

## Theological Trends

# Medieval church history

## Beyond apologetics, after development: the awkward memories

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### *The nature of history writing*

A PHENOMENON OF OUR TIME IS the sheer quantity of history writing that has a bearing on our understanding of Christianity. Unlike other investigations into Christianity which are carried out within the theological community, or by scholars explicitly interested in religion, 'church history' is produced by the whole group of medieval historians in one way or another. Whether or not an institution possesses a 'church historian', or offers theology or religious studies, its history departments will be studying religion in the past, the internal structures of religions, and how they influenced the organization, finances, settlement or social controls of communities or whole societies. Medieval canon law is a burgeoning discipline in faculties of both law and history. If one wished to study, for example, the structure of the presbyterate from Nicaea to Gratian, the task is getting easier all the time, as more materials become available in critical editions accompanied by studies of particular areas. This academic development – with the potential to alter how many aspects of Catholic systematic theology are taught, especially in the areas of ecclesiology and sacraments – takes place largely independently of any direct interest from the professional theological community. In short, while a theologian may consider 'church history' and 'history of theology' sub-sections of their branch of academic endeavour, in practice history is an independent discipline, and those particular areas are sections of that discipline.

Today the 'church historian', as the poor relation within a theology department, is probably the least likely person to be research-active in any area of investigation that will affect our understanding of the history of theology or the place of Christianity within a given society. Meanwhile, the history of theology and religious ideas is pursued within the fields of the history of ideas, anthropology and

the history of literature. The study of popular religion, the cults of saints and movements in spirituality, has shifted from church-based institutions to centres for the study of folklore, medieval history and the early vernacular literatures. None of these specialists would describe themselves as a 'church historian', yet the cumulative effect of such work is to provide unprecedented tools and materials for understanding developments within the Christian community ('the Church'), its self-understanding ('theology'), and how it was part of the larger picture ('society' or 'culture').

Strangely, in many cases these developments go unnoticed by professional theologians. The reasons for this are hard to tease out, but partly the answer lies in a sense that 'the past is prologue' among those whose work is systematic in form, or in a residual attitude from earlier generations of theologians that somehow theological understanding can function in a 'classical' mode, immune from the limits of time, cultural understanding and local knowledge. So, even when the value of history is admitted as an epistemological premise by theologians, actually engaging with history is something far rarer. Recently I attended a major conference on medieval hagiography with scholars from history and language departments on four continents present. Yet apart from one of the Bollandists from Brussels, I was the only participant from a theology department. This is not unusual.

Perhaps one of the reasons for this massive amount of historical research is that our culture tends to seek understanding historically. The basic question of the Middle Ages' investigator was *quid est?*, and the aim was the essential definition as the key to causes and thus to understanding. We tend towards wanting to know how things came about, who used them, how they were limited by their situation, who benefited from them, or suffered because of them. These questions all fall within the ambit of the historian whether they concern the cult of the virginity of Mary, the growth in the centrality of papal government in the thirteenth century, or the impact of the Black Death on late medieval representations of divine justice. There is not a period, nor idea, nor social phenomenon where there is not a little band of historians beavering away, proposing competing theories, and attracting new researchers.<sup>1</sup> There has been a revolution compared with a few decades ago. Today, the historical investigation of religion abounds.

Another difference between the scene in historical enquiries and that in systematic or practical theology is that there are no generally

fixed topics of discussion. Historians do not have a strong sense of corporate identity in their endeavours, nor a sense of common task. Any corporate unity is of a more generic academic variety: a critical scepticism of statements rooted in religious belief, a disdain for those who dabble in history, and a bitterness against academic cut-backs.

*The abandonment of 'church history'*

'Church history' has an honourable pedigree: Eusebius, Socrates, Theodoret, Gregory of Tours, Bede, Baronius . . . Indeed, these writers could be claimed as the parents of the modern discipline in a way in which one could not invoke either Thucydides or Livy. They were careful with documents, sought to locate events in their correct sequence and context, and believed that history was a discipline that sought truth not just in questions of politics but in the larger society, using its own proper methods. However, what united these writers and most 'church historians' down to the 1960s was that the investigation was offered on the assumption of the truth of Christian faith. History was written from within, and served a larger religious group as 'our story', 'our title deeds', or an apologetic as to where the truth resided, and still resided. Within this model the Church 'today' was the focus of the story: its story was explained by analogy with an individual going through their biography. The Church is considered as a single subsisting entity over time, which was still the same body to which the historian belonged. It assumed the Communion of Saints in the Church as a reality in the empirical world. This model of history as 'our story' was not, of course, confined to church history, but used in the 'stories of nations', royal lineages, and many other ways to induce a sense of identity, often speciously, over great time spans.<sup>2</sup> But as that perspective began to disappear from history in general, so it disappeared from religious history.

