

"And Shimei . . . cursed as he went, and threw stones, and cast dust." 2 Sam. 16 : 13

## ECCLESIASTICAL QUANTUM THEORY, OR THE NEW CHURCH HISTORY

Quite often we hear the complaint that syllabuses of theological study are not suited to the actual needs of the ministry. The remedies suggested for this vary according to the time and place and convictions of those suggesting them. At one time the philosophy and psychology of religion may almost displace the Bible; at another, all theology must be "sociologically orientated" (whatever that may mean). Recently a demand for a new theological syllabus has come from several quarters: a syllabus which would be dominated by "a theology of mission". The champions of this proposed type of syllabus tend to concentrate their

criticisms on traditional approaches to Church history. It must be said at once that they often hit the target. To take an obvious example: if one is in Madras or Mombasa, one views history from a different perspective from that of Manchester or Massachusetts. Yet Manchester perspective may, simply for lack of thought, limit the perspective of Church history teaching in, let us say, Mombasa, and even the Manchester textbooks may crowd the vast world Christian movement of the last century into part of a chapter called "Missions". The champions of the new Church history, however, go further. They would omit or reduce the at-

ention usually given to the doctrinal controversies of the early Church; they would discourage extended treatment of the theological issues involved in the Reformation. After all, they say, why, in this ecumenical age, devote so much time to the quarrels among Christians? A great deal of Church history is not "relevant" to the present age, and could be discarded. Let us concentrate instead, they urge, on the spread of the Gospel, the story of the Christian mission.

This sounds attractive: and when one remembers Professor Latourette's monumental *History of Christian Expansion*, and the smaller works of Professor John Foster and others, it seems plausible. It also has the convenience of by-passing some notoriously difficult questions. But perhaps the suggestion conceals, or at least may encourage, the assumption that the only thing that matters about the Church is its size. It represents what one might call a quantitative view of Church history, which may make us so enthralled with Christian expansion that we do not consider the *quality* of the Christianity which expands. Purity of doctrine, the agonizing of Christian minds striving to express their convictions, the quest for holiness and the life of prayer, the demands of love, all are swallowed in the record of the Christian mission. Such a view of Church history may appeal to one who has just had to drag his mind unwillingly through the Nestorian and Eutychian controversies, or one to whom the differences between Luther and Caraffa seem to arise simply from obstinacy on the part of good and sincere men. But it is, to say the least, untheological -

it is anti-intellectual, in fact - to omit the study of rational thought about biblical data from apostolic times to our own. If we care little about theology in the Church of former days, it is unlikely that we shall care much about it in our own. It is unscriptural to ignore the Biblical pattern of mercy and judgment and the doctrine of the Remnant. If the so-called 'Deuteronomic' historians of the Old Testament had been adherents of the new Church history, we might now be rejoicing in the way that Jeroboam II extended Israelite rule, and no doubt some acknowledgment of Jahveh, over Hamath, but have never heard how he did "that which was evil in the sight of the Lord". And it is surely unhistorical to use as a criterion of selection something which is calculated to produce a steady success story. Secular historians with the same sort of approach are accused of naive optimism.

No, Professor Latourette has given us what he offered: a history of Christian expansion. The Lord be thanked. But this is not the normative Church history. Church history - that is, history written from the standpoint of faith in the divine purpose - is the history of the people of God. The story of God's dealings with any of His people at any time or place, worthily rendered, is 'relevant' to them all.<sup>1</sup>

### NOTE

<sup>1</sup> Some refreshing remarks on this last point will be found in an article by Professor Peter Hinchcliff, "Indigenizing' Church History", *Bulletin of the Society for African Church History*, vol. 1, no. 2, 1963, pp. 29ff.