

**Scott W.  
Sunquist**

President of Gordon-Conwell  
Theological Seminary

**Continuity  
and Diversity  
in the Global  
Church**



**The  
Shape of  
Christian  
History**



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## Chapter One

# A Brief History of History

*He has made everything suitable for its time; moreover he has put a sense of past and future into their minds, yet they cannot find out what God has done from the beginning to the end.*

ECCLESIASTES 3:11

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us.*

JOHN 1:1-4, 14

*We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us—we declare to you what we have seen and heard so that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*

1 JOHN 1:1-3

**C**HRISTIANITY IS ROOTED IN TIME: historic events in a particular place that have universal claim. Past events have present realities and a future life. People who come from Hellenistic, Hindu, Buddhist, or various animistic religious backgrounds are shocked by the challenge this is to their reigning assumptions. Here the mundane is sacralized, the cyclical is given direction (and meaning), and all people are given equal status. A value and sacredness is assigned to all of creation in a world where most religions devalue the created world. Those who believed in a life of endless rebirths—a cycle they sought to be released from—now have their life focused on this life and the fullness of this life (in time) for all of eternity. Was all of this done in a simple passage like, “And the Word became flesh”? Yes. The incarnation, the translation of God into human flesh, brought about the conversion of humanity and human cultures.

In this chapter, we will lift up something that has been lost or nearly forgotten concerning Christianity and Christian history. To put it simply, we have forgotten that the dual fact of God’s creation (beginning time) and God’s incarnation (entering time) has been the central strand in what makes Christianity what it is: a religion of transformation in this world. These dual facts also claim to be the interpretive key for all of life.

In answering the compound question mentioned in the introduction—the question about the meaning of the Christian movement and the meaning of God’s redemptive work in history—I will first set the context. Princeton Theological Seminary’s Students’ Lectures on Missions given over the past 120 years provide a convenient context. I will use the history of these lectures as my canvas, and some of the early speakers, especially James Dennis, for my paint. After looking at how Christianity was understood in its historical and cultural context of the early twentieth century, we will turn to look at history from two angles of view. First, we will look at the study of history in the recent past. What is the historian actually doing, or what does the historian

think she or he is doing? This will be a much-too-brief look at the development of history writing in the past century, but it will help to set the context for the rest of the book.

Our second angle of view will be covered in the next chapter. In chapter two we will look at the overall concept of history and time and its relationship to redemption. Christianity is very much about time! Christianity did not invent time, but it certainly did make it what it is today. The results of this view of the cosmos will be shown through examples of church history . . . through time. But now, a brief history of history.

## HISTORY AND THE LECTURES

James Dennis's three-volume *Christian Missions and Social Progress*<sup>1</sup> is an excellent case study in contextualization and historical understanding. Dennis, a Presbyterian missionary to Syria and historian of missions, gave the first Students' Lecture on Missions, later published as *Foreign Missions After a Century*. In fact, he also gave the fourth lectures, which were later expanded into the massive three-volume work, *Christian Missions and Social Progress*. I will use his understanding of mission and the Christian movement as a starting point. He was not an eccentric or marginal figure by any stretch of the imagination. His views may seem so strange and optimistic to us today, so imperialistic and arrogant, and yet his idea of progress was as natural and common in his time as our commonly held ideas that technology holds the answers for the future, or that pluralism is a virtue. Dennis was a nineteenth-century progressive evangelical rooted in the American Protestant tradition, the confidence of the Student Volunteer Movement, and the sense of duty that was at times expressed as the "white man's burden."<sup>2</sup> The phrase "progressive evangelical"

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<sup>1</sup>James Dennis, *Christian Missions and Social Progress: A Sociological Study of Foreign Missions*, 3 vols. (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1897–1906).

<sup>2</sup>This expression was made famous by Rudyard Kipling in his poem "White Man's Burden: The United States and the Philippine Islands," 1899. His intent was to encourage the United States to



makes perfect sense when talking about American Christianity a century ago.

In the introduction to his first volume of *Social Progress* he notes the following:

That there is a striking apologetic import to the aspect of missions herein presented is evident. It is not merely a vindication of the social value of mission work, but it becomes, in proportion to the reality and significance of the facts put in evidence, a present-day supplement to the cumulative argument of history in defense of Christianity as a supreme force in the social regeneration and elevation of the human race.<sup>3</sup>

His view is illustrated in the wealth of facts, stories, and pictures that fill the volume. For Dennis the missionary message is for “worldwide reformation . . . or . . . regeneration.” Listen to his evaluation of history and reform:

We have had local reformations in religious history; we had them in Hebrew history, before the coming of Christ. The result of early Christian labors was the conversion of the Roman Empire, and in the 16th century came the great historic Reformation of Europe. Now, for the first time in the history of our earth, this great movement in the direction of regeneration or reformation is beginning to shape itself into a *world-wide enterprise*.

The sixteenth-century Reformation was only in Europe; thus he says, “May we not expect that a reformation so extended as that contemplated in modern missions will produce world-wide fruit, *especially since it has all the advantages afforded by modern inventions, and facilities and methods of communication, and international relations and the almost magical expedients for disseminating knowledge?*”<sup>4</sup> He and his age had

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follow Great Britain in becoming colonialists, accepting the burden of taking care of the “half devil, half child.” It is a very racist and colonialist rendition of history.

<sup>3</sup>James Dennis, *Christian Missions and Social Progress: A Sociological Study of Foreign Missions* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1899), 1:ix. Although assuming “the white man’s burden” of lifting up other less-civilized peoples, Dennis uses “race” of all peoples as a uniting word.

