

KENNETH SCOTT LATOURETTE A TRAIL BLAZER¹— A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF LATOURETTE'S THEORY OF RELIGIOUS HISTORY

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The books of Kenneth Scott Latourette, the famous Sterling Professor of History at Yale University, are widely used in the study of church history and missions in a variety of Christian institutions. This article seeks to delineate and critically evaluate the view of Christian history set forth by him. It argues that Latourette's view of history represents a serious departure from the testimony of the Scriptures which has not gone undetected by historians and theologians, with the result that his interpretation of history should be used with caution. The wellspring of the great scholar's views are found in the progressivistic spirit of his age and personality, as well as the eschatological assumptions of a pietistically informed religious Liberalism.

* * *

Till a voice, as bad as Conscience
rang interminable changes
On one everlasting Whisper
day and night repeated—so:
Something hidden. Go and find it.
Go and look behind the Ranges—
Something lost behind the Ranges.
Lost and waiting for you. Go!

WHEN Rudyard Kipling composed "The Explorer" from which the above is taken, he had in mind some hardy pioneer

¹Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967) 9, 155. This term is frequently used of himself in his autobiography.

tracking hidden valleys and virgin wilds, mapping uncharted territories. What would be his reaction today to learn that a dweller in ivory towers, an academician—and a church historian, at that—had borrowed his language (in a slightly altered form) to entitle an autobiography? Other than lodging a legitimate complaint over the alteration of his actual words (from “behind” to “beyond the ranges”), the sometime poet might be well pleased when he found out more about this particular historian. For Kenneth Scott Latourette had a career in many respects truly extraordinary, and his personal narrative amply demonstrates that his life has been largely lived as a response to a call to go “beyond the ranges.”

The impact of Latourette is readily demonstrable in Christian institutions of higher learning because his texts continue to inform and shape the emerging generation as they have the past. What, however, is most arresting is that required texts are often assigned in college courses without a recognition of the author’s concept or definition of the subject. Unfortunately teachers of history are so zealous to provide vehicles for the conveyance of information that there is too frequently a neglect by teachers to scrutinize carefully the presuppositions that undergird the arrangement of the data. This article purposes to delineate and evaluate critically Latourette’s theory of history. To accomplish this goal, the student must see his theory of history within the context of his formative influences and educational presuppositions. After describing the mind of Latourette, his definition of history will be delineated, with particular emphasis on historic causation, form, and culmination. Finally, Latourette’s conception of history will be evaluated relative to the validity of his historic and theological presuppositions. It is the purpose of this article to demonstrate that Latourette’s theory, while adhering to the form of Christian historiography, lacks both the theological content to be denominated truly Christian and historic accuracy and realism.

LATOURETTE AND FORMATIVE INFLUENCES

His family and educational heritage

The quiet, optimistic bachelor, who became one of America’s foremost historians of Oriental history,² emerged within the context of a stable, educated, and religious home. In retrospect he was able to comment: “By family background and heredity, as I now see clearly, I was prepared to be a trail blazer. . . . In both my father’s and my

²James E. Wood, Jr., “Kenneth Scott Latourette (1884-1968): Historian, Ecumenist, and Friend,” *Journal of Church and State* 11 (1969) 9.

mother's family was a long tradition of adventuring on new and unmapped frontiers in response to 'a voice as bad as conscience,'"³ His grandparents were a part of that sturdy band that pioneered the settlement of Oregon Territory in erecting Oregon City, the oldest city in the state, in 1848. There Dewitt Clinton Latourette settled to become a successful lawyer and his mother, Rhoda Ellen Scott, taught Latin at the University of Washington.⁴ The children that emerged through this unusual couple were educated in the virtues of both religion and learning. The religious environment of "deep Christian faith, family worship, and pietistic Baptist church life"⁵ functioned to make a lasting imprimatur upon all his subsequent activities. Indeed, to fail to perceive clearly this influence is to misunderstand his philosophy of life and understanding of history. Both theologically and religiously, Latourette was a pietist; the church of his boyhood was in the Moody tradition; and his home was "an embodiment of Christian faith and culture."⁶

The bookish lad then attended McMinnville College, a Baptist school where his father had previously taught, which was in reality an extension and intensification of the evangelical heritage of his home.⁷ There the valedictorian of the class of 1904 and member of the championship debating team became interested in the interdenominational work of the Young Men's Christian Association and its corollary, the Student Volunteer Movement. His youthful enthusiasm led him to sign its celebrated pledge: "It is my promise if God permits to become a foreign missionary." As with most decisions that are made in haste, this one was repented of in leisure. Much later in life he reflected: "I felt as if I had signed my death warrant . . . I hated the thought."⁸ After college he, being not yet twenty, labored in his father's law firm for one year before continuing his educational career.

From the brief interlude in his academic pursuits he set his scope upon Yale College where he completed a B.A. in history in 1906. The Student Volunteer Movement had a strong impact on the campus in those days through Dwight Hall, a pietistic academic center within the college, which focused and defined his previous commitment to

³Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 9.

⁴Ibid., 13.

⁵William R. Hogg, "The Legacy of Kenneth Scott Latourette," *Occasional Bulletin* 2 (1978) 74.

