

ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY
ITS NATURE AND PURPOSE

BY

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BY

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THE PRESENT Dean of the Faculty of Divinity in his inaugural lecture maintained that such a lecture ought either to deal with 'the method a professor proposes to follow within his department, or with some theme he desires to make central to his teaching'.¹ I cannot help feeling that for me there is not even as much choice as that. I am sure that you would be merely bored if I were to talk about 'Liturgical Palimpsests of the Fourth Century Eucharistic Rite'. The special interests of ecclesiastical historians tend to be odd and obscure. I must talk about the method.

But I would go further than that in defining the proper scope of this lecture. For, although I am freed by an accident of circumstance, from starting with a critique of the methods employed by my predecessors, it seems to me important that when a new department is first set up, its function and purpose in relation to the university as a whole should be established as clearly as possible. I hope therefore to attempt two things: to explain what ecclesiastical history is, and to outline what I conceive to be the proper approach to it.

The first point is that ecclesiastical history is a hybrid subject. On the one hand it must have some theological function and importance since it is a necessary discipline within every properly constituted faculty of divinity (though the theologians sometimes seem to doubt this). On the other hand it must be a part of 'ordinary' history, or it would not be history at all (and some historians seem to think that it is not). The ecclesiastical historian

1. W. D. Maxwell, **The Resurrection: Its Significance and Relevance**, Rhodes University, 1958, p. 1.

is in something of the same position as the mathematician, whose subject is very closely related to certain branches of philosophy, while it is also an indispensable part of every faculty of science. The ecclesiastical historian hangs, as it were, in tension between secular history and pure theology. I propose to examine the function of ecclesiastical history in relation to each of these two.

(I) First of all in relation to history; and here (at the risk of labouring some rather obvious points) I must maintain with complete conviction that my subject does not exist at all. There is no such separate study as ecclesiastical history: there is only history.

Most people, I suppose, would assume that ecclesiastical history, though its methods may be generally of the same kind as those of history proper, would be sharply distinguished from it by the facts with which it deals. Unfortunately some ecclesiastical historians, themselves, seem to have assumed that they were exclusively concerned with synods, bishops, heresies and reformations.² But they, thank goodness, are wrong. It is true that in the broadest sense there is a specialisation in ecclesiastical history in that it is concerned with the history of the Christian Church. But I would maintain that the boundary is of the widest and loosest kind. It ought to be merely a matter of convenience that Church history is made a specialisation, and any attempt to do more than that—to make the boundaries rigid or exclusive—will vitiate the whole study. It would be nonsense, for instance, to say that because the Church came into existence about the middle of the first century A.D., ecclesiastical history is not concerned with anything earlier than that date. Christ had been born and had died by then, and to exclude Him from a study of the Church would be to empty it of meaning.

And one must go further back still and say that the history of the Christian Church is incomprehensible without a know-

2. See A. T. Wirgman, **English Church and People in South Africa**, Longmans, 1895. The first three chapters of the book are devoted to the history of the Cape Colony up to 1847. The last ten pages of the third chapter form a sort of appendix on the history of the Anglican Church in the period. In spite of the fact that more attention and space is given to 'secular' history it is entirely unrelated to the 'Church' history and one is left with the impression that the Church was a sort of 'pocket', within the wider field but separate from it.

ledge of the history of the Hebrew people, of the Roman Empire, and of Greek thought.³ And what is true of events which happened before the Church existed is true also of events outside the Church after it began. So that, although one is concerned with the history of the Christian Church, one ought to regard one's specialisation as one of purpose, not of content, like the specialisation involved in a study of the history of South Africa, of Britain, or of Europe. The boundaries ought not to exclude any facts from one's purview, though they may make it unnecessary for one to use them all. Nor should the boundaries be rigidly conceived: one ought to be ready to trespass across them at any moment.

Moreover there is nothing exclusively or necessarily ecclesiastical about the facts themselves with which ecclesiastical historians deal. Economic history, social history, political history, and the history of music, art, or literature, may all very well have to take account of the same facts—the subject matter of history—though the direction of the study may be very different. It is so with ecclesiastical history also. “The distinctions which we draw for the purposes of convenience,” says W. E. Collins, once professor of ecclesiastical history at King's College, London, “are after all mere generalisations which have no existence apart from ourselves, and when we classify facts as military, or ecclesiastical, or economic, we are only going through a mental process which has no effect upon their essential character. There is no sequence of cause and effect which is peculiar to them; they have no existence apart from the whole stream of life of which they are elements. We cannot therefore confine our attention solely to one class of facts and treat them as if they were an independent whole, and complete in themselves, without mutilating them and altogether removing them from the sphere of historical study”.⁴

The ‘secular’ historian must agree, for instance, that the history of medieval Europe is to a considerable extent a study of the medieval Christian Church and of matters of ecclesiastical

3. See e.g. W. H. C. Frend, “The Persecutions. Some links between Judaism and the Early Church” in **Journal of Ecclesiastical History**, Vol. IX, No. 2 pp. 141ff.

See also the highly significant selection of documents published in C. K. Barrett, **The New Testament Background**, S.P.C.K., 1957.

4. W. E. Collins, **The Study of Ecclesiastical History**, Longmans, 1903, p. 2.

and theological importance. And the ecclesiastical historian, if he is doing his job, must equally admit that a good many of the facts with which he deals would often be classified as social or economic.