Another aspect of this paradigm shift is the disappearance of a range of inferences that were still openly drawn in many works of the 1960s. It was the conviction of Eusebius, Bede and the other patrons of history that history demonstrated sacred truth, showed the justice of God becoming manifest, and the direction to be taken towards the eschaton. For the historian of Christianity today such arguments have no place: they are regarded as at best pious reflections, or quite possibly a form of specious propaganda. History has

become a secular discipline where both God and Providence are beneath the horizon of enquiry.

The disappearance of a group of experts, the historians, who could 'objectively' and 'dispassionately' prove that the Church's beliefs about events of history were all securely based, has left a sense of loss among some people. And in this new world the historian is often blamed for their 'lack of faith' or relativism. But history's aim should be neither ultimate truth nor the defence of a particular religious system, but understanding why, how and with what consequences changes have taken place in human societies. This appears to be a lesser aim, to be sure, but if as Christians we believe in the corporate nature of the Church, or even as academics in the corporate nature of our endeavours, then the secular vision of the historian needs to be welcomed as one more contribution to advancing us on our journey towards the truth.

### *History versus development*

A less obvious, but parallel, process to that which has taken place in the history of Christian groups, institutions and movements has occurred in the history of theology. Until the late nineteenth or early twentieth century it was not a widely accepted notion, among Catholics at least, that theology had a history. Heresy had a history, as did individual saintly theologians, but theology was a propositional arrangement which could not yield to the variation of invention, growth and decay that is presupposed by historical analysis. And then, when history of theology did enter consciousness, it did so escorted by a theory which saved theology from the bane of change and decay within a proportional model of truth: 'development'. Not surprisingly since 'the development of doctrine' was seen as an historical process, and as such something in itself visibly developing within the history of theology, for most Catholic writers 'the history of theology' and 'the development of doctrine' were almost interchangeable terms. In other words, to study the history of theology was to study how the beliefs of a later period could be shown to be in continuity with the earliest Christian beliefs, and that these were merely different expressions of the same faith. The fundamental premise of the study was that while faith does not change, its forms vary, and its expressions grow more complex. This often led to a paradox just beneath the surface of a study: history, as the study of change, being charged with showing that something, in its

deepest reality, did not change; and that no matter how great were the changes, they were not really significant!

One of the trends of the last decade of research is the growing distance that has developed between those historians who work in the history of theology, and who treat it as a branch of the history of ideas, and those theologians who use historical methods as part of the study of theological development. However, if there is a clear distance between the 'church history' and contemporary historical research on Christianity, the distinction here between the history of theology and the study of development is far less clear. Many writers are hardly aware of the distinction, and often, in studies using one of these methods, they cite the results obtained using the other method without recognizing the very different question-systems involved.<sup>3</sup> Thus sometimes historians are surprised that their findings are so much at odds with earlier studies, and they wonder how mighty scholars of the past 'missed' evidence. The answer lies in that they are like a geologist and a biologist looking at the soil in the same piece of ground: each sees what their discipline is seeking.

There are many writers at present who have not consciously committed themselves to either discipline. Often these are scholars whose training is primarily in theology, who have turned to history later. And since they know what is significant in terms of the whole systematic picture they are 'programmed' to see those elements and 'miss' what did not survive. But it should be noted that a background in formal theology needs to be considered as a basic requirement for those engaging in the history of theology. Just as there are problems with theologians who wander into history, so there are often greater problems with those trained as historians who are autodidacts in theology. Such historians can make basic blunders in their handling of sources. For instance, describing the Book of Sirach as 'a piece of apocrypha' and then wondering how or why it was used in a specific place. All this on the basis that they have found Sirach so described in a modern non-Catholic translation. Without a larger frame against which they can locate particulars, some strange conclusions can emerge. For example, in reading a saint's life which describes a judgement after death followed by reward or punishment, the historian infers that the author did not have a notion of a 'last judgement'. The theologian and the historian must be learning from one another; but equally they must recognize that their disciplines are distinct, and that neither benefits from their confusion.

*Recovery and 'discovery'*

Karl Rahner remarked somewhere that the Church was always remembering and always forgetting. In this process the historian plays a key role, as many aspects of Christianity over the centuries are brought to light through the new questions that historians ask of their sources. Consequently we recover beliefs and practices, both nice and not-so-nice, that we did not know we possessed as attitudes or conscious ideas or ways of being Christians. Similarly, where people invent what suits them, and want to make it respectable by giving it an ancient pedigree, it is the historian who can blow the whistle on the 'discovery'.

