

THE WRITING OF ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY IN THE RENAISSANCE

by John L. Lievsay

In the apocryphal book of Esdras¹ a moment of high vision is reached when the winner in an ancient quiz show persuades the audience to declare, *Magna est veritas et praevalebit*. His optimistic prophecy may someday prove true—in the ideal republic of Plato or in the Utopia of Thomas More. But in the grubbier Renaissance suburbs of the City of God, the sentiment, even when given lip-service, was not universally thought to be wholly dependable. Truth, being naked, was considered an indecent object to set before delicate and pious eyes until she had been disguised in garments suiting the presenter's taste. Patient old Job, sitting on an ash-heap and answering the implied accusations of his "comforters," asked pointedly, "Will ye speak wickedly for God? and talk deceitfully for him?"² If in that question we substitute the word *party* for the word *God* (an identification often tacitly assumed), then Renaissance writers of church history, judged by their performance rather than by their protestations, must generally have answered yes. Even when their "facts" are right, their inferences from the facts, colored by their prejudices, are likely to be wrong and not to be trusted. The more I read of ecclesiastical history, the more I am convinced that ecclesiastical historians, like travelers, are liars by authority.

If ecclesiastical history is as bad as all that, one may legitimately ask, why bother to read it? The question deserves a serious answer, which, within the limits of a brief essay, I shall attempt to suggest rather than to exhaust. Although certain continental exemplars must necessarily be touched upon, my main concern will be with English representatives of this class of writing; and I trust that I may be permitted the usual elastic interpretation of the term *Renaissance*.

One answer to the question is that our ancestors both wrote and read ecclesiastical history—madly. They could take it in quantity and at length, for it satisfied a deep-lying thirst of the times, a sort of alcoholism for which there was no Alcoholics Anonymous. That morbid hankering is reflected perfectly in the droll question which one of them asks with a straight face: "As for Christian pleasure and godly delights, what can be

more pleasant than the reading of the Ecclesiastical histories?"³ If one is tempted to reply, "The reading of the New York Telephone Directory," he should remember that for men of the sixteenth century religion, the Church, and all things connected therewith, were then literally much more life-and-death matters than they have been since. It behooved a man to know who were his friends and who his enemies, to know on which side his own peculiar slice of faith was buttered. And ecclesiastical histories gave him some clues.

For one thing, although there were of course ecclesiastical histories that dealt with affairs of the Church at varying removes in antiquity, much of what was written in the Renaissance was for the reader practically an account of current events. If it lacked the corrective wisdom of afterviews, it nevertheless had the compelling attraction of immediacy; and it was everywhere cast in the form of a titanic struggle between opposed powers (often enough identified as God and the Devil), of dramatic attack, intrigue, and counterattack. One did not necessarily abandon Eusebius,⁴ Sozomen, Theodoretus, or Josephus. One simply had nearer to hand the enormously fascinating and emotionally stimulating spectacles of the rise of Lutheranism; the Reformation in England, in Scotland, in Switzerland; the wars of religion and the rise of the Huguenots in France; the founding and growth of the powerful Jesuit order, politically oriented and almost universally distrusted; the long and portentous Council of Trent, so disastrous to any hope of Christian unity; and suppression and persecution everywhere—even in those newfound worlds—in the name of Christian charity and the eternal salvation of men's souls.

With all this to look back upon, Francis Bacon, in *The Advancement of Learning*, divides "History ecclesiastical" into three parts, the first of which he calls "the history of the church, by a general name"; and "This part," he says, "I ought in no sort to note as deficient; only I would the virtue and sincerity of it were according to the mass and quantity."⁵ This "mass and quantity" was sufficient to move Degory Wheare, first Camden Reader of History in Oxford, to include in his *Method of Reading Histories* a long section separately discussing "the Method and Order of Reading Church Histories." His "method," in brief, is chronological and ends in an evaluation of his contemporary historians Paolo Sarpi and Jacques Auguste de Thou.⁶ Like Bacon, however, he has some reservations about the "virtue and sincerity" of ecclesiastical histories. After sharp discussion of the unreliability of medieval fabulators and hagiographers, Wheare cautions:

My *Hearers*, I have pursued these things at large, that they who are desirous to know the Church History, might understand, and diligently consider, with how much care and caution they are to be read: for here a Man is in more danger of being deceived by feign'd stories, than in any other sort of Histories whatsoever. And yet it is confess'd by all, that it is much more mischievous to be involved in error here, than in *Civil History*. Now as it befits us to take great care on the one side, that we do not imbrace falsehood for truth

rashly; so it becomes us to consider attentively, that we do not reject what is really true, as false, without deliberation.⁷

Wheare's cautionary words were sadly needed. For the most grievous defect of the ecclesiastical histories written throughout the Renaissance was that their objectivity was marred by a polemic partisanship which too often led to the suppression of inconvenient facts, the acceptance of slanderous hearsay, and the interpretation of natural phenomena as acts of divine intervention in the affairs of men.⁸ The ideals of impartial truthfulness and cool, detached reporting of observed or recorded fact, though often professed, were seldom achieved. To illustrate by reference to one of the pleasantest and least objectionable of church historians, Thomas Fuller thus remarks in his *Church-History of Britain*:

I know *Machiavel* was wont to say, That *he who undertakes to Write a History, must be of no Religion*: if so, *he himself* was the best qualified of any in *his Age* to be a good *Historian*.

But, I believe, his *meaning* was much better than his *words*, intending therein, That a *Writer of Histories must not discover his inclination in Religion to the prejudice of Truth*....

This I have endeavoured to my utmost in *this Book*; knowing, as *that Oyle* is adjudged *the best that hath no tast at all*; so *that Historian* is preferred, who hath the *least Tangué of partial Reflections*.⁹

Yet Fuller's anti-Catholic bias, if not bitter, is pronounced and ubiquitous—even to the extent of promoting in his works a general antipathy to Italians.

The lines of division, at least after Luther, were generally drawn upon Roman Catholic-Protestant differences, although there were also internal disagreements upon both sides. Platina's *Lives of the Popes*, savoring too much of a liberal humanism, was not sufficiently flattering to the Papacy—a defect piously avoided by his continuators Panvini, Cicarelli, and Bzovio. The important, huge, topically organized, and encyclopedically exhaustive general ecclesiastical history of the Magdeburg "Centuriators," led by Matthias Flacius, was so ponderously weighted in support of Protestant doctrine as to call forth (under Papal commission) the multi-tomed Catholic corrective of the Jesuit Cardinal Baronio's *Annales Ecclesiastici*. These famous *Annals* (which came down only to 1198), like the Magdeburg *Centuries*, had their continuators, compendiators, and indignant correctors—among which last I might mention, in passing, the vigorous *Annali ecclesiastici* of Alessandro Tassoni, still in manuscript. Upon a lesser scale may be mentioned the *Acts and Monuments* of John Foxe, a work whose calendar of Protestant saints and martyrs was pointedly in contrast with the *Legenda Aurea* and elicited from the Jesuit Robert Parsons his equally ponderous (but far less readable) *Three Conversions of England*. Illustrative of the internecine party squabbles may be instanced,

on the Catholic side, *The History of the Council of Trent*, by Paolo Sarpi, and its "answer," similarly entitled, by the Jesuit Sforza Pallavicino. On the Protestant side, where the multiplication of sects gave ampler room for disagreement in a variety of directions, it will perhaps suffice to name only the contentious rigid Anglican, Peter Heylyn, chaplain to Charles I and biographer-laudator of Archbishop Laud, one of the most prolific and high-tempered of the later ecclesiastical historians. Heylyn's *Aërius Redivivus* (1670), or history of the Presbyterians, views these "puritans" as subversive of all good order and discipline and (in Books IV and V) is especially severe upon John Knox. He is hardly more charitable with his fellow Anglican, worthy Thomas Fuller, to whose *Church-History of Britain* (1655) Heylyn, in the First Part of his carping *Examen Historicum* (1659),¹⁰ gives exclusive fault-finding attention. In the manner of Pallavicino "answering" Sarpi's *History*, Heylyn marginally tots up the number of Fuller's "mistakes"—and comes up with a total of 337!