I have recently been trying to trace the differences between the parochial systems of the Church of England in England and of the Anglican Church in South Africa.⁵ The broad field of my enquiry has, you might say, been determined by the fact that it is a feature of ecclesiastical life with which I have been dealing. I wanted to know why such-and-such a thing about the Church was so. Some of the factors which have made South African parishes different in organisation and administration from English parishes have been in the broadest sense ecclesiastical.⁶ But two of the most notable have no ecclesiastical connection whatever. The structure of parish organisation was radically changed when the whole pattern of South African living and population-grouping was altered by the growth of the railways in the latter part of the nineteenth century.⁷ Another change has been effected since the 1930s when the national roads superseded the railways as the principal means of communication.⁸ And perhaps the most notable factor of all has been the drift of the English-speaking population of the country away from the platteland dorps.⁹ There

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5. A memorandum prepared for a synodical committee of the Diocese of Grahamstown on the status of missions.
 6. As for instance the missionary work of the Church itself which has led to the formation of an extra-parochial ministry. See resolution 2 of the first official Provincial Missionary Conference quoted in C. Lewis and G. E. Edwards, **Historical Records of the Church of the Province of South Africa**, S.P.C.K., 1934, p. 211.
 7. Notably in the creation of a further extra-parochial ministry in the South African Church Railway Mission. (See Lewis and Edwards, **op. cit.**, pp. 294ff, and D. F. Ellison, **God's Highwaymen**, S.P.C.K., 1930).
 8. So that the Railway Mission no longer works in the Union of South Africa.
 9. The combined effects of fast road transport and diminishing rural Anglican population have meant that, for example, in the diocese of Grahamstown at least a dozen canonical parishes are now permanently attached to other parishes. (**South African Church Year Book**, S.A. Church Publications, 1959-60, pp. 60ff). Several more stand vacant. In part the shortage of clergy may be responsible, but even if there were rectors for all vacant parishes, some of them are now so small (in numbers, at least) as to be hardly able to keep a full-time priest occupied.

is nothing in the facts with which I have had to deal which marks them off from 'secular' facts. There is nothing ecclesiastical or theological about the National Roads Board, except its significance in this particular study, where a proper interpretation depends upon it. And interpretation is, after all, the chief duty of the historian. It is that which marks him off from the chronicler.¹⁰

I must apologise for launching out so abruptly upon what is the largest of problems for the historian. I had originally intended to speak to you tonight on 'interpretation in ecclesiastical history', but it proved to be too vast a theme to be dealt with here. I cannot entirely ignore the matter, however trite my brief remarks may have to be. At a later stage in this lecture I shall have to consider the question of objectivity in ecclesiastical history. At this point I must confine myself to some simple assertions, without developing or defending them. I shall hope to indicate that there is a genuine dilemma which the historian has to attempt to solve, and what its implications are for ecclesiastical history.

By 'interpretation' I do not mean 'personal opinion'. It is surely not the duty of the historian to make some arbitrary and perhaps unrelated judgement upon the facts, assembling them and then commenting upon them. By 'interpretation' I mean the proper selection and presentation of the facts in such a way that their significance is made clear. It has, I know, been argued that it is psychologically impossible for the historian to avoid a subjective interpretation, but I cannot investigate that argument here. My own opinion would be that common sense, honesty, and scholarship will enable an historian to interpret history as accurately and objectively as is possible.

Nevertheless it remains true that the problem of interpretation is a vast one. A desire to eliminate all possibility of a subjective interpretation in their teaching and writing of history has led some historians to adopt what Butterfield calls a 'matter-

10. Cf. almost identical words used by R. P. L. Milburn, **Early Christian Interpretations of History**, A. and C. Black, 1954, p. 11. The Dean of Worcester was for a time my tutor and a great many of the ideas outlined here owe their origin to his teaching. He is not, of course, responsible for the final form they have taken.

of-fact' policy.¹¹ Such a flight from the duty of interpreting history has, in turn, provoked the cry that history is (again in Butterfield's words) 'a bloodless, pedestrian thing', condemning its students to 'a perpetual relativism'.¹²

There is, of course, the opposite danger in the historian who does impose upon the facts of history an interpretation governed by his own preconceived ideas. Since the canon of selection by which he chooses the facts which he will make use of is really a canon of interpretation, this perversion of history may be a very subtle one. Such a subjective interpretation C. V. Wedgwood condemns as 'regarding as worthy of study only such institutions and such persons as can be shown to have some clear connection with the present, and of seeing in them only such elements as can be made to fit into the splendid story of progress towards the political or social ideal as we happen to see it.'¹³ Miss Wedgwood goes on to describe the final stage in the downward path as 'the deliberate use of history to sustain whatever view of politics or morality suits the propagandist or the party in power'.¹⁴

The temptation to interpret subjectively by narrow selection becomes more pressing in a specialised field. There is then more than ever the danger that interpretation will cease to be the proper and objective presentation of the facts and will degenerate into mere comment or worse. As soon as the historian is too rigidly confined to such a field he is less likely to achieve an interpretation arising from his knowledge of all the relevant facts. He is, perhaps, more likely to impose an interpretation upon the facts beforehand.