⁶Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 14.

⁷Hogg, "The Legacy," 84-85.

⁸Kenneth Scott Latourette, "My Guided Life," in *Frontiers of the Christian World Mission Since 1938*, ed. Wilber C. Harr (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1962) 285.

foreign missions. He thus prepared for foreign service in the Far East through the Yale-in-China educational mission at Changsa. The Student Volunteer Movement riveted his attention on Far Eastern studies when such a discipline was only embryonically heard of, let alone pursued, in this major American center of learning.⁹ To prepare himself for China, he determined to take further studies in history that resulted in an M.A. in 1907 and a doctorate in 1909.¹⁰ For his Ph.D. dissertation he wrote *The History of the Early Relations between the United States and China, 1784-1844*, which was published in 1917 and twice republished. His doctorate was directed by Frederick Wells Williams, who was the son of missionary parents from China. It was Williams who solicited Latourette for Yale-in-China.¹¹ It is amusing, if not important, to understand that in Latourette's formal training, he had only one course in Church History, that under Williston Walker, "who in addition to being an outstanding scholar was a superb lecturer."¹² Although Latourette's contact with Walker was slight, the structural presuppositions of his mentor are clearly seen in his philosophical interpretation of history.¹³ In addition, he was devoid of any formal training in theology.

His frustrations in China

After a year of domestic travel for the Student Volunteer Movement, Latourette set out for China. His vocational dreams proved vaporous, as he was stricken with a severe case of amoebic dysentery that forced his premature retirement. Deep mental depression put the hope of return to China out of the question, and physical recovery took almost two years. After he gained sufficient strength, he turned to teaching for a source of financial security at Reed College in Portland, Oregon. There his life-purpose began to crystalize.

Since returning from China I had been deeply impressed by the lack of information about the Far East in this country. So far as I knew, in only seven colleges and universities were any courses being offered on China or Japan and, so far as I could discover, nothing was being done in any high school. I believed myself called to be a trail blazer.¹⁴

⁹Ralph D. Winter, "The Reluctant Missionary," *World Vision Magazine* 13 (July-August 1969) 4-5.

¹⁰Theodore E. Bachmann, "Kenneth Scott Latourette: Historian and Friend," in *Frontiers of the Christian World Mission Since 1938*, ed. Wilber C. Harr (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1962) 235.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 234.

¹²Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 31.

¹³Bachmann, "Kenneth Scott Latourette," 235.

¹⁴Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 50-51.

As a result of his studies came *The Development of China* in 1917. In 1916 he became Chairman of the Department of History and Political Science at Denison University, a Baptist institution in Granville, Ohio.¹⁵ At that post he wrote *The Development of Japan* (1918). He continued his dual career, blazing trails in Far Eastern studies and laboring for the S.V.M. and Y.M.C.A. In the war years he was ordained into the Northern Baptist ministry and served as chaplain at the school.¹⁶

His emergence as an eminent educator

After the war years, numerous schools sought the services of Latourette. After some initial indecision, he accepted the advance of his alma mater to replace the retiring Harlan Page Beach. He later confessed that "as was true to signing the Student Volunteer declaration in 1904, I went to the Yale faculty from a sheer sense of duty."¹⁷ Yale's historic missionary impulse from Dwight Hall and his desire to prepare men for foreign missions activity brought him to the D. William James Professorship of Missions ("and Oriental History," added in 1927).¹⁸ He occupied that post until he gained emeritus status in 1953.

Those years at Yale were marked by tremendous academic and practical progress. Reflecting upon his early Yale days, he commented that "I taught the history of the Far East . . . for many years I was giving practically all the work offered at Yale on the Far East."¹⁹ At Yale he pioneered studies in the relationship of Christianity to international relations, as well as the Ecumenical Movement.²⁰ In addition to classroom labors, he continued an avalanche of literary output—"Each day he wrote 1000 words and regularly made up any arrears."²¹ To the works that made him a pioneer in the study of East Asia were added *The History of Christian Missions in China* (1929), a work which has remained unrivaled in its field, and *The Chinese: Their History and Culture* (1934), a two-volume standard work. The work for which he is now most famous and which has become the major work on the history of missions is his seven-volume study of *The History of the Expansion of Christianity* (1937-1945). Numerous other books came from his pen. Some of these were: *History of*

¹⁵Ibid., 54.

¹⁶Latourette, "My Guided Life," 290.

¹⁷Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 61.

¹⁸Hogg, "The Legacy," 74.

¹⁹Latourette, "My Guided Life," 291.

²⁰Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 94.

²¹Hogg, "The Legacy," 77.

Christianity (1953) and the five-volume *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age: A History of Christianity in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1958-1962).