In recent years some of the most important recoveries are of 'hidden histories': those important areas of human existence which leave little trace in great public sources or which have been unseen through prejudice and presumption. By far the most extensive recovery has been the history of women in medieval religion. It is a fair generalization that women have not left nearly the same trail in the sources as men. Their deeds were considered to be of so little consequence that they were not worth recording, and so were not recorded, and so were forgotten, or not seen, by historians. Now medieval sources are being fine-combed using new questions – such as what was the place of women in society, how were they viewed in canon law and theology – to see if the history of women can emerge from the shadows.

The impact of these studies on theology is only beginning to be felt. But as the prejudices and limited views of earlier times and of particular societies are brought to light, the universality of claims such as 'the Church has always held . . .' or 'it is a basic Christian position that . . .' is vitiated. The recovery of women's history has progressed as an academic analogue to the changing position of women in society. The new perspectives that historians bring to the subject directly challenge any group which advances a view of women based on views formulated in the past (e.g. in Scripture or earlier church practice). At the moment, new studies are appearing every year on the cult of the Virgin Mary, on the use of biblical images such as Eve, on women religious, on women and marriage, and on past views of women, sexuality, and religion; these are contextualizing and relativizing aspects of Christianity that were assumed to be fundamental to its teaching simply because they never rose above the horizon of critical questioning. Most of these studies are carried out without any explicit reference to theology or

Christian self-understanding, but these findings represent a deposit of understanding which Christianity cannot ignore, especially Catholicism, since it invokes materials given shape during the medieval period.

Similar recoveries have taken place in other fields, one of the most striking being the area of Jewish-Christian relations. The Christian medieval element in the formation of anti-Semitism is now seen to build upon a Christian anti-Semitism that goes back at least to the second century CE (the Epistle of Barnabas) and possibly to the late first century (the Gospel of John). Likewise the medieval attitude to the Jews – beginning with the legal impositions on Jews in Merovingian Gaul and Visigothic Spain (seventh century) – can be seen to grow steadily towards the myth of murdering Christian infants (twelfth century), blame for the Black Death, and on to Luther's vitriolic anti-Semitism. Some Christians find unpalatable the realization of the part Christianity played in anti-Semitism, or the links between colonialism and the missions or the Christian defences of slavery, or between the promotion of orthodoxy and civil repression and state control. For others this historical work has been the occasion for soul-searching and a review of attitudes. Causing such personal questioning is not part of the agenda or ambition of most historians in carrying out their research. However, lest it appear that historians only 'dig up the dirt', we should note how Eamon Duffy has discovered the health and holiness of the Catholic Church in England in the period before and during the Reformation.<sup>4</sup> Here the discovery has involved clearing away centuries of propaganda and prejudice. Several similar propaganda myths have also come under critical assessment: thus 'the Spanish Inquisition' is being studied from its vast documentary remains without the barriers of eighteenth-century anti-Catholic propaganda. However, other myths from the same Enlightenment stable, such as that medieval Christians thought that the earth was flat, are still current.

Forging a history to suit a theological or religious argument is a practice with ancient precedents in Judaism and Christianity. The story of the finding of 'the book of the law' (Deuteronomy) in the temple (2 Kg 22) being the earliest, and that of the *Donation of Constantine* being the most famous. But despite all the advances in historiography and critical method, the practice of religious forgery is alive and well. Its usual contemporary form is the 'discovery' of lost spiritualities, and its method is to take what are considered to

be desired notions and link them with an equally desirable and usually intellectually inaccessible region. Thus we have spiritualities which recover 'ancient pagan wisdom' from societies without written records, and from groups which have not left a trace in even the archaeological record! When challenged on the provenance of such detailed information on groups we know so little about, or its striking similarity to utterances of those who would describe themselves as 'New Age', the empirical historian is often told that these investigators do not have to rely on 'the material means of knowing' as they can communicate with the past esoterically. It is not the place of the historian to question, or review, such credal statements, but it is annoying to the historian that these devotees vindicate the beliefs by an appeal to empirical history rather than to their special revelatory mode of knowing.