In order to avoid the odium of selecting an actual case to illustrate this point, I should like you to consider a purely hypothetical instance of the earnest Ph.D. student called X. He elects to study for his thesis 'The Design of Memorial Brasses in the Churches of Cornwall between 1300 and 1600'. (I would stress that this is a purely hypothetical case. I know nothing of brasses,

11. H. Butterfield, **Christianity and History**, Collins (Fontana Books reprint), 1957, p. 33.

12. **Ibid.**

13. C. V. Wedgwood, **A Sense of the Past**, C.U.P., 1957, p. 15.

14. **Ibid.**

their design, or their incidence in the Duchy of Cornwall). Suppose that X discovers that almost every brass from 1300 to 1540 is given a border of trefoils, but that after 1540 hardly a trefoil appears on a single brass. If X is a student of the history of art he may attribute the change to the effects of the Renaissance in liberating the artist from the rigid conventions of the later middle ages. If he is an economist, he may advance the theory that the dissolution of the monasteries meant that brasses were no longer made by monks, but by artisans who were paid for piece-work and therefore put as little into each article as possible. And if he is an ecclesiastical historian he may argue that the Reformation effected a simplification of all Church ornaments under the influence of what is called a 'purer' Protestant idea of worship. The truth may well be a combination of all three or none of these. But X, because he has specialised too narrowly, is unable to see the thing in the round.

The specialisation involved in ecclesiastical history, then, must be a specialisation *within* a much wider field. The dangers inherent in too rigid a specialisation without a proper background can hardly be exaggerated. We are, on this point, confined by the exigencies of the university timetable, but I would not have any student specialise in ecclesiastical history unless he had first had at least some experience of a study of history in the wider sense. Since the study of history is so vast a field there is bound to be within it some degree of specialisation, but it is only in that sense that ecclesiastical history exists as a discipline separate from secular history.

(II) The need for a grounding in the methods of history is, however, for a number of reasons essential in the training of students in theology. The purpose of theology has been defined as the investigation of the contents of belief by means of reason enlightened by faith . . . and the promotion of its deeper understanding'.¹⁵ But the contents of belief which it is the duty of the theologian to investigate and interpret are rooted in historic fact. The creeds of the ancient Church are not, like the confes-

15. F. L. Cross (Ed.), **The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church**, O.U.P. (reprint of 1958), art. 'Theology', p. 1344.

sional statements of the sixteenth century, theological systems. They are basically statements of things that are believed to have happened. The incarnation and atonement, as matters of history, lie in the root of the whole structure of Christian theology. So strongly did the early Church believe this that the first attempts to write an account of the history of the Church (The Acts of the Apostles), represents it simply as a continuation of the personal history of Christ.¹⁶

This, in effect, means that Christian theology depends upon a study of the New Testament which claims to set out the historical basis of faith. And this in turn implies an historical approach to theology. For the books of the New Testament are historical documents and must be interpreted and assessed as such. It is useless to attempt to explain what St. Paul means by 'The Body of Christ' except by an exhaustive study of first century Rabbinic thought in which the term 'body' had quite other connotations from those which it now has.¹⁷

I must not devote too much time to this matter since I imagine that my colleague has yet to pass through this ordeal and I must not steal his thunder. I need only say that the basis of all biblical study is the historian's technique of critical assessment and evaluation. A lecture of this kind would be incomplete without a reference to Lord Acton, and though I have no desire to quote him on the moral judgements of history, I cannot resist pointing out that Acton is on record as saying that the modern historian's critical method first developed in the ecclesiastical field.¹⁸ He also asserts that Lightfoot and Hort were amongst the greatest critical historians produced by the nineteenth century.¹⁹

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16. So that Acts 1 refers to St. Luke's Gospel as the account of what Jesus **began** to do; and a number of typological parallels, notably the martyrdom of Stephen in Acts 7 : 54ff., suggest that the writer sees the Church as being in a real sense an extension of Christ Himself. Cf. also Acts 9 : 5 'I am Jesus, **whom thou persecutest**', when Saul's persecution is directed against the Church.
 17. See e.g. W. D. Davies, **Paul and Rabbinic Judaism**, S.P.C.K., 1948, pp. 56ff.
 18. Acton, **The Study of History**, Macmillan, 1911, p. 6.
 19. **Ibid**, p. 44, and compare the parallel drawn between N.T. and historical studies in G. Rupp, **The Righteousness of God**, Hodder and Stoughton, 1953, p. 28f.

And they were primarily New Testament scholars.²⁰

Moreover throughout the whole of the past hundred years the crucial problem in New Testament studies has been the relationship between the historical facts recorded in the Gospels and the theological interpretation put upon them by the early Church which produced those Gospels.²¹ The question has been recently raised anew by a school of thought, associated with the name of Rudolf Bultmann, which has sought to 'demythologise' the New Testament.²² This has meant that New Testament scholars have been primarily concerned with the relationship between chronicle, history, interpretation, fact, and myth. This is a most cogent argument for the existence of a school of historical studies (for whom that problem on a wider scale is a familiar thing) within a faculty of divinity.