While he was preeminently a historian, he was also one of this century's most ardent supporters of the ecumenical movement within Protestantism—a movement the foundations of which he saw as stemming from the modern missionary movement. To edge the ecumenical movement forward, he became a charter member of the editorial staff of *The International Review of Missions*; for over thirty years he served on the International Missionary Council and actively participated in drafting the charter of the World Council of Churches as the official representative of his denomination at Utrecht in May, 1938.²² He did much to foster Catholic-Protestant dialogue, being, in 1953, "the only Protestant participant in an American consultation on the foreign mission work of the Roman Catholic Church."²³ William Richey Hogg, Professor of World Christianity at Perkins Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas, quickly notes that "an ecumenical perspective shaped all his writings. His global view and balanced appreciative openness toward each segment of the World Christian community became the hallmark of his writing."²⁴

It is not at all surprising that his contributions to religious and intellectual academia would solicit widespread attention. For his contribution of writing on China, the Chinese government awarded him the Order of Jade in 1938. His peers honored him as president of both the Society of Church History in 1945 and the American Historical Association in 1949. In addition, he served as president of the Japan International Christian University Foundation, chairman of the Student Volunteer Movement, president of the American Baptist Foreign Mission Society, and president of the American Baptist Convention (1951-1952). In a somewhat reflective mood he confided that "at the height of my folly, I was serving on thirty-three boards and committees in New York and New Haven, including four mission boards."²⁵ In 1949 Yale honored him by raising him to the status of outstanding service, that is, to the rank of a Sterling Professorship.²⁶ Latourette was awarded fourteen honorary doctorates from such institutions as the universities of Wales, Oxford, Glasgow, and Marburg.²⁷

²²Wood, "Kenneth Scott Latourette," 12.

²³LeRoy Moore, Jr., review of *Beyond the Ranges*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette, in *The Hartford Quarterly* 8 (1968) 82.

²⁴Hogg, "The Legacy," 77.

²⁵Winter, "The Reluctant Missionary," 5.

²⁶Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 95.

²⁷Latourette, "My Guided Life," 292.

In 1953 Latourette commenced his "retirement" years by returning to Oregon City, Oregon, yet continued an active writing and traveling career. His years suddenly jolted to an abrupt halt in 1968 under the wheels of a hit-and-run automobile in front of his home.

Latourette was many things: a historian who believed one could write history objectively, an ordained Baptist clergyman of a pietistic, warmly evangelical spirit, and a trail blazer of both Far Eastern studies and global religious ecumenism. He was a man who heard a whisper "as bad as conscience" to "go and look beyond the ranges." There he labored to forge a new idea of the structure and meaning of history and sought to propound that concept through his writings.

LATOURETTE AND THE MEANING OF HISTORY

The definition of meaning in history

Latourette's pursuit of "the whisper" which to him was "as bad as conscience" cannot be presuppositionally divorced from either his pietistic missionary impulse or the influence of his only teacher in Church History, Williston Walker. From Walker he gained a definition of church history in particular and a method of history in general. Church history was conceived to be a blend of pietistic experientialism and futuristic eschatology—that is, a "divinely guided process and one moving forward to a larger realization of the kingdom of God."²⁸ As a trained, critical historian, he learned to respect data and to prize "objectivity." For him that seemed to mean dispassionate impartiality with facts and balanced judgment with generalization. Yet he recognized that pure objectivity is an elusive phantom and that the very selection of data involves nonobjective factors. Thus, in each preface he indicated the Christian "bias" in his value frame.²⁹ Meaning-in-history is found within the matrix of Christianity, a Christianity that is discernible by the critical mind of the historian within a global world view. Latourette confesses the need for this universalist interpretation of history when he writes that

²⁸Roland H. Bainton, *Yale and the Ministry* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1957) 235.

²⁹Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age: A History of Christianity in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, vol. 1: *The 19th Century in Europe: Background and the Roman Catholic Phase* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969) xii-xiii; Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1953) xx-xxi; Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 1: *The First Five Centuries to A.D. 500* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970) xiii; Latourette, *Christianity Through the Ages* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) xii-xiii.

The usual introductory and supposedly comprehensive courses in the subject and the available texts majored in Western Europe and the centuries through the Reformation. They gave the impression that all since the Reformation was a kind of curtain call, that Christianity was fading out of the human scene, and that it never had been very important except in Western Europe, a region which was only a small fraction of the civilized world. I had repeatedly said of secular historians that with their oblivion to East Asia that they were not aware that the world is round. Latterly historians and history departments were becoming less provincial. However, church historians, so it seemed to me, were even more peer-blind and with less excuse, for if the Gospel is for all men, church history must be seen in the context of the entire globe. Moreover, I was, and am convinced, that never has Christianity so entered into the life of the entire race as it has in the past half-century. With that conviction I undertook a survey which would cover the entire story—all aspects, all branches of Christianity, and the entire globe.³⁰

In general, Latourette's concept of history can be characterized as religious, progressive, global, optimistic, and critical. His primary interest was not the church's internal history, rather it was the external history of Christianity—the effect of the church upon its environment and the effect of the environment upon the church and the world-wide expansion of Christianity in world history.³¹

Latourette's idea of meaning in and out of history finds its structure within Christianity generally and particularly in the person of Jesus Christ. He adopts the rubric of divine sovereignty in the human sphere and an eschatological kingdom-hope. "Ultimately God will triumph. History moves toward a culmination. Whether within or beyond time God's will is to be accomplished and His full sovereignty will be seen to have prevailed."³² The purpose of God in history is not so much doxological as it is anthropocentric and soteriological; history is the story of a sovereign God seeking the obedience of the race. This rudimentary presupposition caused him to state that

The course of history is God's search for man. God is judge, but He judges man that He may save him and transform him. God's grace, the love which man does not deserve and cannot earn, respects man's free

³⁰Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 114-15.