<sup>4</sup>Dennis, *Christian Missions and Social Progress*, 2:18. (All emphases, unless otherwise specified, are mine.)

great trust in technology and human inventions. This is what gives him confidence in Christian mission. I don't believe we are that different today, although we will express it differently (stopping climate change, etc.). His views, however, were not yet chastened by the world wars and genocides of the twentieth century. In the preface to volume three he notes, referring to his previous lectures,

It has been asserted, for example, that missions are a forceful dynamic power in social progress, a molding influence upon *national life*, and a factor of importance in *commercial expansion*, as well as a stimulus to the *religious reformation* not only of *individual lives*, but of *society* as a whole, through many and *varied channels of influence*.<sup>5</sup>

What may cause us to pause is his seemingly imperialistic view of Christianity (“national life, commercial expansion”) that sounds like a domination of the world by Christian cultures and nations. He is expressing here a very liberal view of the missionary enterprise, a view that included much more than making converts and planting churches. This was a broad social mission that embraced the core of the gospel and its many products. Dropping the paternalism, it would still seem that the evangelization of cultures or penetration of Christian values of justice and peace is something we should affirm. Jesus' life and death were not just a privatized act for our own self-improvement. They were identification with the lost, lonely, and oppressed in order to usher in new relationships and life called a kingdom. The problem with Dennis from our perspective is not how expansive his vision of mission was but how it was woven with national aspirations and reliance on human efforts (including technology and empire). His interpretation wove nationalism and modern science into his interpretation of God's kingdom coming to earth as it is in heaven.

Dennis was not unique or strange in this view. I cannot emphasize enough that this was the common understanding of Western nations

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<sup>5</sup>Dennis, *Christian Missions and Social Progress*, 3:v.

and Western theologians, even, or especially, the more progressive of the time. When we say “all Western nations,” this would include France. In 1899, Dennis was working on his magnum opus as the Ottoman Empire was collapsing and France, England, and Russia were moving into the Middle East. With the expanding influence of the French Empire, the opportunity came for the Benedictines to rebuild a crusader church in Palestine. In a September 11, 1899, letter from D. Drouhin, OAB (Ordem dos Advogados do Brasil), to French Consul Ernest Auzépy, we read the following:

In this surprising concurrence of circumstances, there is for us, Mr. Consul, a very precious encouragement: we would gladly say, with our generous Crusaders of the 11th and 12th century: God wants it. God wants it! Especially as our consciences and our hearts give their testimony that, like them, we are only *looking for the greatness of our dear France and the extension of God’s reign*, which for individuals and for peoples is the real, the unique source of civilization and happiness.<sup>6</sup>

Our Presbyterian James Dennis is much less imperialistic and nationalistic than the good French Benedictine brother, but that should give us little solace. Empires were *Christian* empires, and they were all bestowing their “blessings” on the ignorant and “pagan” countries of the world. Rebuilding a crusaders’ church was understood as part of the process of bringing “civilization and happiness” to the Middle East.

### TIME: ADVANCES AND RECESSIONS

Dennis and Drouhin, and for that matter other great Christian leaders of the early twentieth century such as John R. Mott, Robert E. Speer, and Samuel Zwemer, viewed Christianity through their cultural lenses, and they saw progress—social progress, in fact. Christianity

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<sup>6</sup>Dominique Trimbur, “Between Eastern and Western Christendom: The Benedictines, France and the Syrian Catholic Church in Jerusalem,” in *Christianity in the Middle East: Studies in Modern History, Theology and Politics*, ed. Anthony O’ Mahony (London: Melisende, 2008), 379. The cry of the people when Pope Urban II called for the first crusade was “*Deus vult!*” or “God wills it!”



was advancing and bringing with it a better life for all, a life for the West African or Chinese that would be like the best of Western civilization. This basic view was a scholarly or academic view—the view of the academy—but it was also the Fundamentalist and the Pentecostal view of Christianity. The great historian Kenneth Scott Latourette reflected a similar view a half a century later, although he was more chastened by the long historical record he traced. Still, he saw each advance of Christianity as progressing a little further and each recession receding a little less. In his remarkable preface to volume one of *A History of Christianity*, Latourette clearly outlines eight periods of church history, and he does so looking at the advance and recession of the religion and its overall influence on the world's cultures. His last period was not yet complete (1914–1953), but he gives characteristics. He said that even with the “colossal setbacks and striking losses,” Christianity was “becoming really worldwide . . . and it is more potent than in any earlier era.” He was either an eternal optimist, or he was very prophetic, for the great Christian movement into Africa and Asia was only beginning when he penned those words. He knew of dying Christendom (“what was once termed Christendom”) in Europe in the shadow of the two world wars and the rise of atheistic communism, and yet he pronounced the body healthy.<sup>7</sup> He never predicted, nor did any other historian, the rapid decline of Western Christianity that was a reverse image of the non-Western world. Optimism, progressivism, and human ability were themes in the historical writing of Christianity of the period. It was easy for them to see the kingdom of God revealed in modern technology, Christian empires, the missionary movement, new schools, and modern-looking hospitals in poor countries.

All of these historians were telling a story of Christianity as it was unfolding around them in ways that made sense to them and to their

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<sup>7</sup>Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 1, *Beginnings to 1500* (New York: Harper and Row, 1953), xxi-xxiv.

cultures. This should make us very cautious, careful, and circumspect in our task here. The cultural norms and values can enhance one's historic vision, but they can also obscure both how the story is told and how we understand Christianity. Those telling the story that I have looked at above, and those who spoke in lectureships at Princeton or who taught at Yale, were top scholars, and they were very well informed about Christian history and Christian "progress." The best and the brightest were caught up in contemporary visions of reality that obscured their Christian view of time.