Now if it is the function of theology to interpret the given constant then its interpretation must be for each generation in the language and thought-forms of that generation. And that means that, in a sense, theology will be the product of history. Each age has produced its own theology and this is both proper and inevitable. But it is possible that an age may do more than interpret, it may impose upon the faith too much of its own

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20. Lightfoot edited the texts of **The Apostolic Fathers**, Macmillan, 1891, which is strictly Church history and is a classic in its field, but he also published a series of commentaries on St. Paul's Epistles. Hort is chiefly known for his work, with Westcott, on a critical Greek text of the New Testament. But see also F. J. A. Hort, **The Christian Ecclesia**, Macmillan, 1900.
 21. The involvement of the source critics with the reconstruction of a 'Jesus of history' demonstrates this. The form critic is avowedly concerned with the formative effects of the circumstances of the Church upon the Gospel tradition. (But see V. Taylor, **The Life and Ministry of Jesus**, Macmillan, 1955). Even the 'typological' approach of Farrer and others raises precisely the same problem. (See A. M. Farrer, **A Study in St. Mark**, Dacre Press, 1951, pp. 1ff.). For a recent review of the matter see J. M. Robinson, **A New Quest of the Historical Jesus**, S.C.M., 1959.
 22. Bultmann's original essay 'Neues Testament und Mythologie' is translated in H. W. Bartsch (tr. R. H. Fuller), **Kerygma and Myth**, S.P.C.K., 1953, pp. 1ff. It is worth comparing J. Knox, **The Death of Christ**, Collins, 1959, pp. 177ff. Knox maintains that the 'myth', i.e. the early Christian interpretation of Christ is essential to the kerygma. That in turn is worth comparing with Knox's argument referred to in note 65 *infra*.

passing thoughts. In such a case there is always in the next generation a violent reaction.²³

The nineteenth century produced the school of Liberal Protestantism on which rationalism had made its mark. John William Colenso, the famous (or notorious) Bishop of Natal, was an exponent of this theology. He lived at a time when to some it seemed that all theology was about to be tipped into the melting pot and to others that truth was being forced into a strait-jacket of conventional thought. Therefore men fought to maintain their views, some to preserve the integrity of the faith, others, for the right to preach the truth as they saw it. This was the age of religious litigation, of persecution, controversy and dispute. The Tractarians moved heaven and earth to prevent the preferment of the vague, unconventional, but probably orthodox Dr. Hampden.²⁴ Hampden, in turn, as Regius Professor at Oxford failed Tractarian B.D. candidates because he disagreed with their theology.²⁵ The old-fashioned Low Church party and the Evangelicals combined in a screaming frenzy of hysteria to degrade the Romanising W. G. Ward from his university degree.²⁶ Dr. Pusey was unfairly suspended from preaching before the University of Oxford without being given a chance to defend himself.²⁷ Shaftesbury repeatedly attacked and repressed the 'ritualists'.²⁸ But the Evangelical and humanitarian Shaftesbury

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23. Cf. G. Salmon in **Dictionary of Christian Biography**, Vol. II, p. 678, art. 'Gnosticism': "When the philosophic element of a theological system becomes antiquated, its explanations, which contented one age, become unsatisfactory to the next, and then ensues what is spoken of as a conflict between religion and science, whereas, in reality, it is a conflict between the science of one generation and that of the preceding generation." Salmon is presenting something of an apologia for the Gnostics, arguing that they are only attempting what theologians have always tried to do. The passage is also quoted in W. E. Collins, *op. cit.*, p. 129.
24. S. C. Carpenter, **Church and People, 1789-1889**, pp. 130, 148f. and cf. 264ff. Evangelicals were allied with Tractarians in the attempt to prevent Hampden being appointed Regius Professor.
25. Ollard and Crosse, **Dictionary of English Church History**, Mowbray, 2nd Ed., 1919, art. 'Hampden', p. 258.
26. R. W. Church, **The Oxford Movement**, Macmillan, 1891, pp. 326ff.
27. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, pp. 168f.
28. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, pp. 228ff., and E. Hodder, **The Life and Work of the Earl of Shaftesbury**, Cassell, 1887, pp. 618f. and 625ff.

and the saintly Tractarian Pusey formed an unholy alliance to attack the authors of *Essays and Reviews*.²⁹ And Hampden made haste to join in the witch-hunt. F. D. Maurice, for refusing to subscribe to the conventional view of hell, was dismissed from his professorship at King's College, London, without hearing or appeal.³⁰

Colenso, with a mathematical training and scientific interests, was on the side of the rationalists. He treated history, Maurice said, as though it were a branch of mathematics. Like most Liberal Protestants, he had something to say which was both refreshing and true in contrast with the stuffy dogmatism of most Victorian theology. Colenso was not amongst those who maintained that God had planted the fossils in the rocks in order to trap the Royal Society into damning itself. He protested against the 'hell-fire' preaching of most other missionaries who gave the heathen a clear choice between Christianity and a graphically described perdition.³¹ He refused to accept the common contemporary assumption that every custom of the Zulu must be evil because it was 'heathen'. Colenso's early correspondence with F. D. Maurice shows how lightly he sat to the doctrine of original sin.³² He placed his confidence rather in the natural goodness of man and in the reliability of human reason. Natural religion he regarded as wholly good even if incomplete. So he would have converted the Zulu ceremony of the first fruits into a sort of harvest festival,³³ would have allowed polygamy as a temporary feature of Christianity,³⁴ and insisted on using the Zulu name for the creator to translate the name of God in the Bible.³⁵

29. Carpenter, *op. cit.*, pp. 228ff., and Hodder, 592f.

30. C. F. G. Masterman, **F. D. Maurice**, Mowbray, 1907, pp. 130ff.

31. G. W. Cox, **Life of Bishop Colenso**, Ridgway, 1888, Vol. I, p. 55.

32. *Ibid.*, p. 47ff.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

34. J. W. Colenso, **Letter to the Archbishop of Canterbury on the proper treatment of Polygamy** (pamphlet), also Cox, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 63f., 122, 214.