³¹Wood, "Kenneth Scott Latourette," 10.

³²Kenneth Scott Latourette, "The Christian Understanding of History," in *God, History and Historians*, ed. C. T. McIntire (New York: Oxford University, 1977) 52.

will and endeavors to reach man through the incarnation, the cross, and the Holy Spirit. Here, to the Christian, is the meaning of history and its unifying core.³³

The meaning of history then is found in Jesus Christ as the revelation of God's will and purpose for mankind. Ultimately all meaning in history finds focus in him. "No fact of history is more amazing than the spread of the influence of Jesus."³⁴ The ever-widening popularity of Jesus is the key to understanding history. While Christianity has varied from age to age, from country to country, and even from individual to individual, all the forms which Christianity has taken have honored Jesus. From Jesus, through Christianity, have issued impulses or pulsations which have helped to shape every phase of civilization. Latourette declares that "Jesus is the most influential life ever lived on this planet. The influence appears to be mounting. It does not increase evenly but by pulsations of advance, retreat, and advance."³⁵ According to Latourette, history finds meaning in man's reception of God's love as evidenced in Jesus. Response to Jesus has not been uniform, but generally has had a series of advances, retreats, and advances.

The basis of meaning in history

At this point, it is most logical to propose the issue of the criteria for judging the pulsating waves of Jesus' influence. Latourette's reply would be three-fold: first, the geographical extent of Christianity; second, the "vitality" or quality of commitment of those called Christians; and third, the influence of Christianity upon the human race.³⁶ Only the first of these is strictly measurable, while the second and third would seem to be much more difficult to apply. However, Latourette defines even these in ways that make him a tireless chronicler of facts and statistics. He assumes that larger numbers of Christians mean more Christians of strong commitment and that expansion implies increasing influence. These are the criteria that enable him to exult on a favorite theme, "I was and am convinced

³³Ibid., 54.

³⁴Latourette, *The Unquenchable Light* (London: Religious Book Club, 1945) x.

³⁵Latourette, "The Christian Understanding of History," 61.

³⁶Latourette, *Christianity in a Revolutionary Age*, vol. 5: *The 20th Century Outside Europe, The Americas, The Pacific, Asia, and Africa: The Emerging Rural Christian Community*, 534.

that never has Christianity so entered into the life of the entire race as it has in the past four centuries and especially in the past half-century."³⁷

The structure of Latourette's scheme of meaning in history, as a result of the application of the three-fold criteria, can be represented as something of an incoming tide. Each major wave has been followed by a major recession. However, his progressivism is most apparent when he writes that "each major wave has set a new high-water mark and each major recession has been less pronounced than its predecessor."³⁸ With this general rubric, Latourette applied the criteria of the influence of Jesus as derived essentially by statistical analysis and pietistic warmth to structure an outline of history that moves ever forward to a final era of a utopian, universal manifestation of Jesus in the affairs of men.

The structure of meaning in history

As a result of the combination of a methodology derived from historical science and Christian belief, he felt that the mind is opened towards a true understanding of Jesus.³⁹ Using his three criteria, he divided the history of Christianity into a series of ebbs and flows: the period from the time of Christ to A.D. 500 was one of the initial advances in which Christianity triumphed in the Roman Empire; from 500-950 the first and greatest recession was occasioned by pagan destruction in Europe and the invasion of the Crescent into the entirety of Northern Africa and Spain; from 950-1350 Christianity surged forward, and the influence of Jesus spread in the prominence and dominance of various Roman pontiffs; from 1350-1500 the prestige of Rome sank and with it the authority of Jesus; from 1500-1750 the Reformation era pushed the church forward; from 1750-1815 the Enlightenment caused disaffection; from 1815-1914 the fourth age of advance, "the great century of the church," and from 1914 to the present has been a period of "advance through storm."⁴⁰

Latourette was a child of the religious utopianism of the late nineteenth century; from this century with its blatant, unabashed optimism he accepted the doctrine of progress. He was particularly adamant that the present century is one of advance, which is out of congruity with his advance-recession pattern; his optimism rebelled against any notion of a present post-Christian era. He positively

³⁷Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 114.

³⁸Latourette, *The Unquenchable Light*, x.

³⁹Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, xxi.