Obviously, if one wanted the truth, he had to read more than one author, to see from more than one angle. He read the book in hand to discover and rectify the shortcomings of its predecessors, knowing full well that the *next* one would castigate the present one with whips and scorpions. Or, if he wished comfortably to rest in his own prejudice, he simply confined his reading to works produced by the party advocates, of whose position he could be confident in advance.

One prime specimen of party-line propagandizing "history," published at Cologne in 1585, was the *De origine ac progressu schismatis Anglicani* by the Englishman Dr. Nicholas Sander (or Sanders), otherwise known as "Dr. Slanders." His black-and-white contrast of virtuous Catholics and wicked, bestial Protestants, made it immediately, in some quarters of the Continent, the best-known account of the English Reformation; and its virtual translation or wholesale adaptation by a series of other writers has left it even today the principal agent in the formation of a standard Catholic view of the Reformation under the Tudors. The Spanish Jesuit, Pedro de Rivadeneira, author of the first life of Loyola, made it the base of his *Historia ecclesiastica del cisma de Inglaterra* (1588). Girolamo Pollini conflated the accounts of Sander and the derivative Rivadeneira in his flaccid *Historia ecclesiastica della rivoluzione d'Inghilterra* (1594). And the talented Bernardo Davanzati gave the Sanderian view immortality in his Tacitean epitome, *Scisma d'Inghilterra* (1602), one of the classics of Italian literature.

The cautious reader of ecclesiastical history—or even the cautious writer of it—during the Renaissance had other pitfalls to avoid besides such inevitable partisanship. He had also to struggle with the poorly demarcated borders between secular and ecclesiastical history. Books purporting to be merely secular, if written by ecclesiastics or if dealing with the religious

upheaval in the sixteenth century, tended, in the very nature of the case, to concern themselves largely, if not principally, with church history. Cases in point, on the Continent, might be the *Commentaries* of Sleidan—basically Protestant—and the counter-Sleidan *Commentarius brevis* of the Carthusian Surius.¹¹ In England, a typical illustration may be seen in the *Rerum anglicarum . . . Annales* (1616) of Bishop Francis Godwin, translated by Morgan Godwyn as *Annales of England* (1630). Covering only half a century (the reigns of Henry VIII, Edward VI, and Queen Mary), the work inevitably concentrates upon the progress of religious change and the state of the Church. An occasional writer of ecclesiastical history will warn the reader that he is deliberately bypassing secular matters;¹² but, on the other hand, another writer, recognizing the inseparability of the two, will offer an apology for introducing the concerns of this world into his account of more important matters. Foxe, for instance, in treating of Hus and Wicliff, gives rather fully the political background out of which their treatment sprang and then reminds his reader that “at what time I toke in hand to wryte of these Ecclesiastical matters, I could not omit these things which were so strictly joined wyth the cause of the church.”¹³ Still others held the inclusion of secular history a positive virtue in making comprehensible the ecclesiastic.

Other hazy borderlines also presented problems. In the work of the Magdeburg Centuriators, for instance, there is a constant shifting of attention between the statement or history of doctrine and the history of events; and, in England, a similar division of interests also characterizes such a book as Richard Field's *Of the Church* (1606-1610),¹⁴ primarily doctrinal and disputational.¹⁵ Nor was there always observed a proper distinction between myth and tradition, on the one hand, and ascertainable fact on the other. The Biblical account of past “events” was uncritically accepted, and the Revelation of St. John the Divine was looked upon as an accurate forecasting of the shape of things to come. If mere secular history was to be regarded as a working out of the Divine Plan, how much more so the history of the Church! Of almost equal weight with the Bible were the Fathers and the early Church historians, the worth or credibility of whose statements was seldom sufficiently discriminated. It was a rare Renaissance writer or editor of ecclesiastical history who, like Meredith Hanmer,¹⁶ bothered to alert his readers to the varying degrees of trustworthiness among these disparate sources.