35. See E. W. Smith (Ed.), **African Ideas of God**, Edinburgh House, 1950, pp. 103ff.

This revolutionary approach to missions derived directly from Colenso's theology. It was not a policy which grew out of his experiences for he outlined it in his *Ten Weeks in Natal*,³⁶ the journal of the brief reconnaissance tour of the colony made immediately upon his appointment. It was already whole and complete. It brought down upon his head, from other missionaries in the area, the customary South African retort that he was too new to understand the problems.³⁷ And, indeed, it is clear that Colenso, for all that he was a close friend of Bleek the curator of Grey Library,³⁸ underestimated the sociological problems involved in the transference of Christianity from one culture to another.³⁹ But he never abandoned that initial policy. Indeed on the question of the name of God he won the battle, perhaps because of the influence of his press at Ekukanyeni.⁴⁰ There was a sense in which he always regarded all religions as interchangeable. The writings of Cicero, Lactantius and the Sikh 'Gooroos' were as much the word of God for Colenso as the Bible.⁴¹

The crucial issue in the Colenso dispute was the doctrine of the atonement expounded in his commentary on Romans,⁴² which has been described as 'an ingenious travesty'⁴³ rather than an exposition. By representing the atonement as a simply objective event, Colenso taught that Church and society were co-terminous,⁴⁴ which led him, in turn, to an extreme Zwinglian

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36. J. W. Colenso, **The Colony of Natal, a journal of Ten Weeks' tour of visitation among the colonists and Zulu Kaffirs of Natal**, published in 1853 as part of an attempt to publicise and raise funds for the new mission.
37. B. B. Burnett, **Missionary Work of the First Anglican Bishop of Natal** (thesis in Rhodes University Library), p. 37.
38. Now the South African Public Library in Cape Town. Dr. Bleek was the son of Frederick Bleek (the biblical critic who influenced Colenso's Old Testament scholarship and the first person in South Africa with any real claim to be an anthropologist).
39. For a brief consideration of this problem see P. B. Hinchliff, 'South African Letter' in **Theology**, Vol. LXII, No. 463, p. 17.
40. Burnett, **op. cit.**, pp. 35ff., NB. p. 35n.
41. J. W. Colenso, **The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua**, Longmans, 7 vols., 1862-72, Vol. I, p. 154.
42. J. W. Colenso, **St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans: newly translated, and explained from a missionary point of view**, Ekukanyeni, 1861.
43. Burnett, **op. cit.**, p. 88.
44. J. W. Colenso, **Romans**, pp. 96ff, 102ff, 113f and 117ff, and cf. pp. 75 and 156.

view of the sacraments⁴⁵ and a virtual rejection of the idea of conversion.⁴⁶ In this full flowering of eighteenth century Latitudinarian thought the bishop's real and valuable contribution to theology was lost. When the controversy came to its climax the central theological issues were lost sight of and most of the excitement was caused by Colenso's Erastianism⁴⁷ and his biblical scholarship.⁴⁸ This last, though it was condemned as if it were heresy, now appears naive and innocent to modern scholars.⁴⁹

But in such a theology as Colenso's there were serious implications, however much they tended to disappear in the controversy over the inessentials. The Liberal Protestants maintained that no religious belief could be true unless it was tested and confirmed by reason, hoping that such a theology would commend itself to theologian and rationalist alike. They maintained that God's revelation of himself to man was a more or less natural process from which every element of the mysterious or revolutionary must be removed. They tended to maintain that, as man has progressed over the centuries in knowledge and understanding and civilisation generally, so he has come to know more and more about God. They thus advanced what was virtually a doctrine of history. To men like Colenso, Christ was the highest level to which man has ever attained, morally speaking, and one gets the impression that His Divinity was of much less importance to

45. Cox, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, p. 113.

46. Colenso, *Romans*, p. 75.

47. Colenso refused to be tried in any court which did not recognize the Crown as the final court of appeal in ecclesiastical matters. In effect the controversy became a conflict between those who supported Colenso in this contention and those who contended for an un-established, independent Church. See Lewis and Edwards, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-174, but a responsible, unbiased and detailed account of the controversy is badly needed.

48. Lewis and Edwards, *op. cit.*, pp. 163f. and cf. Burnett, *op. cit.*, pp. 67ff.

49. Colenso assumed the Pauline authorship of the Pastoral epistles and took it for granted that the account of beginnings of Christianity in the *Acts of the Apostles* is historically accurate in all its details. (See Colenso, *Romans*, pp. 3 and xii).

them.⁵⁰ They also appear to have believed that history itself must inevitably lead all men to this same high moral level, through the operation of what might be called an evolutionary Providence.