⁴⁰Latourette, *The Unquenchable Light*, xvi-xvii.

concludes that "when the entire world is taken into consideration, Christianity is seen to have augmented its influence upon mankind."⁴¹ Instead of accepting the concept of a post-Christian era, Latourette believed in a "pre-Christian era," that is, that Christianity is only in its youth.⁴² "What the future has in store we cannot know. But if mankind does not commit suicide through nuclear arms, the evidence should lead us to characterize the current era not as post-Christian but as pre-Christian."⁴³ Christianity is conceived as a recent phenomenon; it is gaining in momentum and has seen its widest extension in the past century and a half. In spite of palpable weaknesses, it is displaying great vigor.⁴⁴ This "amazing vigor" is a recurrent theme for Latourette, as evidenced when he writes that

Yet when viewed from the standpoint of the centuries its course is forward. The record of the past gives ground for confident hope that to Christianity belongs the future. It was through faithful souls who in adverse days refused to despair, but had visions to venture in new areas and resolution to hold on in regions in which faith was threatened that Christianity went on. Some even turned defeat into victory. So it is proving in our day. So, we believe, it will be in the centuries to come.⁴⁵

Latourette is willing to concede the death of culture in the West but understands that Christianity always survives such demises. He informs us that "not only, phoenixlike, does it come out of the fire with renewed life, but it also plays a larger and larger part in the affairs of men."⁴⁶ The apparent recessions of our present century are but harbingers of a fresh age of advance.

It is most logical to pose to Latourette's idea of progression in history this question: What is the specific future of this relatively nascent movement that perpetuates the influence of Jesus over the cosmos? At the initial confrontation with the question, the historian in Latourette is quick to grasp the lack of concrete facts ("prophecy is notoriously fallible"⁴⁷), but he does have a reply. That reply is in the

⁴¹Ibid., 123.

⁴²Latourette, *The Christian Outlook* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1948) 1.

⁴³Latourette, "Do We Live in a Post-Christian Age?" *Religion in Life* 33 (1964). 179.

⁴⁴Latourette, "A Historian Looks Ahead; The Future of Christianity in the Light of Its Past," *CH* 15 (1946) 15.

⁴⁵Latourette, "Recessions in the Tide of Christian Advance," *International Review of Missions* 31 (1942) 274.

⁴⁶Latourette, *The Christian Outlook*, 43.

⁴⁷Latourette, "A Historian Looks Ahead," 3.

form of deductions from the assumed historical pattern that Christianity has evidenced. "The historian ought not to attempt to predict the final outcome. However, he can reasonably venture some generalizations."⁴⁸ Latourette conveys his optimism and pietism into his futuristic comments and sees Christianity triumphing in the affairs of men and the final demise of the planet. The mature form of Christianity is uncertain to him, but he feels certain that it would reflect some form that we currently have (i.e., Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Anglican).⁴⁹ Also, he maintains that Christianity in the future will evidence the advance-recession motif of the past.

It would appear that Christianity, with long centuries, probably millenniums, ahead of it, will progressively bring mankind into obedience. Crises will be encountered. Losses will be experienced. Yet recessions will be followed by fresh advances. The general direction will be onward.⁵⁰

His utopian expectations for the future are not absolutely perfectionistic in that "mankind will never fully attain to the standards of the Sermon on the Mount," yet he expects larger approximations individually, societally, and ecclesiastically. The end of man's existence on this planet is certain with or without the fullest evidence of the influence of Jesus. Of this eventual demise he notes that

Sometime the world will end . . . that may come by a sudden catastrophe, and perhaps fairly soon. . . . It may be by the slow loss of air and water. Adverse climactic conditions or an alteration in the atmosphere may gradually work such untoward conditions that mankind will no longer be able to maintain itself. This is the trend of prophecy from modern science. Or mankind may destroy itself out of its own folly. But sooner or later humankind will no longer find a home in this planet.⁵¹

That "whisper as bad as conscience" drew Latourette into a systematic reconstruction of Christian historiography. His was a whisper that led to familiar paths "beyond the ranges" presuppositionally, yet never so cogently argued by the combination of the rigors of accepted historical research and an unmistakable Christian consensus. For Latourette, the paths "beyond the ranges" led to a cultural, progressive, pietistic interpretation of history, a construction that deeply reflects his religious heritage, the religious optimism of his

⁴⁸Ibid., 16.

⁴⁹Latourette, *The Christian Outlook*, 16.

⁵⁰Ibid., 186.

⁵¹Ibid., 198.

era, and his graduate training. The paths beyond led, for Latourette and those who followed him, to a triumphant religious hope that was grounded in history.

LATOURETTE AND CRITICAL EVALUATION

The "whisper as bad as conscience" brought the scholarly pietist "beyond the ranges" and to a reconstruction of the seeming dichotomy between "world history" and "salvation history" that attempted to blur the two opposites into a harmonious whole. The "path" beyond the presuppositionalism of Augustinian historiography has, however, not been without its critics. Indeed, since Latourette purposed to merge secular and religious history into one cogent, holistic motif, criticism has been heaped upon him from two quarters: secular historians and theologians. When he set forth the foundational principles of his idea and system of meaning in history as president of the American Historical Association in 1949 under the rubric of "A Christian Understanding of History," the response was often barbed. Latourette publicly confided, "By the grapevine I heard that many of my auditors were disgusted. Some said that if they wanted to hear a talk on the subject they would go to church."⁵² Elsewhere in rehearsing his life and the response to the AHA address, he must have been impressed by the negative reaction, for he repeats the same theme ("My presidential address was on the subject, 'The Christian Understanding of History,' which some of the hearers didn't enjoy").⁵³ Secularists and religionists alike cast intellectual, philosophical and theological stumbling stones in the optimistic primrose paths of his research "beyond the ranges."