Whatever its basic shortcomings, however, and whatever its ancillary blemishes, the Renaissance reader of ecclesiastical history was sure to find in it a supply plentiful enough to last him a lifetime of reading, an availability greatly multiplied through the invention of printing, and a variety of forms unparalleled in any previous age. He could choose from among total (or general) histories such as those of the Magdeburgians or Baronius; or his-

tories of the Papacy; or histories of schisms and heresies; or histories of particular nations;¹⁷ or histories of particular sects or orders, such as the Presbyterians and the Jesuits; or histories of particular doctrines or institutions, such as tithing,¹⁸ the Inquisition, the Sabbath; or histories of particular events, such as the Crusades, various Councils, wars of religion,¹⁹ massacres and conquests, and the innumerable miraculous Jesuit "Relations"; or, finally—to abridge, not to exhaust the possibilities—the histories of particular pious individuals, as in Heylyn's apologetic life of Archbishop Laud,²⁰ Hacket's *Scrinia Reserata*,²¹ or in four of the five *Lives* written by Izaak Walton.

And for those who had less than a lifetime to devote to this sort of reading, there were at hand such convenient abridgements and compendia as Timothe Bright's (1589) of Foxe's *Martyrs*, Odorico Rinaldi's Italian reduction of Baronius, the troublesome Protestant Pierre Jurieu's octavo two-volume adaptation of Sarpi, or the original abbreviated compilation, in two Parts (1624, 1625) by Patrick Simson, *The Historie of the Church since the dayes of Our Saviour Jesus Christ untill this present Age*.²²

Here, if not God's plenty, was at least the Devil's. All the reader had to do was to choose—and hope that he would live long enough to reach the final page.²³

NOTES

1. III Esdras, iv:41.

2. Job, xiii:7.

3. The question is asked by Meredith Hanmer, translator of Eusebius *et al.*, *The Auncient Ecclesiastical Histories of the first six hundred yeares after Christ* (London, 1585), dedicatory epistle (to Robert, Earl of Leicester), sig. *2 verso.

4. In *The Method and Order of Reading both Civil and Ecclesiastical Histories . . . Made English, and Enlarged by Edmund Bohun* (London, 1685), p. 244, Degory Wheare calls Eusebius "the Prince among Church Historians."

5. *Advancement of Learning*, ed. Thomas Case (London: World's Classics, 1929), p. 87.

6. *Method of Reading Histories*. Sections 32-45 (pp. 225-296) deal with ecclesiastical history; Sarpi and De Thou, pp. 293-296.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 240.

8. This last is amusingly commented upon by Thomas Fuller, *Church-History of Britain* (London, 1655), Bk. IV, p. 171: "I know not whether the Vulgar Tradition be worth Remembrance, that the Brook [the Swif] into which Wicliff his Ashes were powred, never since overflowed the Banks. Were this true (as some deny it) as silly is the inference of Papists attributing this to Divine Providence, expressing it self pleased with such severity on a Heretick, as simple the collection of some Protestants, making it an effect of Wickliff his sanctity. Such Topical Accidents are good for Friend and Foe, as they may be bowed to both; but in effect good to neither, seeing no solid Judgement will build where bare fancy hath laid Foundation."

9. *Ibid.*, dedicatory epistle to Bk. X, sig. Ggg 3 verso.

10. The full title is more revelatory of the spirit in which the book is written: *Examen Historicum: Or a Discovery and Examination of the Mistakes, Falsities, and Defects in some*

Modern Histories. Occasioned by the Partiality and Inadvertencies of their Severall Authours.