Such a theology inevitably provoked strong opposition and in Germany, where it was for a time dominant and almost universal, there was at last a violent reaction. This reaction was sparked off by the publication of Karl Barth's *Commentary on Romans* in 1918.⁵¹ The Neo-Orthodox Protestants, those who followed Barth, tend to stress the unnatural and the revolutionary in theology, and the Divine as against the human. But unfortunately they also tend to regard all human thought and activity as so fundamentally corrupt and unsound as to pervert any truth with which it deals.⁵² This is bound, apart from anything else, to make one ask how they can be so sure, then, that they are right. It also means that they regard human history not as the progress towards the truth (as the Liberal Protestants did) but as a distorting mirror held up to the truth. Since all their emphasis is placed upon the Divine absolutes, there can be no value for them in the study of what they would define as relative. "From [that] absolute point of view," Paul Tillich says of Barth's theology, "history becomes indifferent", though he excepts the "one moment which is called 'Jesus Christ' and which has a supra-historical char-

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50. Mrs. Colenso's letters, recently published, are interesting from this point of view, especially as the editor of the letters maintains that Mrs. Colenso was a better theologian than her husband and influenced his thought considerably. See W. Rees, **Colenso Letters from Natal**, Shuter and Shooter, 1958, p. 30. Mrs. Colenso plainly thought it wrong to worship Christ as God, though it is not clear whether she counted herself amongst those who refused 'to recognise the Deity of the Lord Jesus' (p. 182) or whether she merely objected to an over-emphasis upon the divine in Christ (p. 252). The bishop himself argued that prayers ought not to be addressed to Christ. (Cox, **op. cit.**, Vol. II, pp. 100ff.). And his attitude cannot be defended by arguing that it was the worship of Christ's humanity which he condemned, for it was a cardinal point in Colenso's case that his opponents laid insufficient stress on Christ's humanity. (Rees, **op. cit.**, p. 68).
51. The *Commentary* was revised considerably and a new edition published as early as 1921.
52. See Barth's Gifford Lectures, **The Knowledge of God and the Service of God**, Hodder and Stoughton, 1938, and NB. Lecture XV.

acter."⁵³ Christian history is virtually ignored and we are left with a gap between the gospels (themselves, as we have seen, historical documents) and the contemporary Church.

Now it seems to me that an attitude of indifference to the study of history suggests that it is more important than ever that the teaching of the theologians should be examined critically against the background of history. I am not concerned merely to carp at the theology of Barth, for I revere him as a theologian of great, if not heroic, stature. A great deal of what the so-called Neo-Orthodox Protestants have to say is undoubtedly both stimulating and true. But if the theologians are going to advance an interpretation of history (which is what the Liberals did), or pass judgements upon the value of a study of history (which is what the Neo-Orthodox do) then history has become bound up in their theology. Moreover theologians seem so often to have been fascinated by history, not so much as a discipline, but as a theological concept. The last quarter of a century has seen the publication of a large number of works which expound the theological significance of history.⁵⁴ There can be no doubt that the theologians are right to take man seriously, for that is what their preoccupation with history really means. But such theological expositions of the meaning of history are only of value if they come from theologians with a training in the methods of historical study. It is easy to generalise about history as a concept if one has not first had to subject oneself to the painstaking discipline of history itself. The more one has subjected oneself to that discipline, the more awkward corners one discovers and the less likely one is to produce some facile theory of what history means. So that the theologians can only properly treat history as part of their theological system if they have first come to understand it from the inside.

The theologians are also themselves men, and themselves part of the facts of history. For that reason, too, they must be

53. P. Tillich, **The Protestant Era**, Nisbet, 1951, p. 44.

54. E.g. Nicholas Berdyaev, **The Meaning of History**, Bles, 1936; Tillich, *op. cit.*; R. Bultmann, **History and Eschatology**, Edinburgh University, 1957; and with a rather different emphasis H. Butterfield, *op. cit.*; and M. C. D'Arcy, **The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred**, Faber, 1959.

prepared for their propositions to be studied against a background of history, and for the historians to ask them to re-examine those propositions in that light. It is after all easy (though perhaps superficial) to see why the nineteenth century should have produced a theology of progress along with all the other progressive things it gave birth to; and it is just as easy to see why the first world war should have produced a theology disillusioned with all things human. What the theologians have said may be true all the same, but they must be prepared for the historian to say, 'What you have said fits in too neatly in the accidental framework of this particular period of history; please re-examine it.' Such a judgement may well be superficial and it can certainly neither prove nor disprove the truth of the theologians' teaching. But it subjects theology to a valid criticism.

If theology is in part the product of history, then history is also in part the product of theology. That is clear in certain particular instances in the wider field of history generally⁵⁵—the conversion of Constantine, the Reformation, the Wars of Religion. It is also especially true of the history of the Christian Church. If it is the function of theology to interpret the faith for each generation, then, in so far as it succeeds, the life of that generation will be an attempt to work out that faith in practice. The history of the Christian Church cannot be understood in isolation from the social, economic, or any other kind of history of the society in which it lives. Nor can it be understood if it is forgotten that the history of the Church is, amongst other things, the story of an attempt to manifest an eschatological reality in terms of time. Church history is in one sense what Charles Williams calls the 'measurement of eternity in operation'⁵⁶ and

55. So that it is possible to argue that "the story of the Christian Church throughout the nineteen hundred and fifty odd years of its history is intimately bound up with the development of the culture and civilisation of Western Europe which we inherit today. No one can rightly understand the Middle Ages, or that great upheaval of religious thought and social institutions which we call the Reformation, or the 'Rise of Capitalism' (to use a phrase of R. H. Tawney), or the founding of the New World in America and the development of the British Commonwealth of Nations, without some knowledge, at least, of the history of the Christian Church". C. W. Dugmore, **Ecclesiastical History No Soft Option**, S.P.C.K., 1959, p. 6.

