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 mentalites. 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

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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 eccles-
iasiastical 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 invest­
igation'; 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 under­
stand 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
J.R. Cheney, edited by Christopher Brooke, David Luscombe, Geoffrey
£15.00; The Materials, Sources and Methods of Ecclesiastical History,
370 pp. £10.00.
Organization of the Church in Fayette Township, New York. 1830, September–October. First missionaries called to preach to the Lamanites (Native Americans) (see D&C 28; 30; 32). Elder Heber C. Kimball and six others arrived in Liverpool, England, on the first overseas mission. 1838, April 26. Name of the Church specified by revelation (see D&C 115:4). Church history or ecclesiastical history as an academic discipline studies the history of Christianity and the way the Christian Church has developed since its inception. Henry Melvill Gwatkin defined church history as "the spiritual side of the history of civilized people ever since our Master's coming". A. M. Renwick, however, defines it as an account of the Church's success and failure in carrying out Christ's Great Commission. Renwick suggests a fourfold division of church history into missionary History . Patrologies 10 . On Early Church Literature 8 . Brief Histories 9 . In-Depth Histories 20 . Constantine - Church & State 6 . Antiquities 6 . Eastern and Latin Churches 3 . Special Periods 9â€| The New Testament itself gives indications of the significant impurities in the Church in its own day, predicts the growth thereof, and warns against temptations natural to the human heart in every generation. Sometimes older historians had access to documents we do not have, and they often had more life-long industry in their historical field, with the profound depth of knowledge that attends it, than many, or most, contemporary historians. It is unlikely that you will ever know more about history than the 1800â€™s American historian, Philip Schaff. The original church stood until the 16th century, when the new building, the one standing today, was built. Some original features are still at the site, including the Tomb of St. Peter, one of the disciples of Jesus from the Bible. 5. Church of the Nativity. The Dura-Europos Church is likely the oldest Christian church in existence. Before it was used as a church, however, it is believed that the building was a private home. Today, the site is in ruins, but it was fully excavated during the 1920s and 1930s by a team of French and American archaeologists. Spread the love The history of hotels can be a little hard to trace, since people have needed lodgings for asâ€| 8 Oldest Pyramids in the World. Posted by Shasha Neil 0.