

The Vocation of the Christian Historian

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This paper is written with the assumption that those who hear it are themselves committed Christians. While non-Christians are surely welcome to listen, and they may even profit from what is said, the main concerns of the paper may not be relevant to them. This is so because commitment prior to discussion is something I would not try to impose on someone. Nevertheless we proceed on the basis that Christianity as personal faith and as world-view are correct, and that what we seek is the integration of that faith commitment with historical study. By "historical study" I mean no special definition, unique to Christians, but historical study, commonly defined by those with research degrees who actually "do" history. Christians are called to write about and teach the same discipline as persons of any faith or of none. Christians, least of all, should try to redefine history, because we who believe in the coherence of multi-dimensional truth want to have the broadest possible discussion of all reality with all persons interested in serious inquiry.

If, in order to have an acceptable dialogue with all historians we must discuss the same reality, we define that as: all past human activity. At a stroke, therefore, a bone of contention arises. Christians are persons who follow God, or, as I prefer it from the Heidelberg Catechism, who belong to God. Much "Christian history," i.e., the Bible, is a testimony to the acts of God. But, as historians we study past human activity. Here is the contentious point: we historians study man, not God. Historians with research degrees agree on this. I know of no working historian whose subject is God in History—I do not mean the idea of God in the idea of history, but God as known by Hebrews and Christians and history by everyone who does history. People who write meta-history or providential history are either non-professional such as philosophers, theologians or clergy (e.g. Jacques Ellul, Hendrikus Berkhof, James Montgomery Boice) or popularizers, most notably Francis Schaeffer. Occasionally a historian tries to write a providential history, and Christian scholars find it unpersuasive. I am thinking, for example, of John Warwick Montgomery's *Where Is History Going?*, and the public fight over it in the pages of *Fides et Historia* a decade ago.¹

As Stanford Reid has suggested, we study man rather than God because of the radical hiatus between time and eternity. God, who is in eternity,

is inexplicable in human terms. We simply cannot reason from our time-space to God's eternity. We, who can only partially comprehend what we call time, can scarcely comprehend Him who is clearly beyond our reach. Even Moses, who was in a more direct contact with God than any person in modern times states flatly that "the hidden things belong to God."² Indeed, even in the Judaeo-Christian understanding of things, God is increasingly hidden as time passes. Even Christopher Dawson, who believes that the Incarnation of Christ is the key event of history, one which gives spiritual unity to the whole historical process, states that those events "have occurred as it were under the surface of history unnoticed by the historians."³ In sum, for historians to try to discern God's actions in modern history seems a sterile task because of the inherently ineffable nature of the subject.

At this point, caution must be sounded and a balance struck. Just because we can know little of God's intended purposes it does not mean we know nothing at all. The twin difficulties of overassurance and overdiffidence has been discussed by E. Harris Harbison and summarized by Frank Roberts. "The tendency towards overassurance has generally been marked both by its disposition to play down the complexity and ambiguity of history and by its inclination to emphasize the clarity of the divine plan and purpose in events of the past." On the other hand, overdiffidence inclines historians to reject a distinctively Christian approach to history as either impossible or undesirable. Such writers as Karl Lowith and Van Harvey lean perhaps too far in this direction, either believing that, in the New Testament age, the confrontation with the powers is beyond the scope of knowing, or that the historical method itself is incompatible with belief.⁴

While one accepts the point that balance is important, and that a continuum between overassurance and overdiffidence exists, one nevertheless thinks that the sin of diffidence, if sin it indeed be, is not unnecessarily one of "sloth". Rather, one accepts the limitations noted above, not necessarily of a Christian approach to history, which this essay will affirm, but of knowing the work of God in history, and especially of "patterns" of providential action. Having mentioned the word pattern, we must make some mention of David Bebbington's excellent book, *Patterns in History: A Christian View*.⁵ In it we have as sensitive and penetrating an analysis as to be found in the relationship of Christian commitment to historical study. Yet, even here we notice the tension between "technical" history (i.e., the history that all historians practice) and "providential" history (i.e., the history that only Christians can know). He does well to try to resolve that tension by a distinction between explicit and implicit renderings of faith commitments. Rather than a uniquely Christian history, Bebbington suggests that a believer can produce work which is "consistent" with the historian's Christian views: "What is written will be a distinctively Christian product, but the Christian content will be implicit rather than explicit."⁶ I must say that I am not fully persuaded by Bebbington's

conclusion that the reasons for moving between technical and providential history is a tactical one, depending upon the audience to which the writing or the teaching is addressed—i.e., with academic colleagues one is implicit, with Christian sisters and brothers one is explicit. Yet, I appreciate Bebbington's work as the best statement yet on the vocation of the Christian historian.

