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography*, an epitome of one of the great monuments of late nineteenth-century scholarship. Thus it describes Alfred's peace with the Danes, the treaty of Wedmore in 878, as the occasion when Guthrum, the Danish king, 'became a Christian'.⁴ It is highly dubious if a political and military compromise, shortly afterwards abrogated by Guthrum, was the stimulus to his spiritual awakening. The doubt is not over whether Guthrum submitted to Christian baptism, an empirical matter; it is rather over the meaning of that act, including questions over the *ex opere operato* efficacy of baptism, a conceptual matter, that doubt arises. The mental scheme of the writer of the *Concise Dictionary of National Biography* article determined his account of the past. It is increasingly believed that this is always the case with historians. Their conceptualisations embody values; and those values shape their writings. Facts are not sovereign.

The second aspect of the trend is the acceptance that a historian legitimately has a point of view in his studies, a position that entails the rejection of objectivity as traditionally understood. This follows from the first aspect. If history is

conceptually conditioned to a high degree, then each historian, possessing a different conceptual understanding from his fellow, will write history that reflects his own personality. The historian is not passive before material that speaks to him of the past, but plays an active part in constructing his account. His mind has a bias that is unavoidable. It may even help his history if he has an empathy for those about whom he writes. A worker for a political party in the present, for example, may be more able than another historian to appreciate the frustrations of those in the past responsible for maintaining voluntary activities in the community.⁵ Committed history, as it is coming to be called, may reveal more than the exploration of a researcher dedicated only to the ideal of objectivity. But it was true even when, in the later nineteenth century, it was generally supposed not to be, that eminent historians injected a point of view into their work. E.A. Freeman, the historian of the Norman Conquest, for instance, could be carried away by his racial feelings when describing Queen Edith, wife of Edward the Confessor: 'But [Edith] has been charged with far heavier offences than this. She seems to have been in some degree smitten with her husband's love of foreigners'.⁶ Written history has never been objective in the sense of reflecting only the past that is studied; it has always reflected the present too, for it has been shaped by all the forces moulding the historian's mind. What is new is to regard this not as something to be regretted and minimised, but as just and proper.

The decline of the idea of value-neutrality in Anglo-Saxon countries over the last quarter century or so is a consequence of other developments in the discipline. First, there has been the actual practice of committed history. Since the 1960s historians have been more confident in openly flying their colours. A landmark in this development was the publication in 1963 of E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*, an analysis of the processes by which (allegedly) a unitary working class was forged by about 1830. Thompson, though writing as a scholar, was loudly on the side of the working people. His Marxism, far less moderate than it has since become, was the spur to the enterprise. Others have followed in a variety of radical causes of which the latest wave is feminist. Yet this practice of writing from a convinced and expressed point of view has not been confined to the left, and those seeking change. In a recent and illuminating work, Maurice Cowling of Peterhouse, Cambridge, has drawn attention to a tradition of conservative (and Conservative) writers, often associated with that college and normally historians, who have challenged the liberal assumptions dominating English academic life.⁷ Political commitment was allowed to influence historical writing more openly in this tradition than was normal, and, though of long-standing, this approach has come to the fore more markedly in recent years. From very different angles, political convictions have encouraged historians to voice their point of view.

A second influence in the same direction has been of a more theoretical kind. The most obvious challenge has again been Marxist. All historians, Marxists have argued, are influenced by their class interests. Marxist historians themselves have the discernment to ally with the progressive forces in the world, but most others, while believing themselves to be writing in a value-free manner are in reality producing 'bourgeois' history; that is to say, they are supporting the existing capitalist society. The ordinary British empiricist tradition, supposing itself to be engaged in fact-finding and committed to objectivity, has been guilty of self-deception, for in practice it has been committed to such values as the continuance of liberal democracy.⁸ The Marxist case has made most impact, but it has been reinforced by the broad tradition of German historical theory leading in the twentieth century to the sociology of knowledge of Mannheim and the critical theory of Habermas.⁹ According to the sociology of knowledge, men of ideas like historians necessarily reflect their society; and according to critical theory, values are so pervasive that history cannot avoid them. Committed history has received both a stimulus and a theoretical justification from these sources.

Thirdly, and for many British historians most importantly, there has been the influence of other disciplines. Sociology, long neglected in Britain, became a force to be reckoned with in the 1960s. Far more alive to analysing its own premises than history had been, sociology provoked theoretical questioning in what was at the very least a closely adjacent discipline. For some analysts it was in truth the same discipline, so that controversy over the relationship between the two roused historians into considering the boundaries and distinctiveness of their subject.¹⁰ Furthermore, sociology's characteristic concern for generalisation of findings helped shift the balance within history away from fact-finding and towards conceptualisation. Other disciplines made a similar impact: economics, with its model-building, and anthropology, with its systems of inference, both forced on historians a recognition that classical empiricism was not all. The effect, therefore, was to encourage the tendency for historians to abandon the ideal of value-neutrality.