The criticism of theologians

Theologians have questioned Latourette's definition of Christianity in that some understand that he divorces it from theological content; that is, his definition of Christianity is so cultural and environmental that it despairs of being Christian. J. S. Whale, Professor of History at Cheshunt College, Cambridge, England, exclaimed emphatically, "What is the distinctive nature of this Christian Faith which has run like fire through the stubble and bids for nothing less than the whole world?"⁵⁴ Searle Bates, formerly Professor of History at Nanking University, China, argues perceptively

⁵²Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 115.

⁵³Latourette, "My Guided Life," 292.

⁵⁴J. S. Whale, review of *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 7: *Advance through Storm, A.D. 1914 and After, with Concluding Generalizations*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette, in *International Review of Missions* 34 (1945) 429.

when he criticizes Latourette thusly: "We must remind ourselves that Latourette's very concept of Christianity in history is not 'The Faith,' but an entity much more human, much more comprehensive—even to the margins of dualism—than the doctrine of some Christians who are revolted by it."⁵⁵ That is, Latourette's definition of Christianity appears to be more inspired by the subjective notion of the ever-penetrating "influence of Jesus" than a theological perception of "the faith." He holds to a Christianity that is distinct from the message of Christianity. Christianity is a cultural and social relativity that lacks a static, definitive, restricted core or kerygma. This becomes poignantly evident when he informs his readers that

Christianity is a religion. Like other religions, as we see in the churches it has strong admixtures of human elements. Some of these contradict the gospel. . . . The history of Christianity is in large part the record of the love of God operating in various ways, conditioned by cultural inheritance and present forces, many of them antagonistic.⁵⁶

What is the core of Christianity to Latourette? This he defines as the ethical principles of the Sermon on the Mount with its "standards at once alluring and impossible of full attainment within the bounds of time."⁵⁷ He adds immediately that Christianity is far more than a set of ethical principles, but "one puts down his final volume (*History of Expansion*, vol. 7) with the uneasy feeling that this explicit concession to the tremendous assertions of Creeds and Confessions, of the Epistle to the Romans is hardly born out by the implicit presupposition of the whole work."⁵⁸ Latourette's definition of Christianity is criticized as far too generalistic for the theologian; a dichotomy between the Gospel and Christianity appears nauseously secular. He finds the Gospel intrinsically in the NT, but not in Christianity.⁵⁹ Some have felt that such a dichotomy is both unnecessary and destructive. It is simply argued that Latourette unwisely "saw the history of Christianity, not as primarily institutional or theological history, but as an empirical movement in history,"⁶⁰ much to the detriment of the genius of Christianity.

"The historian of Christianity," says LeRoy Moore, Jr., Professor of Church History at the Hartford Theological Foundation,

⁵⁵Searle Bates, "Christian Historian, Doer of Christian History. In Memory of Kenneth Scott Latourette 1884-1968," *International Review of Missions* 58 (1969) 325.

⁵⁶Kenneth Scott Latourette, *Challenge and Conformity* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955) 22-23.

⁵⁷Latourette, *Advance through Storm*, 499.

⁵⁸Whale, review of *Advance through Storm*, 429.

⁵⁹Latourette, *Advance through Storm*, 499.

⁶⁰Wood, "Kenneth Scott Latourette," 10.

Hartford, Connecticut, "who tries to avoid being a theologian becomes by his own default only an irresponsible theologian."⁶¹ The path "beyond the ranges" may have been occasioned by a minutely audible whisper, but the echo of criticism of Latourette's journey screams back with the charge of theological ineptitude. Even a deeply committed friend such as Ralph D. Winter, Professor of Missions at the School of World Mission, Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California, is forced to confess, "Here is one tangible gap in his credentials: he did not undergo the customary orientation of seminary theological studies."⁶² Latourette never took a theological degree (his M.A. and Ph.D. at Yale were in history); in fact, he never took a single course at Yale in theology or biblical studies and only one in church history (Williston Walker's survey). Hogg simply states the echoing point that

Latourette was not a theologian and never thought of himself as being one. He had read the classics—Athanasius, Augustine especially, some of Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin—and also Temple, John and Donald Baille, and some of Barth, Brunner, and Bultmann. Yet his mind was that of the fact-gathering historian whose data yield patterns and enable generalizations—not that of the theologian.⁶³

When he did finally decide to produce his "comprehensive" *History of Christianity*, which appeared just as he retired from Yale, he audited colleague Robert Calhoun's course on the history of doctrine prior to the Reformation and did much additional reading on his own as well.⁶⁴ "The most that can be said," writes Moore, "is that this cram-course tactic gave Latourette the objectivist historian a good bit more data, which is ably presented in the pages of the *History*, but it did not enable him to pass the examination."⁶⁵ That is, if one is convinced that church history is inseparable from the story of doctrinal development, indeed that this development is its guiding hermeneutic, and the story of the church in time is always an account of the attempts and failures on the part of the church to unite theory (doctrine) and practice (worship and missions), then Latourette is disappointing.

Latourette's approach to history arises from two primary sources: first, his historical studies at Yale in a Von Ranke approach, particularly history as an objective, documentary, statistical, analytical

⁶¹Moore, review of *Beyond the Ranges*, 90.