At this point I would like to change the frame of reference, from history to the historian. I do so in the belief that the argument can be advanced if we can come to grips with who we are; and, with that in hand, we can return to what we can and should do. As Anthony C. Thiselton has suggested in a brilliant book on biblical hermeneutics, there are two horizons which must be reconciled, the objective and the subjective. There is always a dialectical relationship between the object of an historian's study and the subjective beliefs which she or he brings to the subject.⁷ This is not an easy thing to do, as our academic preparation does not encourage that confrontation. In my own special interest, the European background to North American history, especially the migration of Europeans to North America, Oscar Handlin has well stated the problem I wish to discuss. In *The Uprooted* Handlin affirms that to understand the migrants he had to confront himself.⁸ Our academic preparation does not encourage us to confront ourselves, and, to be sure, that confrontation can be discomfiting.

What does it mean for an historian to be conscious of himself before he can do historical study? Perhaps an illustration will help. On Easter 1977, the BBC televised a panel discussion on the subject of the resurrection. Bamber Gascoyne asked a question of his fellow discussants which is of ultimate importance for Christian historians: if there had been photographic technology on the Emmaus Road, and if a picture had been taken of Jesus and his two walking companions, would that picture have shown Jesus of Nazareth, whom everyone in Jerusalem knew? Or, did it require eyes of faith to see and recognize him in the breaking of bread? In short, if anyone could have recognized him there is no need for an act of faith to know the risen Christ. If, as Christian tradition has it, we see him as the Christ by an act of faith, then we have to lay aside for a moment the objective reality of a person on the Emmaus Road and inquire into the subjective matter of how we develop eyes of faith. At a stroke, the subject of conversation shifts from the thing observed to the observer. At this point in the conversation, historians become uncomfortable because instead of discussing "reality out there" or, "reality as it actually was" (Ranke), we are discussing ourselves—not the typical subject of discussion among us.

How do we develop eyes to see what we do see? More specifically, if we who are Christians wish to seek the application of our commitments in the actual doing of history, do we have eyes to see what others cannot, or will not, see? The main point here to which reference must be made is Carl Becker's famous essay "Every man His Own Historian" in which the most cogent case for subjectivism is made. In Becker's view, the historian becomes the main focus of history.⁹ The past, he insists, is irretrievably lost, and if

it exists at all, it exists in the mind of the historian. A more modest case for relativism and subjectivism, one with which I feel quite comfortable, is that of E. H. Carr, for whom history is a dialogue between the past and the present.¹⁰ "The past" is what happened, and that is lost, taken by itself. But, like Berkeley's notional unheard trees falling in the forest, the past event would be of little or no interest if we could not recall it or discuss it. "History" is *our* reconstruction of the past. As in any dialogue, both parties bring their respective contributions.

Historical study, then, is relativistic and subjective, to one degree or another. Part of reading E. P. Thompson on *The Making of the English Working Class* is to inquire into how Marx and Freud came into his pre-understanding (*Vorverständnis*). Part of reading Erik Erikson on *Young Man Luther* is to inquire into how his pre-understanding of human development caused him to be less interested in Luther's theological ideas than in his bowels and bathroom habits. This came home very strongly to me in my first teaching job. We had a seminar required of all senior students. At one session they read Bainton on Luther, the next Erikson on Luther. The principal instructor in the seminar invited me to participate on the latter day. His intention was to portray Erikson as having "superceded" Bainton. I questioned this, and my colleague replied that Bainton merely gave a religious interpretation of Luther, and that now "everyone knows" that religion is an illusion, and that "reality" lies elsewhere. I asked how "everyone" knew that, to which my colleague suggested that since the publication of William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* early in this century, no one could believe any longer in the normative and objective reality of religious experience. The students were unprepared for this discussion, because we were no longer talking about Luther, but about what my colleague and I knew about what everyone knew about reality. Another example on the point, but from a different angle of vision, will help us to see the point more clearly. Samuel Eliot Morison was criticized for one point in his biography of Christopher Columbus, in which he wrote that on the first sight of land in the new world, Columbus "staggered" to the deck.¹¹ The critic wanted to know how Morison knew that Columbus staggered. What were the sources? The ship's log records that on that day there were high seas and that the captain was ill. Very well, says the critic, but how do you know he "staggered"? Morison replied that he himself was an accomplished sailor and that he himself had sailed in a replica of the *Santa Maria*. In a high sea, when you are sick and in a ship like the *Santa Maria* you do not "walk" to the deck, you "stagger". In the end, Morison "knows" because his own experiences cause him to empathize with similar experiences in history. "Reality" then one supposes, is what most of my friends and I know it to be. To those who affirm that they "know that their redeemer lives", others will reply that they know that the class struggle exists. *Touchez*. Is the historical task, in sum, an academic version of what John Lennon wrote for the Beatles: "with a little help from my friends I get by"?