We now live in a new century, and it is necessary to re-center or re-view Christianity today as we understand it in historical perspective. In light of the presence of Christianity today as mostly a non-Western religion (roughly two-thirds), and in light of the errors of the past in equating human technology, social progress, and empire with Christian mission, meaning must now come out of three sources, or must heed three voices. To stick with the analogy of a thread, history must be told by weaving together three strands: the biblical story, the experience of the global church, and its founder. It would be good to reread that last sentence before you go on: biblical story, global church, and Jesus. These three voices or threads will help prevent us from repeating the imperialistic and ethnocentric histories of the past.

None of our great standards for guiding us in our understanding Christian history in the past will work today. We cannot rely on Wesley's quadrilateral (Scripture, tradition, experience, and reason), the Reformation cry of *sola Scriptura*, the *Book of Concord*, or the Westminster Confession of Faith. These lenses for understanding Christianity came out of Western Christendom, when Christianity was woven into the fabric of Western societies. This was Andrew Walls's point in his lecture in Denmark mentioned in the introduction. Needed for the twenty-first century are concepts and convictions that come out of studying Christian movements through the ages in

diverse cultures. As we look at the global movements through the ages, we must be guided by the biblical story and the *global* Christian experience in continuity with its founder. Keep this in mind as we move forward. More to the point, as we will see, Jesus is the key to understanding history, not just Christian history. We will elaborate on this in the next two chapters.

Before deciding on the lens or prior commitments that we will hold onto in our writing and reading of history, it is necessary to ask the preliminary question, Just what is history? We are not asking what is Christian history or what is church history, but what is history itself? History is not what happened, and often it is not what we *think* really happened. *History is a story* that is often confused with what actually happened. We only remember the past as a story, as a narrative. When we do not know all the details, our minds fill in the gaps to give us a story that has cohesion. There is much debate and confusion over the meaning and writing of history, especially the writing of Christian history, so we want to lay out the basic concerns, approaches, and vocabulary before we move on.

## WHAT HISTORIANS DO

History is the art of telling, as accurately as possible, *stories* of the past. Thus writing history is not a mere listing of “facts” or evidence nor a tablet on which to etch a particular ideology; still, commitments and beliefs are necessary to the task of telling a meaningful story.

In this section we will look at each of the underscored elements in the above sentence in order. First, we will look at the nature of history as telling a credible story. It involves recreating using one’s imagination, but it also involves accuracy, fact-finding, and historical coherence. We all recognize that there is such a thing as bad history or history that does not square with the evidence that is available. Bad history is what keeps historians employed, as we are driven back to research and then suggest ways to correct it.

Second, we will look at the nature of facts or evidence that is available to the historian and what this raw historical material really means for the telling of history. What is regarded as the raw material of history is quite diverse and often does not “prove” what we hope it will prove. The search and selection of historical material depends on the questions we ask. In short, historical research is very complex.

Third, we will turn to various ideologies and philosophies that have guided (and at times repressed) the study of history in the past. In particular we will look briefly at the place of progressivism, positivism, cultural studies, postmodernism, and postcolonial studies. We will comment on how these issues and studies (as distinct from disciplines) have redirected the study of Christianity.

Last, we will look at the place of commitments or beliefs in historical studies. There is a place for belief commitments even in the study of genetics or climate change. In historical studies the debate continues about the proper role, but to deny that there is a place for *belief* is to place one’s *faith* in the wrong place.

***History as the art of accurate storytelling.*** Our first point is that history is neither a record of what happened in the past nor a list of supposed facts of the past. History is the art of telling as accurate a story about the past as possible. Because history is the story of people and not things, it is told in a way that reflects how people live and how we hear about human lives.<sup>8</sup> We tell stories because our minds are hard-wired to take in all historical experiences and data as a story. We remember events as part of a stream of related events that carry some sort of meaning. We remember our life as a novel; in fact, a novel is an imitation of our lives as story. Another way of looking at the narrative nature of the human mind is to think about death and grief.

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<sup>8</sup>In part of a larger argument that leads elsewhere, Bultmann begins his essay on “Christian Faith and History” (1957) asking, “What is the core of history? What is its real subject? The answer is man. . . . The real subject of history is man.” Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology: The Presence of Eternity* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 138-39.

Sudden death is like a sudden and unexpected end of a story. Any good counselor or therapist will inform us that grief counseling is very much a matter of letting and even encouraging the grief-stricken to talk about the loved one lost. Telling the story of their life, looking at pictures, and rereading letters and journals—all of these activities help the survivor to make sense of the death and to accept the (possibly) tragic end of a life. Retelling the story of the life helps to complete the story. Life is like that. We are creatures of and for story. History told as raw, unrelated facts is not even history, strictly speaking, because the important detail of causality or connection is missing. There is no history without story. Story connects seemingly unrelated events in cause and effect and gives meaning and purpose to life.

If we need other evidence of the importance of story, we can find it in how we raise children and how religions are communicated. Children's books are all stories, not confessions or dogma. As Dorothy Sayers wisely says, "the dogma is the drama."<sup>9</sup> Even the "children's Bibles" that we find in bookstores are filled with stories. Children learn about the Old Testament and about the life and parables of Jesus when they are young because they love to hear stories. It is very difficult to get a young child to sit down to hear Paul's arguments about the law. Paul's letter to the Romans comes much later in our development. The law apart from the historical narrative is detached and will come across as "inhuman." Children's rhymes and poems are stories—usually short and funny.