The Christian response to this broad trend will probably be ambiguous. The Christian is likely to be persuaded by the arguments, or else conditioned by the intellectual atmosphere, into some degree of sympathy for the newer position. On reflection, he is bound to admit, at least in principle, that 'facts' are relative to the conceptual schemes of those who propound them and that written history is made in the image and likeness of the historian. The new position therefore offers a more adequate account of how historians in practice operate. He will be the more ready to make the admission when he considers the origin of the empiricist position which is being superseded. Far from being the product of Christian civilisation, it is the fruit of the secularisation of Christian worldview in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.¹¹ He

will shed no tears over the demise of the exaltation of 'facts' when he recalls that they provided an alternative ground of certainty as faith faded in an uncertain world. Consequently the newer position will be appreciated as a shift back towards an understanding of history both more intrinsically just and more in line with the traditional convictions of Christian civilisation.

Yet on the other hand, the Christian is likely to hear alarm bells ringing. He will probably be dismayed by the relativism of the newer position. It appears to make the truth of a historian's statements depend on his subjective perceptions. We seem to lose our grounds for believing that we know about the past. That is worrying for a Christian, whose faith is founded on redemptive events in history. Fears, however, are unnecessary, for the newer position need not lead to the quagmire of unqualified relativism. The reason is that history is not reducible to subjective perceptions. A historical account is the product, not only of a historian's mind, but also of evidence. Documents, memories, archaeological discoveries - these and many other traces of the past exist in the present. Evidence is not unproblematic in itself, but it does give a measure of hard content to history. Historians do change their minds because of evidence: Lord Dacre's second thoughts about the authenticity of the Hitler diaries constitute a celebrated instance. Hence historical conclusions are not a matter of private illumination, but are the result of examining evidence which in principle can be examined by others. There is, therefore, scope for debate on the common ground of the evidence over its proper interpretation. Other practitioners provide a check on the free play of a historian's imagination. What a historian describes may not be 'the facts', but the factual, what the evidence shows, is constitutive of written history. The Christian need not be alarmed by a view of history that he welcomes on other grounds.

The newer view is, in truth, an opportunity for the Christian. The trend is towards a position more favourable to Christian faith, rather than less so. On the older view, a Christian perspective was ruled out of court as an offence against the neutrality of 'objective' history. On the newer view, there is a chance to write history in which a Christian expresses his convictions. Christian history is regarded as a legitimate enterprise. The historian can permit his biblical vision of reality to shape his writing, just as he allows it to shape his life. So it will be useful to set out the Christian convictions that particularly apply to history writing. Two convictions are paramount: belief about God's part in history, providence; and belief about man's part in history, what we can call anthropology.

Providence, it may be suggested, is both general and particular. General providence is the divine guidance of the whole of history from creation to the last day. It is this element that gives the historical process the linear quality, the sense of direction, that dominates western thought but seems so strange to

those who come into contact with the West from, say, Japan. Particular providence is God's intervention in specific events, whether in judgement or mercy. Just as we discern the hand of God at points in our own lives, so we can see it at work in the history of the world. Christian history, as in the past, can be attuned to the ways of providence. Here is a point of view for a Christian historian. But is this perspective available to a writer today? Dr John Richardson of the University of St Andrews has put forward the objection that it is not. He points to the words of Jesus concerning the ignorance of all but the Father of 'that day and that hour', the 'times or seasons',¹² contending that they show that we cannot understand the end of history. If we cannot understand the end, we cannot know God's intentions for the world and so cannot write of his providential activity.¹³ This objection, however, can be answered. The words of Jesus are about the *time* of the end, which we do not know, not about the *nature* of the end, about which we do know. Scripture offers us the expectation that every knee will bow to Jesus Christ before He delivers all authority to the Father. The expectation is certain because the victory has already been won, by Jesus on the cross. The nature of the end of history, that is to say, has been revealed in the middle. In the work of Christ we see the archetypal event, mercy being made available to those who trust in Him, judgement being dispensed to those who do not. We therefore know the goal of the general course of history, and the content of particular divine interventions. General and particular providence are alike illuminated by the cross. Hence there is no reason, at least of a theological order (a practical issue is considered later), why we cannot write of providence working itself out.

The other central Christian conviction about history concerns the human condition. A Christian anthropology, as Dr Richardson insists, is an essential link between Christianity and history.¹⁴ Humanity, the Christian holds, is great but fallen. Man was made in the image of God, but has become the prey of evil. It is sometimes objected that this belief is so abstract as to be of no use in understanding the past, but on the contrary it can offer specific guidance to the historian. A friend researching on the Scottish blood-feuds of the reign of James VI was able to treat the irrational propensity to taking revenge (for most historians inexplicable folly) as an entirely understandable symptom of fallenness. Treating it as natural helped him to pinpoint the occasions when it began to be denounced, so that this Christian conviction actually helped his research. Again, a Christian anthropology holds that man is free but determined. Human beings have the ability, in some sense, to take decisions without external constraint, yet at the same time their behaviour is formed by their environment, natural and human. The issue of whether human activity can be described as 'determined' is central to contemporary discussion in the philosophy of historiography. Christians, with different emphases, would wish to affirm both human freedom (because of their belief in moral responsibility) and determinism (because of their recognition of the influence of circumstance). Once more,

there are practical implications for writing history. The Christian will want to give due weight to economic regularities suggesting that behaviour is determined, and yet will recognise the spontaneity of works of art as expressions of the free spirit. A distinctive anthropology, that is to say, can inform history understood from a Christian perspective.