Is this where it rests then, a thorough-going subjectivism, energized by

self-authenticating experiences? Before we answer "no", as we qualifiedly will, let us state clearly that even if it were true, it would present no more difficulty for the Christian historian than for the marxist historian or psycho-historian. With Thompson and Erikson, celebrated practitioners of the historian's craft, allowed to see reality as they and their friends know it, why should we be embarrassed to see the past as we and our friends see it? What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. While we as Christians do not necessarily endorse every disclosure of religious belief in history, (some may not have been genuine) we nevertheless are open to an interpretation which affirms that, *in reality*, religiously-motivated actions do exist. How do we know that Christ came into people's lives and transformed them? We know because we too have met the Christ, whether as catholics in the eucharist or as protestants by making a "decision for Christ". There are no such things as facts of history, and the past simply does not speak for itself because we understand only in the interpretive framework of the ideas we already hold. This insight appears to be shared across a broad ideological spectrum: Becker's relativism; Cornelius Van Til's apologetics; Thomas Kuhn's paradigmatic scientific analysis. Using Kuhn's language we see that fundamentally differing paradigms separate competing groups of theorists from each other, and communication across these paradigms is often virtually impossible.

Approaching this ineffable precipice of non-communication George M. Marsden rescues the argument by returning the question to the common sense understanding of everyday life. Here he draws upon the "common sense" school of thought, notably associated with Thomas Reid, the eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher. This helps us to account for the other side of the question, i.e., the experiences and understandings we have in common with non-Christians. There are, Reid argued, "first principles" which every human being affirms, and this affirmation is not contingent upon reason, commonly defined.

For instance, virtually everyone is forced to believe in the existence of the external world, in the continuity of one's self from one day to the next, in the connection between past and present, in the existence of other persons, in the connections between causes and effects . . . In practice, normal humans simple find it impossible not to rely on basic means of gaining access to knowledge. Only philosophers and crackpots, he was fond of saying, would seriously argue against the reliability of these first principles. And even skeptical philosophers duck when they go through low doorways. So do Hindu mystics.¹³

This "common sense" approach (in its technical meaning) makes very good sense, in the ordinary sense of that term. At least since Hume, we are unsure that our ideas correspond to reality. Reid simply disposes of the philosophical concept of "ideas" and starts with common sense, which tells us that we can know directly something of reality. Knowledge, then, is not confined just to ideas, but involves what is really "out there". *We do have*

some theory-dependent access to events, some knowledge which cuts across all theories and paradigms. So, in actual fact, there is some common ground of inquiry into the human past. In theological terms, is this what we mean by "common grace"? Has God given a coherent universe, and given the good will of historians, can we not communicate fairly well the assurance that we are talking about the same things?

So where does this leave writing history from a perspective, Christian or otherwise? Again, George M. Marsden helps us with an analogy from gestalt psychology.¹⁴ Surely every one, at one time or another, has seen the picture printed immediately below.



Young lady or old?

At first glance most people see the old lady, and only later do people see the young lady (indeed, I know several famous historians who said they could not see the young lady, despite some considerable effort to do so). In the common sense understanding of things, both ladies are there, but not everyone can see them. The presenter of such a picture will not get his viewers to see the second image through argumentation. Seeing, and believing, that the young lady is there, will come sometimes as insight, and it will change the viewer's understanding of what reality actually is. Christian seeing and believing is something like that. It is not that we see everything differently from non-Christians. All humans, as Reid pointed out, know the signs of everyday life. We come to know God and his work in a moment of shattering insight, flowing from things we have seen before many times. We know and experience grace in the eucharist, in nature, reading a scripture passage, etc., and when that understanding comes we say, "Oh, now I see", and a pattern emerges from what was there but unseen.