Children remember stories, and well-told stories (usually filled with moral lessons) help to guide us into adulthood or continue to irritate us if we choose to ignore their promptings. We enter this world to hear stories, we live our lives as stories, and when we hear about others' lives, we tell stories about them. Even in death, we need to tell and hear stories.

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<sup>9</sup>Dorothy Sayers, *Creed or Chaos: Why Christians Must Choose Either Dogma or Disaster, or Why It Really Does Matter What You Believe* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1939), 5.

The religions of the world also pass on their teachings as myth or story.<sup>10</sup> In most religions the historicity of the myth is not as important as the story itself. When William Carey and his “Serampore Trio” were doing their pioneering mission work in East India, they translated the Hindu epic poem the *Ramayana*. This story of the struggle of good and evil reveals a lot about meaning and how a good Hindu should live in the world. The early missionaries knew that this story would help them and later missionaries to understand the mindset of many in India. Am I saying that this poem is history? No, but I am saying that how the *Ramayana* functions as a meaningful story for those who hear it, tell it, or act it out reveals more about the human need for story. When missionaries arrived in Africa, they would hear the stories of the gods and the ancestors; these stories helped the missionaries more than learning a thousand local aphorisms or laws.

Buddhism also is preserved and presented through story. I remember, right after studying comparative ethics of Theravada Buddhism and Christianity in graduate school, I then made a trip to do some lectures in Thailand. I was full of teachings from the *Jataka Stories*<sup>11</sup> and the *Dhammapada*,<sup>12</sup> and I even had my own copy of the *Dhammapada*. I read these teachings many times and marveled at the similarity of what I considered basic human common sense that is found in so many sacred texts. Then I arrived in Bangkok and took a tour, led by a very culturally astute monk living at a monastery at a new *wat* in the far eastern end of the city. This *wat* had been a major building project; it was the tallest in the city. We toured the grounds and then began our ascent up the inside of the sacred building. Two things struck me. First, as we made the ascent, floor after floor, we saw pictures of the life of Siddhartha Gautama. I recognized most of the

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<sup>10</sup>We are using the term *myth* here in the general sense of a story with meaning (whether part of history or not).

<sup>11</sup>Stories of the former lives of the Buddha (before he was reincarnated as Siddhartha Gautama).

<sup>12</sup>Proverbial sayings of the Buddha. It reads very much like the book of Proverbs.



scenes as my guide would tell me what was going on in the story, and then he would tell me what the story meant. It was a five-level morality story of how to live by rehearsing the life of Gautama and the experiences of the former lives of the Buddha. My monk-guide explained that most of the people have a hard time meditating on the non-existence of God and self, so the stories of the Buddha help to teach and focus the people on what is true and good. We are made to live and learn from story.

Finally, to underscore my point further, I am reminded of how much students loathe studying history. I have worked to give our guild a better name among undergraduate and graduate students, but in general I still hear, “I can’t stand history. All these names and dates. . . . It is just a bunch of meaningless facts.” When we hear this response, we are probably hearing students express what history is not supposed to be, or they are expressing their own laziness (you *do* need to learn some facts, even in biology or geometry or geography). A good history class and a good history essay tell a story that is credible, a retelling of a different time and place, that makes sense to the student or the reader. History “means” nothing if it is just a list of things that happened as best as we can reconstruct it. The historian is both scientist and artist, living in constant creative tension in the same body. As we will see later, the historian is also part moral guide.

The stories, told well, stick with us and guide us. M. C. D’Arcy describes how history began: “The past has been kept alive immemorially by word of mouth, by story-telling and ballads and annals.”<sup>13</sup> Herbert Butterfield, describing the evolution of history-telling, comments about where history began: “There is ample reason for saying that some things would linger in the memory, at any rate for a time, for the simple reason that the world so loves a good story.”<sup>14</sup> These stories, however, mix a good tale with some actual facts, but often the

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<sup>13</sup>M. C. D’Arcy, *The Sense of History: Secular and Sacred* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), 18.

<sup>14</sup>Herbert Butterfield, *The Origins of History* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1981), 18.

facts are obscured. The modern historian does not take a good tale as accurate history but sifts through “story telling” along with other historical evidence and then retells a story for today that makes sense of all the evidence. History is always part story. And yet a story can mislead if it is not grounded in facts from the past. But what are these “facts” of the past?

***Evidence or facts for the writing of history.*** Our preoccupation with facts and accuracy in history comes from the Enlightenment. At the same time objective approaches in history writing were developing, Protestant historiography was also developing. A view of history was developed, which persists today, that honors a particular type of knowledge and way of knowing over others that were common in the past.<sup>15</sup> Frankly speaking, it is good to be on this side of the Enlightenment, where ethnic myths, nationalistic stories, and witch hunts are critiqued by carefully recorded history. On the other hand, our scientific approach can miss historical truths that are not recorded as “verifiable facts.” The resources of the historian are described as “evidence,” and the historian must act as an investigator or a good lawyer studying his or her evidence and then defending its value or exposing its weaknesses. This evidence may come as artwork or shards (for the archaeologist), paintings, diaries, court records, interviews, registries, sermons, or even as older histories. The value of the evidence must be tested against parallel evidence and the accepted scholarship regarding these forms of evidence. After the veracity and the meaning of the many records and materials are received, the story can begin to be told.