56. Charles Williams, **The Descent of the Dove**.

it has to be taught like that, with its failures as well as its successes. It must be taught as the history of the working out of theological understanding and not just as what has been described as 'a corpus of cautionary tales and horrible precedents.'⁵⁷

There are theologians who argue that right (i.e. orthodox) theology is that which has behind it the traditional teaching of the Church, either in a particular period⁵⁸ or throughout its history.⁵⁹ The correct statement of a problem in theology may be no concern of the historian. It is not his business to check a theological statement on the nature of the Trinity, any more than it is his business to check a statement made by an astronomer about the distance between two stars. But when a theologian argues that his formulation of doctrine is the right one because it is the teaching of the Church at a particular period, he has in fact made a statement about history which needs to be investigated by historical study. We have already seen that this is true even of the theologians who say that their theology is right because it is the theology of the New Testament. In this sense all theology has an historical basis and is open to historical investigation.

The simplest and most direct form of such an investigation is that which is concerned with the uncovering of the origins of particular features of modern ecclesiastical life. Such things as the organisation of parishes (to quote an example I have already cited), or the laws of the Church, or the ways in which Christians worship, can only be understood, and the theological implications of them appreciated, against the background of their origins and history. 'The Liturgical Movement', for instance, seeks to make forms of Christian worship more directly expressive of Christian doctrine in such a way that it will have an evangelical impact.⁶⁰

57. T. F. Taylor, 'A Movement in Clerical Education' in **Church Quarterly Review**, Vol. CLX, No. 337, p. 510.

58. It is frequently assumed by Anglican theologians that the theology of the first four or five centuries is normative.

59. This is, roughly speaking, the contention of Roman Catholic theologians, but the tag of St. Vincent of Lerins is very difficult to apply in practice.

60. On the Liturgical Movement see e.g. A. G. Hebert, **Liturgy and Society**, Faber, 1935; J. H. S. Srawley, **The Liturgical Movement**, Alcuin Club, 1954; J. de Blank, **The Parish in Action**, Mowbray, 1955, and A. R. Shands, **The Liturgical Movement and the Local Church**, S.C.M., 1959.

The movement is therefore primarily concerned with the theology it intends such liturgical forms to convey. But it is also concerned with the liturgical forms themselves. It must, amongst other things, examine the forms used by the Church at various times, in order to discover what those forms were intended to express, how far they did so effectively, and how they have been modified by non-theological factors.

The Christian denominations themselves cannot be understood unless their origins and history are investigated. Fortunately the days when ecclesiastical history was primarily regarded as a testing ground for interdenominational ballistic missiles are no longer with us. Still I think it remains true that anyone who teaches Church history is likely to be suspected of doing so with a denominational bias. It is important that it should be clearly understood why it would be not only wrong but futile to give way to any such prejudice. Fundamentally the historian's bulwark against denominational bias is precisely the same as his bulwark against any kind of prejudiced interpretation—honesty, common sense, and scholarship. But there are special factors in this particular field which need to be considered.

I have already briefly suggested that theological propositions are not *per se* susceptible of proof or disproof by historical investigation. Even where there is clear and strong historical basis for theology, that basis does not necessarily determine the particularities of the theology. For the most part, therefore, any attempt to write or teach history in such a way as to whitewash one's own Church or discredit someone else's is doomed to failure. It cannot prove that one's own theology is the right one, and that is what matters. Proving that the Donation of Constantine is a forgery did not invalidate Roman Catholic teaching about the pope; any more than discrediting the motives of Henry VIII invalidates the theological achievements of the English Reformation. To prove that the English bishops of the eighteenth century were, on the whole, an irreligious lot of political timeservers, does not prove that Anglican teaching on the episcopacy is wrong. Nor can one dismiss Wesley's objections to that teaching simply by showing that his actions were not always consistent with his theology. Such questions remain chiefly a matter of dispute among theologians.

Even where theologians stake their teaching directly upon historical fact, the function of the ecclesiastical historian remains severely limited. The great historian Döllinger refused to accept his Church's teaching on the infallibility of the pope, because he believed, as a matter of historical fact, that the popes had not always been infallible (at least as he understood the term).⁶¹ Newman left the Church of England partly because historical study led him to believe that his Church was in a position analogous to that of a fourth century sect which was schismatic (as he understood the term).⁶² But the drastic actions of Döllinger and Newman were not really proof that the theologians had been wrong. Their effect was chiefly to reveal that the theologians had not been sufficiently careful in defining such terms as 'infallibility'⁶³ and 'schism'.⁶⁴ Again the function of the historian, in fact, was to require the theologians to undertake a critical re-examination of their theology.