'Discovery' is not restricted to the more bizarre or esoteric; it often attaches itself to areas of interest which are historically and theologically well founded, such as Celtic spirituality. As a researcher of the early medieval period, I am in no doubt about the richness of the materials left by the early writers of Ireland, Wales, Brittany, and Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, it is clear that the theological perspective of this material – in that it is pre-Scholastic – can often be intellectually challenging, and, on occasion, helpful in ecumenical discussions as it does not exist within the language-games of the sixteenth century. Unfortunately, as presented in many popular books and courses, 'Celtic spirituality' is a mixture of wishful thinking, romanticism and the buzz-words of the 1990s. But then we should remember that it is easier to invent a 'Celtic past' than many other kinds of past: the material appears to be very distant in time, and all of its written records are linguistically difficult to access. First, much material remains unedited, while that published in Latin, or in old vernaculars (e.g. Old Irish or Anglo-Saxon), is often hard to find.<sup>6</sup> Second, the Celtic environment appears exotic (out on the rim of the Atlantic), beautiful (pictures from the Book of Kells), and romantic (green and unspoilt). Thus there is a vacuum into which can be imported contemporary views on the environment, women, church authority structures, and moral decision-making. I am not taking issue with any of these matters, but simply with the notion they are to be 'discovered' in some unused historical treasure trove.

'Celtic spirituality', popular imagery apart, is without coherent definition, and much of its contemporary content either lacks histori-



cal foundation or is indistinguishable from the Christianity found throughout the Latin world in the early Middle Ages. There are, of course, practices which first appeared in the insular world, but collectively these do not justify seeing 'Celtic Christianity' as possessing an alternative religious understanding – much less an alternative 'Celtic Church' – to that found elsewhere. Indeed, the most controversial question among historians for nearly two decades has been whether there are any features which are distinctively insular or Irish in the period; for if such distinctive marks could be found it would help us to identify anonymous works as insular or not. At present those who hold that there are distinctive insular, or Irish, or Celtic features do not point to anything as significant as differences in theological content, but in the academic form or the linguistic features of insular works. Furthermore, in the case of distinguishing Celtic and Anglo-Saxon religious works, except where they identify themselves through the vernacular used, even these criteria are of little help.

So the question is this: why do we refer to 'Celtic spirituality' when 'early medieval Latin spirituality' would be more accurate, and 'Anglo-Saxon spirituality' equally appropriate? The answer to this question does not lie in history. I suspect it lies to a large extent in our prejudices and emotions. 'Celtic', today, brings up nice images; but 'early medieval Latin' produces a blend of images from boring school lessons and Gothic novels, while 'Anglo-Saxon' carries for many negative undertones.

Other instances of history being 'discovered' and re-packaged in user-friendly ways abound. The most fundamental questions in all these cases are: first, why do people wishing to put forward a contemporary vision of belief – Christian or otherwise – see a need, or have a desire, to present it as something old, lost sight of, or ancient; second, why do we as people feel more comfortable in what has the appearance of being old and traditional? Obversely: why not sell new wine in new wineskins? The answers to these questions do not concern history, but they may tell us a great deal about our psychology of belief.

### *Ecclesiastical fears*

Since Christianity sees itself built upon events in history, it is not surprising that it takes a close interest in history and the activity of understanding the past. Moreover, the modern discipline of history both as an activity and a methodology arose within the context of

studying the Scriptures, the Church and its documents. Yet the relationship between the hierarchy and the historian has often been one of tension: the names of Döllinger and Acton come to mind. Sadly, this tension has re-emerged in recent years. It can be found in attempts to highlight 'the good side' of institutions and activities, or to suggest that a Catholic historian has a greater sympathy with his or her subject and so understands things that are otherwise opaque. In the last decade or so, there have been many instances where historical work has been perceived as threatening by the Church's leadership and they have sought to counter it.

The historical investigation of clerical celibacy provides a convenient example of this process in action. Nearly a decade ago now, a work announced that sacerdotal celibacy was the consistent teaching of all the ecumenical councils since Nicaea – and so there was no basis for appealing to the Eastern Churches for an alternative to Western practice.<sup>7</sup> This was presented as an historical conclusion, and the reader was invited to infer that consequently there was no alternative to the practice today. This begs two questions: first, is this the historical situation; and second, even if it is, does that entail the impossibility of change? Only the first question concerns me: is it the teaching of the councils when many did not even mention the issue and, furthermore, had married members? It was doubted and rejected in other cases; and in any case, even when promulgated in conciliar canons, since the enforcement of these canons did not take place until many centuries later, why were they made, and for whose benefit? These are some of the historical questions that must be asked before one could say what was the attitude of one, much less of several councils separated by centuries. But the method of the book was not that of the historian – for all the work's academic trappings – but of a canon lawyer citing precedents in a case. The lawyer citing precedent operates outside time and context; his sole aim is to find other judgements in the eternal 'today' of law that can determine a judgement here and now.<sup>8</sup> I respect a canonist's right to his own method within his forum, but I object when that is presented as history.