The value of good evidence is easily illustrated by the many bad histories that are written in the modern world to support imperialism,

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<sup>15</sup>Foundational to this approach to church history was the important work of Johann Lorenz von Mosheim (1694–1755), whose four-volume *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History: Ancient and Modern*, ed. H. Soames, trans. J. Murdock (London: Longman, 1841), first published in 1755, was the standard Protestant text for most of the nineteenth century. He claims to have gone to the very sources and given a critical and objective record of church history. See James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller, *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 14–16.

nationalism, or racism, or ideologies like Marxism or capitalism.<sup>16</sup> Here the myth of value-free history is exposed. No historian (we should hope) would defend inaccurate history that defends genocide, pogroms, or the use of “comfort women.” It is appalling but not surprising that until very recently history books in Japan were written and used that described the role of Japan in early twentieth-century East Asia as beneficent. High school students would read (“factual history”) about how Japan helped Korea develop as a nation and how much the Japanese were appreciated as benevolent imperial rulers. China also was depicted as a nation asking for Japan’s help, and so Japan came forward as a big brother to help little China. However, the historic facts of ruined lives flatly deny such claims. I have seen photographs of Japanese soldiers crucifying pastors in northern Korea, literally nailing Christians to crosses in mockery because many Christians resisted the imposition of Shinto worship. I have talked to elderly people in Singapore about the treatment of women and pastors. I have been to the Nanjing museum remembering the Nanjing massacre, and I have read journal entries of both businessmen and Christian leaders describing the treatment of prisoners by Japanese soldiers at the Shantung Compound. The evidence—from oral narrative, journals, letters, and pictures—contradicts Japanese nationalist interpretations of the period. This does not mean that the Japanese or the Japanese people are evil (we can find similar moments in the histories of all peoples and religions); it just means that in this case withholding evidence is an injustice and oppression to others. It is bad history, no matter how artistically and beautifully the story is told.

For our historiographic study here, we will also call on evidence, but our evidence will be much more diverse than from traditional histories of Christianity. In building our case for how Christian

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<sup>16</sup>A recent volume exposes the problem and power of partial histories that have reinforced racism in American Christianity. See Jemar Tisby’s *The Color of Compromise: The Truth About the American Church’s Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019).

history must be understood today, we will collect and curate evidence from the ancient church in particular because this reveals for us how Christian identity was first developed and perceived in the midst of a sea of paganism and Zoroastrianism (Roman and Parthian Empires). We often talk about the beginning of Christendom with the conversion of Constantine, but it actually took centuries after Constantine before the culture or larger society of the Empire was converted. Thus, Christian writings well past the time of the Council of Nicaea were written in a context of a largely unconverted broader culture. We want to look at these types of writings because there is a closer awareness that Christian teaching and life is peculiar, not culturally normative, but rooted in the paradigmatic life of Jesus. Writings from a later period, say, medieval or Reformation Europe, come from a very different context, one where the struggles are internal and the larger non-Christian world is far away. Second, we will draw on other places in history where Christianity came in contact with other cultures, societies, and religions. This evidence will again highlight Christian identity through contrast and encounter. These encounters come from all the continents (except Antarctica) and include recent encounters, even into the twenty-first century.

***Recent philosophies and ideas of history.*** We live in an age when there is little universal agreement about how history is to be written. I learned this when I presented a paper on the evolution of historiography in the last century to an international group of Christian scholars. I spent a good deal of time talking about postmodernism (Foucault, Lyotard, etc.), which had exhausted me as I tried to understand and then to express it in a coherent three or four pages. I realized that many of the ideas that are tangentially related to postmodern philosophy have become a part of our academic thinking in the West today. When I was done presenting my paper, the Europeans, South Africans, and Australians asked why I spent so much time on postmodern historiography. I was stunned and simply said, “Because it is

so important; it is a dominant theme of many of our discussions at the American Academy of Religion and the American Historical Association.” I was firmly told that this is just an American thing; Europeans, South Africans, and Australians do not take it that seriously. They may have been overstating their case, but they made their point. Questions of interpretation and methodologies in history are very much in flux, and there is no single or dominant approach today. Still, as an American I am quite aware of the effect of postmodern issues and questions, if not their conclusions, and so here we will look at recent trends in historical studies including postmodern and post-colonial studies.<sup>17</sup> This may be a little tedious, but it is necessary because where we will end up will be in part from an indebtedness to these philosophic movements.

Before World War I, historiography was confident in its scientific clothing. It was an age of progressivism, growing empires, and confidence. It was assumed that history (and the other social sciences) was “scientific,” being based on commonly accepted verifiable facts. Such confidence was crushed first during the Great War, and then it suffered a death blow with the rise of Nazism (where “empire” came home to roost). Progressivism had confidence in science and technology, but science and technology also produced mustard gas, fire-bombing, and atomic weapons. Historicism and positivist history were implicated and thus began a scramble to redefine the parameters and possibilities of history in a way that was scientifically satisfactory.<sup>18</sup> Rather than trying to map all the historiographic approaches that have

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<sup>17</sup>For a more thorough discussion of these issues, refer to Gertrude Himmelfarb, Keith Jenkins, Donald R. Kelley, Richard Evans, and Georg Iggers, among others. A number of points of departure in the fragmentation of historical study occurred with the French *Annales* school in the 1930s and 1940s with Marc Bloch and Lucien Lebrun, and with the post-critical (and its close cousin postmodern) writings of Derrida, Foucault, and Lacan. Everything began to change in the 1940s and 1950s, at the beginning of the dissolution of empires. See Robin D. G. Kelley’s introduction to Aimé Césaire’s *Discourse on Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review, 2000), 7-9.