⁶²Winter, "The Reluctant Missionary," 5.

⁶³Hogg, "The Legacy," 75.

⁶⁴Latourette, *Beyond the Ranges*, 115.

⁶⁵Moore, review of *Beyond the Ranges*, 90.

discipline; second, his pietistic, subjective, evangelical heritage which is evidenced in an experiential, pragmatic, nose-counting kind of religion. The pietist approach to church history focuses more on practice than on theory, on religion more than doctrine. Thus, his history is an account of human response. The pietist historian is concerned primarily with the intangible rather than the tangible. And this is where he gets into a bind. The best he can do is redefine Christianity and reduce his approach to statistical analysis. Hence, we have Latourette the historian hugging-and-chalking his way around the world, counting every gain, noting every loss, writing *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*. Hogg, who did doctoral studies under Latourette, co-authored several works and married into his family, most adequately summarizes the theologian's tension with Latourette's method:

The Christian historian of Christianity or of the church must be skilled in the methods of his craft but must also be responsibly knowledgeable in theology, for the latter shapes data-selection and interpretation. Precisely here his critics judged him weak. Reinhold Niebuhr referred to him as a layman in theology, a label widely repeated.⁶⁶

The criticism of historians

The stones of criticism that hobble Latourette's path "beyond the ranges" fall into two general categories: theological and historical. The former questions Latourette's prowess and credentials to write the history of a religious movement, while the latter criticism focuses upon the use of the sources and the structure or shape that he creates from his data. Some critics have fundamentally questioned his "wave metaphor" of history as a succession of tides. Such a presentation of Christianity in terms of extension, advance and increase is "condemned as tainted with the doctrine of evolution, a non-biblical concept of progress; and as contrary to fact in the experience of twentieth century Europe."⁶⁷ Hogg is quick to comply that "some have scorned it and profess to see in it the optimism of evolutionary progress. They dismiss it as naive."⁶⁸

Somewhat parallel to the reaction toward the wave theory is also the evaluation of Latourette's chronological divisions of advance and recession. Ernest A. Payne, a former professor at Regent's Park College, Oxford, England, and General Secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, comments: "One cannot escape

⁶⁶Hogg, "The Legacy," 76.

⁶⁷Bates, "Christian Historian," 322.

⁶⁸Hogg, "The Legacy," 78.

the feeling that Dr. Latourette finds his diminishing periods of recession a little too neatly and easily."⁶⁹ Any metaphor applied to history must be most cautiously used, and it must be made clear whether it is intended as a judgment on the meaning or lack of meaning of the historical process as such, or simply as an aid to the better understanding of a certain group of observed phenomena. There is always danger of a metaphor once adopted being master instead of servant. This fallacy of servant becoming master is most evident in his evaluation of the present century. At this point his presuppositions force him to reject his artificial wave metaphor because it calls for a recession which he cannot vocationally accept. Latourette's linear theory seems artificially imposed even upon "salvation history," and that appears to be an ever deeper travesty when viewed from "secular history." The sixteenth century appears to have evidenced more of the "influence of Jesus" than the so-called "Great Century."

Perhaps a minor point of criticism and yet quite integral to Latourette's criteria for the determining of the "influence of Jesus" is the yardstick of Christian vitality. Some assert that he over-evaluates the social success of Christianity. F. Ernest Stoeffler, Professor of Church History in the School of Theology of Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, notes: "Many of us would not care to be quite as optimistic about the social achievements of Christianity as is Dr. Latourette."⁷⁰ Scholars have seriously questioned whether Christian influence can explain such movements as the promotion of anti-slavery, the League of Nations, democracy, socialism, the Red Cross, and numerous schools and hospitals or such personalities as Sun Yat Sen and Ghandi.⁷¹ Reinhold Niebuhr, famed American theologian and professor at Union Theological Seminary, New York, calls such evidence "rather irrelevant" and "highly problematic."⁷² He is frank to add that

In most of the achievements which Professor Latourette enumerates, secular idealism co-operated with more distinctively Christian idealism in bringing them about. . . . One therefore feels it a little pretentious to assert that "It is through lives made radiant through Christ that these movements began."⁷³

⁶⁹Ernest A. Payne, "The Modern Expansion of the Church: Some Reflections on Dr. Latourette's Conclusions," *JTS* 47 (1946) 151.

⁷⁰F. Ernest Stoeffler, "Christ the Hope of the World," *Religion in Life* 3 (1954) 349.

⁷¹William A. Speck, "Kenneth Scott Latourette's Vocation as Christian Historian," *Christian Scholar's Review* 44 (1945) 292.

⁷²Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christ the Hope of the World," *Religion in Life* 3 (1954) 335.

⁷³*Ibid.*, 335-36.

