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# Church History Old and New

Alan Rogers

In recent years, the study of church history has been affected by the revolution which historical studies in general have undergone. The major characteristics of the new type of history are twofold — a concern less with 'great' events and 'great' people and more with the commonalty; and secondly, an attempt to reintegrate the various specialist branches of history, to see one's chosen theme in its total context of the history of mankind. Thus the newer study of church history tries to assess what it felt like to be an 'ordinary' Christian at various points in the past — what the French have called *l'histoire des mentalités*. There have been some people who claim that these newer concerns have indeed come largely from the modern school of French historians, but I fail to see in recent writers like A.D. Gilbert (*Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change 1740-1914*) the influence of Bloch, Levi-Strauss, Leroy Ladurie and other great French historians. Rather it would seem that the origins of this new concern for 'the common Christian' spring from new understandings both of theology as less a matter of tenets and more a matter of relating living with religious insights, and particularly of the nature of the church itself as a lay body provided with clerical ministers rather than a group of clergy trying to convert the world.

There is thus in the new church history less of historical theology (on the grounds that 'arguably the best theologians had the least impact on the mass of churchgoers') and more of 'establishing and elucidating what was generally believed in an age or society' by studying 'the modes of belief and convention, the forms of observance and practice'. 'Great men are atypical; it is in studying the activities of ordinary people that we can see most clearly into the history of a past age'; 'the scene surveyed from an episcopal bench looks very different from the church choir. Perhaps too much "church history" has been from the standpoint of the shepherds and too little from that of the flock. Church historians therefore need to shift their studies from clergy to laity and, at the same time, from the national to the local level'. If our aim really is 'to understand the way in which the *church* worked and lived in any century from the first to the twentieth', then we can no longer limit our understanding of the *church* to clergy, theologians and administrative structures. . In a perceptive review of E.R. Norman's *Church and Society in England 1770-1970*, R.K. Webb wrote, 'He has given us a fine synthesis and a compelling interpretation of the official mind of the Church of England with

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regard to social questions. In doing so, he has brought this line of inquiry close to an end . . . Future investigation of the social attitudes of the Church must abandon the bishops and intellectuals to examine the life of the Church at less exalted levels'. This is perhaps much the same as the call by Martin Brecht in the *Studies in Church History* volume under review for 'territorial Church History'. Such studies have of course their own dangers; it is possible to write local history without saying anything of general significance at all. But nevertheless, it is along these lines – and along these lines alone – that the future of church history lies.

The two books\* under review unhappily show only very few signs of an appreciation of this revolution. Not even the volume specifically devoted to *The Materials, Sources and Methods of Ecclesiastical History* gives anything like as clear an account of the new dimension and attitudes as is possible. The terms of reference of the two volumes – both very similar – do not help. *Church and Government* (with Professor C.R. Cheney as the 'jubiland', a horrid word) aims in each paper to discuss certain records and the light they throw on 'the interaction of secular and ecclesiastical government', the relations between the formal aspects of Church and State. In so doing, the book has isolated itself from the newer trends. There are some hints – the role of provincial synods in the early medieval life of the church in Normandy, the influence of church courts on secular courts in England in the twelfth century, and the role of archdeacons (treated in both volumes) – but the rest are detailed studies of documents or 'great' people, Geoffrey of Monmouth, monastic diplomatic, Gratian, Vacarius, the Papal Bull of *Unam Sanctam*, John Baconthorpe and canon law, king and archbishop in the political crisis of 1313-16 – aside from the mainstream of church history. If some of this work is necessary to the writing of church history, its relevance is not shown here. Not only is this a work for the specialist; its concept of 'the church' is not that of thinking Christians today.