<sup>18</sup>Gertrude Himmelfarb points out that the “new history” idea goes back to an 1898 article in the *American Historical Review*, but I believe that was a call to a new focus on culture (*Kulturgeschichte*) away from political history, and this did become a central element later. See note 24 below.

blossomed, it will be most helpful for our purposes to identify some of the major themes of and issues with some of the newer “studies.”

First, as we have seen above, there has been the debate over just how much history is a science: verifiable, understandable, and repeatable.<sup>19</sup> Can we judge history the way we can judge a chemistry experiment, or the way we can evaluate the results of new experiments on combustion? Historical studies today do not have the same confidence they did in the past, but there are different ways history has been reconstructed. The revisionist movement in history involved rethinking or remaking historical studies, and it has come under many names and brands: “New History,” the French *Annales* school, “reconstructionist,” deconstructionism, postmodernism, the new historicism, postcolonial or social or cultural history.<sup>20</sup> Each of these reconstructions of history focuses on a new perspective, which often functions as an uncompromising ideology. For our purposes here, it is enough to notice that the positivist confidence in telling a universal history is gone, whether it be a Marxist history or a historicist account.

Key in all of this development was the creative historiographic work that came out of France in the 1920s, but which had a global impact in the writing of history after World War II. The French *Annales* school was less of a philosophy or theory of history than it was a gestalt or new spirit of historical inquiry. The new spirit focused less on institutions and official documents and more on a Durkheimian concern for collective mentalities (at times “collective effervescence”)

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<sup>19</sup>R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 132.

<sup>20</sup>Revisionism was a significant movement in the 1960s, but 1992, the 500th anniversary of the year when “Columbus sailed the ocean blue,” was a critical date. All of North American history, and with it Euro-centric, conquest, and “manifest destiny” assumptions, were challenged by authors such as David Stannard (*American Holocaust: Columbus and the Conquest of the New World* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1992]), Kirkpatrick Sale (*The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* [New York: Plume, 1991]), Tzvetan Todorov (*The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, trans. Richard Howard [New York: Harper and Row, 1984]), Stephen Greenblatt (*Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991]), and Kathy Pelta (*Discovering Christopher Columbus: How History Is Invented* [Minneapolis: Lerner, 1991]).



that helped to explain the history of peoples and cultures.<sup>21</sup> Francesco Chiovaro expresses it well when talking about one of the developments from *Annales*, the new history as history lived by the people:

I understand, above all, a new mentality of the historians who henceforth regard their discipline open to contributions from other human sciences; to their perspective, to their conclusions, to their methods. Hence the attention drawn particularly to economy, sociology, and geography; then to psychology and to linguistics, and finally to comparative mythology and cultural anthropology.<sup>22</sup>

For the most part this use of social sciences has become common, though not always with an even application of (especially) cultural or anthropological analysis.

Second (and related to this), there have been various debates over the role of the social sciences in the research and writing of history. This is really the biggest story and the one we need to dwell on briefly. Some critiques of the new social science approaches focus on the unmooring of history from traditional history and thus its loss of concern for objectivity, certainty, inductive reasoning, and empirical research.<sup>23</sup> These critics decry the focus on cultural interpretations, linguistics, symbols, hermeneutics, and even multiple rationalities as more than a loss of the “Great Books” curriculum of the past. For the critics, this is a loss of the primary role that history played in the past of searching for and describing truths from the past. History was seen by many as the queen of the social sciences, laying a foundation for other, “softer” sciences that rely on historical research. Previously,

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<sup>21</sup>See Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middleton, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 51-64.

<sup>22</sup>Francesco Chiovaro, “History as Lived by Christian People: Hypotheses for a New Methodic Approach to Christian History,” in *Church History in Ecumenical Perspective*, ed. Lukas Vischer (Bern: Evangelische Arbeitsstelle Oekumene Schweiz, 1982), 93.

<sup>23</sup>A sustained argument against “cultural studies” in history is given by Australian historian Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How Literary Critics and Social Theorists are Murdering Our Past* (San Francisco, CA: Encounter, 1996). His arguments are less about cultural studies than about social theories that function as ideologies, which flatten the complexity of conquest and empire to “good versus evil.”

history was written about great people and major events; the history of nations and of wars were the major subjects. New history focuses more on the history of the average person as a member of a particular culture or society.<sup>24</sup> Social context determines the way of thinking and the use of language. Interpretation of historical events can only be done by those in that cultural or social context. The use of words is a political act, giving a person power to interpret self and others. Therefore, the grand narratives of the past were oppressive political acts rather than historical descriptions. Gertrude Himmelfarb's engagement with the new history is not neutral, but she does give a helpful and fair definition of the new emphases:

Thus, the new history tends to be analytic rather than narrative, thematic rather than chronological. It relies more on statistical tables, oral interviews, sociological models and psychoanalytic theories than upon constitutions, treaties, parliamentary debates, political writing, or party manifestos. Where the old history typically concerns itself with regimes and administrations, legislation and politics, diplomacy and foreign policy, wars and revolutions, the new history focuses on classes and ethnic groups, social problems and institutions, cities and communities, work and play, family and sex, birth and death, childhood and old age, crime and insanity. . . . The old history is "from above," "elitist history," as is now said; the new is "history from below," "Populist history."<sup>25</sup>

She goes on to critique (at length) the new historical methods (plural). "Where history was once primarily (often entirely) narrative, now it is primarily (often entirely) analytic."<sup>26</sup> What she means by this is the tendency for the new historians to lord it over the facts with their interpretive webs. She, along with Windschuttle, notes that many new historians deny the integrity of people in the past to act on their own,

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<sup>24</sup>Gertrude Himmelfarb identified in 1987 that it was not really so new. See the introduction to *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>25</sup>Himmelfarb, *New History and the Old*, 32.