The most frequent criticism of Latourette's pulsating linear philosophy of history is his optimistic evaluation of the present century. The phrase "post-Christian era" troubled Latourette, because to understand a diminishing influence of Jesus would destroy his optimistic, progressive view of history. It is as though he presuppositionally erected a philosophy of history and then applied the historical method to buttress his conclusions. If this present era is post-Christian, a flaw emerges in the scheme that is fatal. Winthrop S. Hudson, Professor of Church History at the Colgate-Rochester Theological Seminary, Rochester, New York, bluntly states: "Christianity, he asserts, is neither a waning force nor a dying faith. This is the thesis which he seeks to defend as an historian, but it is actually a thesis that can be defended only by a man of faith."⁷⁴

Moore sounds a distressing toll of the proverbial bell when he adds, "(although) this assessment is in some respects undoubtedly true (it) is small comfort in a world seemingly gone mad with the craze of power and perpetually teetering on the brink of disaster."⁷⁵ It would seem self-evident that Latourette's wave theory for the twentieth century breaks down because the losses since 1914 that have been occasioned by the spread of Communism, the rise of nationalism in former colonial areas, the pervasive attraction of secular liberalism, and the impact of technological developments are scarcely counterbalanced by any striking parallel gains for the Christian faith. With Niebuhr it must be said that to claim that the church is becoming increasingly potent in our day is "certainly open to doubt."⁷⁶ Payne queries:

Are Dr. Latourette's views but wishful thinking, a sad blindness to the widespread apostasies and uncertainties of our time and the sharp challenges to the churches by other missionary ideologies? Is it possible that Dr. Latourette's judgment on the contemporary scene is the result of his location on the American continent where church statistics still show an upward trend? May not his American background account for his optimism?⁷⁷

Payne further argues that Latourette's view is "ludicrous" in that Christianity is losing its grip on the race, if it ever enjoyed such a privilege, both intellectually and morally.⁷⁸

⁷⁴Winthrop S. Hudson, review of *Christianity in the Revolutionary Age*, vol. 1: *The Nineteenth Century in Europe: Background and the Roman Catholic Phase*, by Kenneth Scott Latourette, in *JBR* 27 (1959) 248.

⁷⁵Moore, review of *Beyond the Ranges*, 93.

⁷⁶Niebuhr, "Christ the Hope of the World," 336.

⁷⁷Payne, "The Modern Expansion of the Church," 149.

⁷⁸*Ibid.*, 148.

Latourette is further faulted by theologians in that his eschatology is not that of the Judeo-Christian heritage. The most stinging criticism at this point comes from Whale, who charged Latourette with advocating an idealism "not essentially different from the Nazisms and Marxisms of our time, in spite of the mere facade of Scriptural phrases behind which it innocently hides itself."⁷⁹ The NT argues for a cataclysmic, divine advent inaugurating a kingdom, not one of evolutionary perfectionism which dreams of a utopia achieved by human effort within the time process. Moore remarks, "There is, I think, considerable justification for Whale's rather devastating criticism."⁸⁰ Stoeffler agrees at this point by saying:

Perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses of Christian humanism as related to the interpretation of history is to be found in the fact that it seeks the end in the process. On the theological level this conviction is generally expressed by the conception of the kingdom of God as a kind of glorified democracy which we are in the process of establishing.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

It may be readily conceived that the path "beyond the ranges" has been threatened by the omnibus forboding clouds of doubt, that somehow Latourette's "whisper as bad as conscience" has become some kind of diabolical sneer. If the path beyond the ranges is strewn with the wreck of straw men and half-truths, it should not blur one's vision of the massive pioneering labors of Kenneth Scott Latourette. He presented the first global, non-provincial history of Christianity, delivering the study of history from being primarily "Western."⁸² His massive volumes have become standards in the field of mission history; indeed, the Public Orator of Oxford University referred to his seven-volume history of the expansion of Christianity as "a seven-fold shield against the bolts of ignorance." Latourette, as a tireless chronicler of facts, pushed Christian historiography beyond the established myopic perimeters and pioneered a new conception of that history. His work informed a generation of church scholars wearied by global holocausts that Christianity was not waning but reaching new heights, even if those new paths "beyond the ranges" are contested grounds. His person and accomplishment would bid the intrepid, restless explorer to go forth to open new vistas of knowledge as Rudyard Kipling urged him with the inspiring utterance:

⁷⁹Whale, review of *Advance through Storm*, 429.

⁸⁰Moore, review of *Beyond the Ranges*, 93.

⁸¹Stoeffler, "Christ the Hope of the World, 345.

⁸²Hogg, "The Legacy," 76.

Till a voice, as bad as Conscience
rang interminable changes
On one everlasting Whisper
day and night repeated—so:
Something hidden. Go and find it.
Go and look behind the Ranges—
Something lost behind the Ranges.
Lost and waiting for you. Go!

Yet, while Latourette must be recognized for his remarkable genius and voluminous literary output, it must be understood that his theory of history stands upon contested foundations. His defense of a visually victorious, moral church is without historic, theological validation; his progressivism reflects nineteenth-century historicism; and his Christianity is a veiled pietistic moralism. History is progressing toward its end, not in a materialic era of "Jesus consciousness," but in the millennial reign of the righteous king (Rev 20:1-6). There is great reason for optimism, not only because our redemption is nearer than when we first believed, but because He is progressively building His Church. The church will not so permeate history as to swallow it up, but the Christ of the church will soon be displayed as the sovereign King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev 19:16, 1 Thess 3:13). History is an upward lineal line, but in this tragic world, it is only perceivable to the eye of faith.