Moreover it must be frankly admitted that, even where theology has a close connection with history, the present state of the evidence does not always make it possible for the historian to give a conclusive answer. What he can usually do is to set out the probabilities and leave it to the theologian to proceed accordingly. There is, for instance, the question always prominent in interdenominational debate, whether bishops are essential in the

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61. See e.g. J. J. I. von Döllinger, **Fables Respecting the Popes of the Middle Ages**, Rivington, 1871, particularly the essay 'Liberius and Felix', pp. 181ff.
62. Newman's original enquiry was into the position of the Monophysites who maintained their heresy by an appeal to antiquity. In the course of that enquiry he became concerned with the Donatists also. In his **Apologia** Newman denies that the Donatist matter had much effect on his thought (**Apologia pro Vita Sua**, Longmans, 1890, 2nd Ed., pp. 116f. and cf. 221) but his biographers agree that it was of considerable significance. (See e.g. W. Ward, **Life of John Henry, Cardinal Newman**, Longmans, 1912, Vol. I, pp. 66ff. and G. Faber, **Oxford Apostles**, Faber, 1933, pp. 414ff.)
63. P. E. Hallett (Ed.), **Catholic Dictionary** (15th Ed.), Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951, art. 'Pope' p. 649f. and cf. the discussion in the translator's Appendix E to Döllinger's work cited above.
64. Dean Church, in effect, argued that the question of schism could not arise when there was at least as much intermingling of 'light and dark' in Rome as in England. R. W. Church, **op. cit.**, pp. 346f. Virtually the same argument is advanced in T. G. Jalland, **The Church and the Papacy**, S.P.C.K., 1944, pp. 540ff.

Church. In part the answer to this necessarily depends upon whether there were bishops in the first generations of the Church and, if so, whether they were bishops in the sense in which we use the term. And there is simply not enough historical evidence for an answer to be given with certainty.⁶⁵ There is, I would say, a probability, but that is not the same thing as proof. And if I were to represent my opinion, based on what evidence there is, as proved—if, in other words, I were to advance a prejudiced account of history for partisan reasons—I should have gained nothing other than the short and nasty satisfaction which might more easily be gained by writing abusive anonymous letters. Assuming the good faith of the historian (and making allowances for the fallibility of all scholarship) he is no more likely to write a prejudiced account than the physicist is likely to fake the results of an experiment. And it would be just as silly for him to do so. The fact is that historical investigation cannot prove or disprove theological truths, but it can and ought to examine them critically against historical fact.

Church history is, as I have already suggested, far more likely in these days to serve an eirenic than a controversial purpose. A study of history is now for the most part a means of understanding and has, therefore, an important part to play in the present movement for the reunion of the Churches. The Churches have come to realise that the only possible basis for reunion is a sound theological agreement and not a sentimental evasion of doctrinal differences. In other words it is understood that the machinery of reunion has been placed in the hands of the theologians. And the theologians have come to realise that a resolution of doctrinal differences cannot be achieved without a study of the historical origins of those differences.

65. A great deal of new writing on the 'historic episcopate' has been published in the last decade, without producing much new fact or fresh thought. J. Knox, **The Early Church and the Coming Great Church**, Epworth, 1957 (a Presbyterian work which cannot therefore be accused of wishful thinking) argues that the evidence for the existence of an episcopate in the primitive Church is as strong (or as weak) as the evidence for the existence of the New Testament itself (p. 145). This is virtually what is implied by B. J. Kidd, **History of the Church to 461 A.D.**, O.U.P., 1922, chapter X.

A particularly clear example can be found in E. L. Mascall's recent work *The Recovery of Unity*.⁶⁶ It is unfortunate that Dr. Mascall is so determined to emulate the pig-baby in *Alice* that his very real contribution to the current discussion is likely to be overlooked in one's amusement, or annoyance, at his caustic wit. The book is an investigation of some of the causes of the present disunity. He asserts that these are often to be found in the mistaken but unexamined presuppositions which both sides have accepted.⁶⁷ Mascall maintains, and I think he has proved his case, that in matters like the doctrine of the eucharistic sacrifice Catholics and Protestants alike inherited from medieval philosophy certain presuppositions which made disagreement at the Reformation inevitable.⁶⁸ He implies further that an understanding of these causes ought to make it possible for us, now that we can examine and escape from such wrong presuppositions, to come to a new understanding and agreement. And this is the more significant because Mascall holds pronounced and decided views. He cannot be accused of shirking issues or of looking for a sentimental or superficial solution. Indeed one of the themes of his book is that these solutions are not solutions at all.⁶⁹

Work of this kind indicates where a fruitful field of historical investigation lies. The historian by uncovering the real rather than the apparent causes of disagreement is contributing greatly to the theology of reunion. This is another instance of the way in which history and theology are bound up together and another field in which it is the function of the historian to submit theology to a critical re-assessment.

While ecclesiastical history is, then, not a discipline distinct from 'ordinary' history, but a specialisation within it, it has a particular purpose in a faculty of divinity. That purpose, in its simplest form, is the uncovering of the origins and past history of ecclesiastical and theological ideas and institutions. But perhaps its most essential function is something else—to inculcate a proper critical approach to a study of theology.

66. E. L. Mascall, *The Recovery of Unity, A Theological Approach*, Longmans, 1958.

67. *Ibid.*, p. xf. and p. 2ff.

68. NB. *ibid.*, pp. 101ff.

69. *Ibid.*, 'Foreword', but the whole book is the very opposite of sentimental about those with whom Dr. Mascall disagrees.