<sup>26</sup>Himmelfarb, *New History and the Old*, 52.

as independent agents, with a multiplicity of causes, robbing the events of their complexity.<sup>27</sup> What Himmelfarb, Windschuttle, and others are reacting to is a tendency toward reductionism by many social historians, psycho-historians, and cultural historians. I think this is a valid critique, as far as it goes.

However, there is a new world of historical research and writing that has opened up thanks to this new focus on the cultural use of language and symbols, the political role of history writing, and turning the focus away from the major figures toward the common people. The *Annales* historians saw their new history as complementary to the history of institutions and “great people,” not contradicting what had been done earlier. This earlier historical writing was institutional, tended to be elitist, and focused on the great figures who were not always the best moral exemplars. For Christian history especially, the newer cultural studies guide the historian to ask questions more germane to Christianity:

- Where are the poor?
- How did this ethnic minority understand and witness to their faith?
- How were women involved?
- What language was used?
- How were church conflicts cultural, and how were they theological?

Third, and a subset of the social science approaches above, there is the struggle of other ideologies from within the historical process directing the historical project. Epic events—events larger than life—can become controlling narratives overshadowing the life and identity of a people or a society. The historian can become captive to the event or experience as the grand idea, forcing other narratives and other evidence into the

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<sup>27</sup>Himmelfarb, *New History and the Old*, 53.

mold of the “great experience.” Here we see revealed the nascent power of the historian as storyteller. One quick example will suffice. When writing about the history of Serbian Christianity for the second volume of *History of the World Christian Movement*, I was reading to try to understand the life and spirituality of the Serbian Orthodox Christians of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Here is what I wrote:

Damascene of Gabrovo (d. 1771) was a monk in the Serbian Hilander monastery. After being appointed abbot, he appealed to the Ottoman rulers to repay a large debt that they owed the monastery. Through intrigue and deception, Damascene was falsely accused of having taken a Muslim woman into his house, and was given the opportunity to either convert to Islam or be hanged. He refused to convert, stating not only his innocence but that he was born an Orthodox Christian and would die as such. Rejecting Jesus Christ would be the same as rejecting eternal life, he said. Accordingly he was hanged, his name entering the ranks of the Serbian saints who resisted.

Theodore Sladich (d. 1788) was another figure from the period who opposed Ottoman policies of heavy taxation. He also opposed the spread of influences that were coming from western Europe, especially the introduction of new forms of education that appeared to him to be reducing the importance of traditional religious teachings. During Lent of 1788, Theodore and 150 of his followers publicly preached against paying the heavy taxes to the Turks, linking such resistance to demonstrating one’s love for God and the saints. For their testimony, all were burned alive. The episode demonstrates the degree to which religious and political forms of resistance were joined.

*The ethnic identity of Serbs, Bulgarians, and many others continued to be shaped by what they considered to be oppression, and their resistance to it. While most of those involved in the history could not see it at the time, in the eighteenth century the Ottoman empire was in a period of slow political and economic decline. In the context of this decline, and to a degree on account of it, volatile religious divisions gave rise to nationalistic impulses in the Balkans.*<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>28</sup>Dale Irvin and Scott Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement*, vol. 2, *Modern Christianity from 1454 to 1800* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 2:381-82.

What I put in italics I think can be defended by looking at the writings of the period and by looking at the tradition or history of the Serbs and Bulgarians, even by reading the very recent history of the Balkans. However, it is a dangerous move to shift from saying that this oppression the Serbs suffered has influenced their understanding of themselves and their lives to saying that any history of the Serbs must use these stories (especially the 1389 Battle of Kosovo) as the lens for researching and writing about the Serbs. These periods of suffering are important parts of their history, but to say that they are *the* lens or *the* hermeneutical key is to give them a power like that of an idol. When this happens, history, driven by a particular ideology, shapes people into a particular view of reality or view of themselves. This is an improper use of history, allowing “the idea” to lord over the process or to master the story and the storyteller. I believe that a great deal of our modern ethnic and religious violence and intransigence comes from such historical ideological (or ethnocentric) readings.<sup>29</sup>

Much has been written about other historical approaches that dominate the scene today, but we will only briefly mention them here: postmodern and postcolonial studies. These two approaches or techniques (they are not really cohesive systems or philosophies) have made important contributions to the writing of history. *Postmodern* studies have de-centered historical writing from the hegemony of people like me: North Atlantic white males. When I was studying Asian Christianity in the 1980s, most of what I read was written by missionaries from the West or scholars working with Western records in large libraries in the West. Many of these historians were among the greatest historians of the age. However, they were limited in what they could know and what they could perceive. A Lutheran Batak historian, researching and writing about Christianity and Islam in

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<sup>29</sup>One small observation here will help keep the argument together. The concept of group identity (ethnic, national, regional, etc.) that I am discussing here comes from Durkheim’s concept of “collective” identity, which was heavily used by the French *Annales* historians.

northern Sumatra will see, understand, and write differently about his or her own local history in Batakland. He or she will know the languages, will have in his or her own heart the love and pain of the history. He or she will write a different story.