Historians should have little difficulty understanding this, because it is like the way we actually do history (minus, of course, the soul-shattering nature of the insights). A metaphor, again, will help to clarify: access to reality is limited by a series of lenses like the multiple-lens glasses that eye doctors test us with. While it is true that each person wears a different set of lenses, most normal people can read most of the letters on the chart. As Christians we have an extra set of lenses, which perhaps allows us to see what others see, but also more than they and perhaps more clearly. Indeed, as Nicholas Wolterstorff has argued, these extra lenses can act as “controls” on what we see through ordinary lenses, insuring that common sense beliefs will not contradict special beliefs.¹⁵

In conclusion, I hope it is now clear just what the balance is that this paper is trying to strike. We do history from a perspective, and the adequacy of an historical interpretation must take into account the historian who is in dialogue with the past. Nevertheless, all is not mere opinion and private experience because reality can be shown if we dispense entirely with Baconian-style empiricism and rely on common sense, which is, after all, analagous to how we really understand history or anything else. As Christians we say we see not the antithesis of what non-Christians see, but all that they see, and more, because we have that extra set of lenses. Further, that extra set of lenses helps us to see not only more, it helps to order and to control our understanding of what comes to us through the ordinary lenses.

C. T. McIntire has helped with an explanation of this, as clear as it is brilliant. Everyone knows that reality consists of time and space. Christians and non-Christians alike see this two-dimensionality. We Christians insist that there is a third dimension—spirit—and that a fully-orbed view of the world must be three-dimensional. Moreover, these dimensions are not arranged in a hierarchy of importance, rather they are integral to each other. Now, secular-minded people may well object to the claim of a spiritual dimension, but even they must see that good and evil exist in the world, and that it refers to something more ultimate (even if, for the moment, ultimacy is not God, but possibly even merely the mode of production). McIntire uses more comprehensive terms for time, space and spirit—historical, structural (ontic) and ultimate.¹⁶

Presented in this light, the integral and fully three dimensional world on which Christians insist, is something which we Christians see at first, but it is not so far from the experience of non-Christians that they cannot understand it. Perhaps like our dual gestalt picture, if it is pointed out that the nose of one is the chin of the other, ordinary people will see what we mean. When we insist that a Christian world-view is a fully-orbed view of the world, non-Christians need not dispense with everything they know, but add that extra set of lenses to common sense-type insights.

Of course, it needs to be said in closing, that Christians must act Christianly towards others in discussing these matters. We who say we have

the best view of reality must not come to others in triumphalism. Modesty and humility are becoming traits. Even if we have all the lenses of our glasses on fully, we still see through those glasses darkly. And, when we become arrogant and militant we must recall that Jehovah sits in the heavens and laughs when we imagine vain things.

Having said what we have said about the nature of the historical task, it would seem that the vocation of the Christian historian is four-fold. First, we must get out of Christian ghettos and speak to our disciplinary colleagues at large, in journals and in books likely to receive serious criticism. In short, we must speak *in* professional historical circles. Second, we must also speak *to* professional historical circles about the God who is there, and in whom reality finally consists. Third, we must speak *to* the church. Our fellow believers need the insights which a fully-orbed gospel view of reality can give. Finally, we must speak *in* the church, because it is only in fellowship with believers that we can continually have kept before us that beyond the professional study of history is seeking first the Kingdom of God.¹⁷

NOTES

1. Ronald Vander Molen, "The Christian Historian—Apologist or Seeker?", *Fides et Historia*, 3 (Fall, 1970), pp. 41-56; Stephen A. Hein, "The Christian Historian—Apologist or Seeker: A Reply to Ronald Vander Molen," *Ibid.*, 4 (Spring, 1972), pp. 85-93; "Where Is History Going? And Historical Scholarship: A Response," *Ibid.*, 5 (Spring, 1973), pp. 109-112.
2. W. Stanford Reid, "The Problem of the Christian Interpretation of History," *Fides et Historia*, 5 (Spring, 1973), pp. 97-98.
3. Quoted in C.T. McIntire (ed.), *God, History and Historians* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 28.
4. Frank Roberts and George Marsden (eds.), *A Christian View of History?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 10-13.
5. (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1979).
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 185-88.
7. A. C. Thiselton, *The Two Horizons* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981).
8. Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1951), p. 303 ff.
9. Carl Becker, *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* (Chicago, 1935).
10. E. H. Carr, *What Is History?* (New York: Knopf, 1964).
11. S. E. Morison, *Admiral of the Ocean Sea* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1942).
12. Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).
13. George M. Marsden, "Common Sense and the Siritual Vision of History," in C. T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells (eds.), *History and Historical Understanding* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984).
14. *Ibid.*
15. Nicholas P. Wolterstorff, *Reason Within the Bounds of Religion* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976).
16. C. T. McIntire, "Historical Study and the Historical Dimension of Our World", in McIntire and Wells, *History and Historical Understanding*.
17. Mark A. Noll, "The Conference on Faith and History and the Study of Early American History", *Fides et Historia* (Fall, 1978), pp. 8-18.