In the dystopias of Huxley's *Brave new world* and Orwell's *Nineteen eighty-four*, as in the real tyrannies throughout the world, the writing of 'correct' history, and its constant re-writing, were and are functions of the command and control structures. When one sees historians – or those who employ the results of such work – marginalized for their opinions, or when one sees 'history writing' that is

symbiotic with power structures, one cannot but feel uneasy. It seems as if in some quarters of the Church's hierarchy the old suspicions that attached to scripture scholars have now been transferred to historians.

### *Collaborations*

Historical investigation as a primary mode of human enquiry is one of the characteristics of modernity. Far from being an investigation method which is alien to the religion of God's mighty deeds and of his Christ, historical consciousness coheres well with Christianity. Indeed, as noted above, it is a form of investigation that has many of its roots in Judaism and Christianity. However, it is a discipline in its own right and not a servant of either religion, as such, or of theology. But to both the theologian and the believer it brings a particular kind of understanding, and it holds up a mirror to Christian praxis and theology in a unique way.

However, despite the fearful suspicions of some ecclesiastics, historians as a group do not need theology or the Church, so if their insights are to contribute to theological debate they have to be invited to join in that debate in a spirit of collaboration. Unfortunately I see few signs of this happening, at least within Catholic circles. It is in religious studies and theology departments of secular universities that the contribution of the historian is valued; while in many Church-run faculties 'history of theology' is taught by systematics as background, or a subject of minor importance. Even more depressing is the fact that in many seminary programmes the old 'church history' model is alive and well, and often taught by someone who is not a professional historian. Hence the ordinands are not properly exposed to this methodology for the examination of religion or the content of belief. From the Catholic perspective, this bodes ill for the future.

I end on this ironic note: while the amount and quality of historical research devoted to Christianity is getting steadily larger, its utilization within the community of the Church is proportionately decreasing. This, or the other points I have raised, may not seem to accord with the facts: that is the weakness of seeking trends when the quantity of information, in the absence of suitable filters, forces one to rely on anecdote and personal impressions. As I conclude, I am painfully aware that these are, consequently, non-quantifiable opinions. My hope is that this article is justified in that it raises some interesting questions.<sup>9</sup>

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## NOTES

1 A simple way to gauge this is to note the number of specialist societies that cater for these interests, produce journals, organize web-sites and hold conferences.

2 This sort of argument is central to the creation of nationalist, ethnic, and racist myths: 'we fought them a thousand years ago!'; 'they started this by stealing our land [three hundred years ago]'. Until a few years ago many imagined that what was left of this kind of 'history' after the mud of Flanders was destroyed in the stench of the Nazi concentration camps. This has proven too optimistic in the light of the Balkans in recent years.

3 One must recognize the asymmetry between these positions. The results of a study by a student of theological development can only be used *per accidens* by the historian as the former is not interested in the scene at the time, but only in a particular aspect of that period in view of what happened much later. Thus the historian can use the bits and pieces that the theologian has turned up, but not their judgements as to the importance of an idea at the time. By contrast, since the theologian wants to base his or her argument about development on what was there then, he or she can take over the work of the historian completely; but they should remember that they take it over for use in making a theological point whose significance lies in what it states about a later period, or today.

4 *The stripping of the altars: traditional religion in England c. 1400-c. 1580* (New Haven, Conn., 1992).

5 I have written on the importance of the study of this legacy in 'The Latin sources of medieval Irish culture' in K. McCone and K. Simms (eds), *Progress in medieval Irish studies* (Maynooth, 1996), pp 91-104; and I have argued for its utility in constructing a contemporary Christian identity in 'St Patrick and an Irish theology', *Doctrine and Life* 44 (1994), pp 153-159.

6 There have been some attempts to remedy this situation. For example, there is a useful anthology of Welsh material edited and translated by O. Davies, *Celtic Christianity in early medieval Wales* (Cardiff, 1996), and of Scottish material by G. Markus and T. O. Clancy, *Iona: the earliest poetry of a Celtic monastery* (Edinburgh, 1995). In the near future an anthology with a wide range of Celtic material will appear in the Classics of Western Spirituality series: O. Davies and T. O'Loughlin, *Celtic spirituality* (Mahwah, forthcoming).

7 R. Cholij, *Clerical celibacy in East and West* (Leominster, 1988).

8 The differences between the methods of the lawyer and the historian, with special reference to matters medieval, is explored in S. G. Kuttner, *Harmony from dissonance: an interpretation of medieval canon law* (Latrobe, 1960).

9 I wish to thank the many colleagues and friends who have discussed this topic with me; and especially those who, while strongly disagreeing with some or all of the points made here, continued to join me in discussion of these topics.