Granted that there is a Christian vision of the past, incorporating convictions about God and man, there remains a practical problem confronting the would-be Christian historian. If he writes Christian history, will it be read? The problem arises over providence. A historian writing of divine judgement on German militarism, as Sir Herbert Butterfield recommends,¹⁵ is transgressing the accepted conventions of his trade. The supernatural is not discussed in serious history, except as a form of mental aberration. There is a solution: it is possible to conceive of history in terms of providence, but not necessarily to write of it there. When producing a book for the community of scholars, the divine hand, though discerned, need not be described. John Richardson objects to this procedure as a form of intellectual cowardice: surely a Christian should write about all he sees?¹⁶ But a Christian writing for historians knows that their consensus is that there is no God active in the world in discernible ways; many do not believe that a God is there at all. It is folly to write with the eye of faith for those who lack it. The enterprise is bound to fail, and it come perilously close to casting pearls before swine. We should conclude that the Christian has an opportunity to frame Christian history. Whether he writes with all his convictions fully displayed is a matter of judgement. In general, he should not do so in history written for the historical community.

When writing for the Christian community, on the other hand, he need not stay his hand. Christian history, of which providence and Christian anthropology are part and parcel, has great value for the believer. It offers guiding principles for theology and mission. For theology, it supplies a worldview, giving content to a way of looking at the whole world and not just the Church. It undermines the idea of progress; the notion that humanity is advancing towards perfection. Christian history can agree that there has been technical advance, but not that there has been moral advance. And it can point to such evidence as the holocaust of the twentieth century as confirmation of the lack of human progress. Likewise, Christian history will set a question mark against the idea that humanity is degenerating, perhaps already in a state of decadence. It will draw attention to the people in the past who alleged that humanity had then plumbed the depths of depravity, and it will reveal that in no field of human activity has there been an unalloyed golden age. The marriage tie, for example, often thought to be held in unprecedented contempt today, he will show to have been even less respected in the seventeenth century. Instead of progress or degeneration, he will advocate a steady realism. He will recognise that there are disasters in history, as in the sixth century, when half Christendom

was overrun by Islam. But, knowing that God is in charge, he will be able to reveal something of His continuing care. Long centuries after the sixth-century Muslim tide, Christian communities remain in Arab lands. The historian can offer evidence that, despite human fallenness, God is guiding history to its final goal.

For mission, the historian's chief function is to illuminate alternative options, enlarging Christian experience from one generation to many. He can recall forgotten strategies of mission, like the systematic village preaching of the early nineteenth century that rooted the Evangelical Revival in the life of Britain. He can offer warnings about mission. In Luther's quinqucentenary year, when his memory is rightly celebrated, it is for the historian to remind us that even so great a man trusted the sword to enforce religious conformity, to the discredit of the gospel. Knowing the extent of human fallenness, he will not flinch from the task. And the Christian historian can help the believing community to understand the world to which Christians are sent. In particular, he can illustrate how different the world is from its state at any time in the past, and so the risks of attempting to transfer past strategies of mission wholesale into the present. In each of these ways the historian can add depth to the fulfilment by the Church of the commission to spread the gospel throughout the world. Christian history is useful.

The conclusion of this survey of current trends in history and Christian responses must be that the two chief trends are complementary. On the one hand, traditional Church history is in decay, and is being replaced by historical studies that make no attempt to insulate the ecclesiastical from the secular. On the other, the notion of value-neutrality in history has declined. Increasingly it is felt that history may, and must, reflect the personality of the practitioner. It follows that a historian can, when it is wise, reveal his Christian convictions. Christian history, entailing a discernment of the way of providence and an exploration of the implications of a Christian anthropology, has become an option in the scholarly world. Remarkably - and here perhaps we can see providence at work - the two trends have been simultaneous. Church history, with its definite utility, has a replacement in Christian history. Furthermore, Christian history can do better what Church history was expected to do, for it examines the whole of history, not merely a part; and it looks through Christian eyes, not aiming for an unattainable neutrality. History in this form has evident value for the believing community. That is why it should be seen by Christians, not as a diversion from theology and mission, but as a vitally important contribution to both.

NOTES

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3. Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert and Lee Horsley, *Churches and Churchgoers: patterns of church growth in the British Isles since 1700*, Oxford, [1978].
4. *The Concise Dictionary of National Biography*, London 1930 edn, p. 547.
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6. E.A. Freeman, *History of the Norman Conquest*, 2, p. 46, quoted by J.W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent: Victorian historians and the English past*, Cambridge, 1981, p. 191n.
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12. Matthew 24.26, Acts 1.7.
13. J.S. Richardson, *Should Historians write History that is distinctly Christian?*, [Leicester, 1982], pp. 11f.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
15. Sir Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, London, 1949, pp. 49f.
16. Richardson, *op.cit.*, p. 10.