Many postmodern historians will say that perspective is *everything* and that meaning is *only* in the mind and heart of the local community. Thus, no evaluation or critique can be made of a particular community's interpretation.<sup>30</sup> Expressed in this way it is an extreme position that makes both critique and truth claims impossible. Such an ideology is irresponsible scholarship, and theoretically it prevents intercultural scholarly debate since it gives such prominence to local or cultural interpretations of reality. It also makes international relations nearly impossible. Global understanding as well as peacemaking depend on our ability to understand other cultures and peoples. Postmodern histories can often block the very concern they try to enhance: empathy.

On the other hand, what postmodern historians have given us is insight into the larger story or the deeper understanding of events and people. The value of this contribution to the forgotten cultures and marginalized masses is hard to quantify. This recovery of history we do not want to lose nor belittle. The first task of the historian is to listen to the evidence and listen to other storytellers, noting how they tell their stories. Evaluation and critique must not be lost in the joy of newfound voices that for so long were silenced. Uncritical acceptance of the newer storytellers is paternalistic and unacceptable. However,

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<sup>30</sup>Windschuttle, *Killing of History*, 279-80, tells the story of Michel Foucault's inventing history to prove his theory. In Foucault's *The Order of Things*, Foucault describes Western taxonomies of animals and compares them with "a certain Chinese encyclopedia," which divides animals according to very different categories (belonging to the emperor; embalmed; tame; sucking pigs). He uses this "history" to illustrate that different cultures have different rationalities. However, the "Chinese encyclopedia Foucault quotes from is fictitious, invented by the Argentine short story writer, Jorge Luis Borges." Historians are often tempted to create history to make a point, but in this case a very radical claim is at stake: different cultures have different rationalities.



historical research with postmodern and social historians as equal dialogue partners is in the best interest of historians of Christianity today. Such intellectual humility will prevent the hermeneutical divide described in the first paragraph of the introduction.

*Postcolonial* historical writing is closely related to postmodern criticism, recognizing the need for particular cultures and societies that experienced Western colonialism to write their own histories. Postcolonial historians focus on the new context of liberation after colonial oppression. The studies originated as a way of listening to colonized voices that had been silenced for so long. However, in the past few decades the approach has been expanded to include the study of history of all minorities or ethnic groups, whether from former colonies or not. Postcolonial interpretations and approaches are used in most of the social sciences; one can even do a postcolonial analysis of the book of Ruth. Again, we should listen to the basic concern here, recognizing that Christianity started out under an empire (actually both Roman and Parthian). What could be more Christian in historical studies than studying and listening to “the least of these” and the ones who are oppressed by political and religious rulers? However, Christianity was much more than resistance to empire (if it was that at all), so we must also beware of this type of reductionism in historical research and writing.<sup>31</sup>

We want to receive the new approaches of cultural studies without jettisoning the quest for truth, inductively researched and received. We want to understand the life and history of a particular indigene on their own terms without saying that their particular language and culture of interpretation is something that we cannot understand. We want to encourage cultural history but not let it become an ideology that makes *multicultural* history-telling impossible: we can talk about

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<sup>31</sup>For a critique of this view of first and second century Christianity as resistance to empire, see Scott Sunquist, “Hidden History,” *The Christian Century*, September 18, 2006, <https://www.christiancentury.org/reviews/2006-09/hidden-history>.

and be challenged by others even though they are from another culture.<sup>32</sup> Thus, in our twenty-first-century global culture, we must affirm both the particular local interpretations *and* the need for global connectiveness. Our appreciation for local cultures and societies must not prevent us from our search for common understandings of peace and justice. Cultural studies can unwittingly support new forms of tribalism and division. History is foundational for other social sciences, and therefore it must not abandon its role as truth-teller, cross-culturally or even globally received. It must not sacrifice the unity and peace of humankind on the altar of a de facto cultural absoluteness.

***Faith commitments and Christian history.*** Finally, it is important to recognize that all historians have beliefs about the world, the cosmos, God/gods, spirits, and the dead/ancestors. These beliefs will influence what is researched and how the story is told. We have mentioned the three voices or threads that should help to guide our history writing: Scripture, the global church, and continuity with the life of Jesus. A person can be guided by these and still not have Christian faith. In other words, a person can believe that Christianity should be critiqued on its own terms but not be a believer herself.

What we are saying here is that historians should be clear about what philosophy or ideology is framing their narrative, but they should also state clearly that they are telling a story that they are part of or that they are discovering and talking about people who are not in their own community of faith. Does this matter? I think it does. Let me explain.

In telling stories where Christians describe something unnatural or supernatural (miraculous), we might just drop the story completely if we do not believe such things happen. Or we might simply say,

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<sup>32</sup>These convictions of the value of local histories and the need for global scholarship were foundational for two scholarly community projects that have shaped my scholarship: *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (1991–2001, involving over 480 scholars) and *History of the World Christian Movement* (1998–2010, involving about fifty scholars).

“Some of the local Christians reported that . . .” Or we might find it a quite credible story given the three voices to which we are listening and by which we are guided. The person telling a story from the inside, as it were, will be more attentive to issues like the specific words about Jesus’ identity, the meaning of the Trinity, or the role, function, and power of the sacraments. This will be a major theme in chapter three on the cross.

We turn now from historical writing in general to the Christian story, or what is generally called church history. In this turn we are now looking at how to engage in the study of Christian history with the newer, more interdisciplinary study of historical periods. As a reminder, what has made it necessary to rethink how we approach the history of Christianity is the transformation that took place in the late twentieth century. Our basic assumptions about Christianity and its development have been challenged and, in fact, have proven to be inadequate. So, now it is time to look at the first of three threads that make up the cord of Christian history: an understanding of time itself.

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