The *Studies in Church History* volume is even more disappointing because we expect more from it; it is deliberately aimed at telling us what church history is all about. Perhaps the failure of the book is the fault of the editor, whose 'idle and barren' contribution (by far the longest) is an example of that deadening antiquarianism based on research without understanding of which Professor Hill speaks; who fails to see that the study of 'Church and Society' is demonstrably narrower than 'Religion and Society' despite the recent work by Alan Macfarlane and Keith Thomas and even the contribution within the volume itself of Keith Robbins; and who must (in part at least) be held responsible for the unintelligent use of capitals throughout the book (thus 'jews' and 'elizabethan' etc.) and for the inexcusable absence of an index which makes the volume largely unusable. It is

particularly a fault of the medievalists; many of the modernists show more sympathy and more real appreciation of what it is we are all about, like Keith Robbins on the task of the modern ecclesiastical historian, Robert Dunning on parochial church life in the 19th century and Patrick Scott on church magazines. Professor Hill herself however in her general survey on ecclesiastical records shows an awareness of the new dimensions, as does Brenda Bolton in her detailed study of the sources for the study of the *humiliati*: 'what is really needed is a new approach to the existing evidence of using the insights of the social sciences. These would give us . . . greater understanding of the way in which the members of this informal religious community were able to live devotional lives as grass roots level'. On the other hand Sheridan Gilley, in his study of how the nineteenth century Catholics in England viewed the Latin countries, gets near to the heart of the matter but never quite arrives. Some of the other studies can be made to be relevant: the Frankish penitentials or the splendid study of language in the Middle Ages (Roger Bacon for instance: 'from the beginning of the world the common people (*vulgus*) were separated from the knowledge (*sensus*) of the saints, the philosophers and all other wise people . . .') although this view is qualified by Brenda Bolton who points out that some *laici litterati* were allowed some clerical privileges such as the use of a habit); but in every case it is the reader, not the author, who has to make the connections. It is relatively easy to see how some of these studies are necessary preliminaries before writing a history of the Christian church; thus if Wycliffe didn't translate the Bible (Michael Wilks), some other group did. But most of the others defeat analysis. What is the relevance of how Eusebius and other early Christians wrote history? What does it matter if Clement VI's sermons were written by someone else? The themes are not those of the *Church* – the coronation oath, the Council of Westminster in 1175, Le Neve's *Fasti*, etc. It may be true as Professor Hill says, that 'without research, understanding is starved of material'; but, she goes on, 'without understanding research declines into a deadening antiquarianism'. There is little sign in some of these research essays of that 'humane critical faculty' for which the editor himself calls.

But it can be argued that these volumes did not set out to provide this 'understanding'; they consist of detailed academic studies. Almost every paper is rooted in some manuscript collection; it is this which provides the coherence to both works. The 'materials and sources' of the *Studies in Church History* volume consist almost entirely of documents. There is hardly a mention of archaeology, so that a comparison of this book with *The Archaeological Study of Churches* (Council for British Archaeology Research Report 13, edited by P. Addyman and R. Morris) is particularly

unfavourable — the archaeologists are more aware of documents than the documentary historian is of archaeology. This shortcoming is heightened by the fact that Professor Hill, in her presidential address, reminds us that 'archaeology, architecture, geography, topography, personal memory, even of late years the study of photographs and of the tape-recorder, all have their part, and a steadily increasing part, to play in the process of historical investigation'; but none of the writers draws upon these disciplines, and she herself urges the primacy of the documents: 'it is above all upon the written word that the study of ecclesiastical history depends'. Works like Robert Moore's *Pitmen, Preachers and Politics* and James Obelkevich's *Religion and Rural Society* which use oral tradition, dialect and even the study of surviving parsonages have not yet had an impact on the school of church historian represented by most of the essays in these books.

Of course such studies as these are necessary: 'before we can understand what ecclesiastical history is all about, we must go back to its sources'; but 'we are not to become so much engrossed in the finer points of textual interpretation that we lose sight of that historical understanding to which we are called'. 'The main reason for investigating these records . . . is . . . to find out how the church *as a whole* worked in relation to its earthly responsibilities' (Hill: my italics). Such 'historical understanding' is not contained in these essays. Those who want to find out how the church worked will not find it in these books. Those who read these two books will find in some of the essays some illumination; but the majority of the papers represent the dead-end of ecclesiastical history, not the new avenues which have been opened out before us. This is a pity.

*Church and Government in the Middle Ages*, Essays presented to C.R. Cheney, edited by Christopher Brooke, David Luscombe, Geoffrey Martin and Dorothy Owen. Cambridge University Press, 1976. 284 pp. £15.00; *The Materials, Sources and Methods of Ecclesiastical History*, Studies in Church History vol. 11, edited D. Baker. Blackwell, 1975. 370 pp. £10.00.