11. *Commentarius brevis rerum in orbe gestarum, ab anno salutis M.D. usque in annum M.D. LXXIII. . . . Per F. Laurentium Surium Carthusianum* (Cologne, 1574).

12. See, for instance, Patrick Simson (or Symson), *Historie of the Church*, Pt. I (1624), p. 11.

13. John Foxe, *Actes and Monuments of these latter and perillous dayes* (London, 1563), p.

130. Foxe's book is no unconsidered trifle: it is a folio of over 1800 pages.

14. I have used the second edition: *Of the Church, Five Books. By Richard Field Doctor of Divinity and sometimes [sic] Deane of Gloucester . . .* (Oxford, 1628).

15. Except in the long Fifth Book, where some attempt is made at a chronological account of early Christian times.

16. *Auncient Ecclesiastical Histories*, inserted leaf, "The Translatour unto the Reader," p. [404 bis].

17. It was the lack of a comparable history to place beside Sleidan (for Germany), Sarpi (for Italy), or De Thou (for France) which moved Bishop Gilbert Burnet to write his history of the Reformation in England. See his *History of the Reformation of the Church of England*, 4 vols., ed. E. Nares (London, n.d.), I, xxxi.

18. See John Selden, *The Historie of Tithes* (London, 1618), one of the best researched and coolest of ecclesiastical histories. The Preface is a noble statement of the proper aims and methods of the truthful historian, secular or ecclesiastical: exhaustive examination of *all* the evidence, full statement of all relevant facts, no argument from *parti pris*, observance of a proper skepticism, maintenance of an open mind (pp. iii-xvi). Nevertheless, according to Heylyn, *Aërius Redivivus* (ed. 1672), p. 386, Selden, finding that the work was likely to prove offensive to King and Bishops, tendered his submission "in open Court at Lambeth, on the 28th day of January 1618." A sad commentary on the power of *veritas* to prevail.

19. Although scarcely history in the sense that De Thou's *History of His Own Times* is to be reckoned history—or even at the level of his own *Histoire universelle* (1616-1620)—there should be mentioned here Agrippa d'Aubigné's blazing *Les Tragiques*, today perhaps the most undervalued poetic performance of the Renaissance. That it is so results, in part at least, from its very Huguenot partisanship.

20. *Cyprianus Anglicus, or the History of the Life and Death of William Laud*, ed. H. Heylyn (London, 1668).

21. John Hackett, *Scrinia Reserata: a Memorial offered to the great Deservings of John Williams, D.D.*, published posthumously (London, 1693) and surely one of the most curiously conceived of biographies, being explicitly modeled upon the *Vita del Padre Paolo* of Sarpi's intimate companion, Fra Fulgenzio Micanzio.

22. Simson, *Historie of the Church*, Pt. I (1624), sig. *3 verso, records the compendiator's woes: ". . . those who have undertaken to write *Compendis*, have found therein great difficulty, being so invironed with straits, that they finde it very hard, either to satisfie themselves or others (for if the *Compendis* bee short, they seeme obscure; if written at length, they seeme to have need of other *Compendis* to abridge their prolixity) . . ." (Italic and roman type reversed).

23. General bibliographical guides to Renaissance ecclesiastical history may be found in E. Fueter, *Geschichte d. neur. Historiografie* (Munich and Berlin, 1911), which I have used in the Italian translation by A. Spinelli, *Storia della storiografia moderna*, 2 vols. (Naples, 1943), I, 295-349; for the English Reformation, in Conyers Read, *Bibliography of British History, Tudor Period, 1485-1603*, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1959), pp. 151-212; and, for English ecclesiastical biography, in Donald A. Stauffer, *English Biography before 1700* (Cambridge, Mass., 1930), Chs. III ("Ecclesiastical Biography," pp. 64-90) and IV ("Izaak Walton," pp. 91-120), together with the comprehensive Bibliography and the Chronological Table, pp. 289-379.