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## What Good is Church History?

Public lecture  
October, 11, 2004  
4 p.m. Cudahy Hall 105  
Marquette University, Theology Department  
Milwaukee, Wi

### 1 Introduction

It is lonely at the top. It is hard to be a Theologian. Although pastoral ministry is widespread, academic theology and the intellectual reflection on faith, piety and its manifestations in church are not well-reputed. I am not going to discuss the reasons for that, but in fact the fatal consequences of this development on both sides of the Atlantic can be seen. Economics and, in effect, the applied sciences rate much higher on a particular issue than questions about its ethical value, its foundation in Scripture and tradition, or the quest for its historical background. Humanities, in general, and theology, in particular, do not seem to have a payoff. Don't they?

I vote for the contrary. Theology in particular and humanities do pay off. They reflect, empower and initially, although only partially, establish communication and reflection about a very serious question. Who am I in a world that, on the one hand, produces freedom, globalizes and is becoming united, but, on the other hand, is a world in which violence, brutal power plays and injustice cannot be overlooked: a world in which money seems to rule and accumulating economic power is the only valid goal.

Don't worry, this is not a translation of Oswald Spengler's 'downfall of the occident', including a lachrymose poem on the times long

gone which had a better sense of culture, virtues, and vision for tomorrow. On the contrary, I would like to stress my understanding of Christian theology, in general, and of Church history, in particular, focusing on contemporary problems of mediating and communicating the truth of the Gospel to today's (Western) civilization. I am still convinced that theology can contribute essentially to the future of Western civilization – including some sharp criticism on the contemporary performance of Christian occidental culture.

The greatest contribution theology could offer is to give back a certain sense of human dignity, but not a racist, ethnic, political or economic dignity. No, it is the dignity of humans understood as God's image and his elected crown of creation. This identity has been lost. While it is a subject of my colleagues in systematic theology to unfold this proposition within their sections on anthropology and its consequences for the social ethics of today and tomorrow's world, I will deal with this question with regard to the history of the church.

I do understand the church as an assembly of those who seek God and find their identity with God as beings made in his image and likeness. Thus, the Church is just not the assembly of the elected, the reconciled, the newborn or the perfect. Church is a room, a forum in which a great variety of humans dwell: some looking, others searching, others resigning, others comforting, and so on. Church is, as St. Augustine once said, a mixed body (*corpus permixtum*). Thus the Church represents God's creatures as they are after the fall.

So, in an overview as much as in detailed studies, the history of the Church illustrates the history of God's grace and merciful patience with his creation.

Neither this understanding nor the hermeneutical preconditions and methodological consequences of this thesis are evident. I will explain my thesis in 4 sections: After a survey of some important views on Church History and a brief definition of my own, I will explain my understanding of Church history and historical theology in its interconnection with other sub-fields of theology. A third section will deal with the relation between history and Church history before I conclude with some forward looking theses about future work in and orientation of Church history/historical theology.

## **2 What is Church History?**

### **2.1 Definitions**

Even a quick search for a definition of Church history shows that it is not clear what Church History means, what the Church Historian deals with, nor how he understands his job. To illustrate the confusion, let me give some definitions as they have been formulated in the past as they influence the contemporary work of Church historians and theologians dealing with historical theology.

I will start with Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in the late third and early fourth century, who was unfortunately later declared a heretic but in fact the father of Church history. In the first book of his "*historia ecclesiae*", the Greek authority writes:

*It is my purpose to write an account of the successions of the holy apostles, as well as of the times which have elapsed from the days of our Savior to our own; and to relate the many important events which are said to have occurred in the history of the Church; and to mention those who have governed and presided over the Church in the most prominent parishes, and those who in each genera-*

*tion have proclaimed the divine word either orally or in writing. [...] But at the outset I must crave for my work the indulgence of the wise, for I confess that it is beyond my power to produce a perfect and complete history.*

Eusebius is obviously driven by the very easy question about what was happened after Christ had been resurrected from the dead and finally had risen to heaven. He seems to not have had a problem with the objectivity of his topic. Living in this time of furious discussion about the relation between God and Christ, especially dealing with the theses of Arius, the deacon in Alexandria and energetic defender of the humanity of Jesus, Eusebius sketches out the accentuation of his book:

*It is my purpose also to give the names and number and times of those who through love of innovation have run into the greatest errors*

It is not quite clear whether he wants to protect the Church from more or even worse errors or whether he is asking for mercy on those who erred – likely with a certain reference to his own experiences during the Nicene controversies. Finally, in the preface of his large overview of the last 350 years of the continuous proclamation of the gospel, Eusebius allows a quick glimpse into his studio. How did he work?

*Having gathered therefore from the matters mentioned here and there by them whatever we consider important for the present work, and having plucked like flowers from a meadow the appropriate passages from ancient writers, we shall endeavor to embody the whole in an historical narrative, content if we preserve the memory of the successions*

*of the apostles of our Saviour; if not indeed of all, yet of the most renowned of them in those churches which are the most noted, and which even to the present time are held in honor.*

Eusebius collected items for a large narrative. By no means does he recognize that gaps in his narrative will occur. But his intention is to preserve the story of the successions of the Apostles in order to hold them in honor according to the heritage of the “most noted” churches of his times. Interestingly, he claims his selection to be from the mainstream, although he obviously was under suspicion to have left the common sense with regard to his understanding of Christ. With that we note that he speaks of churches – not the one and only holy catholic church – as did his later successor, the African theologian and father of Latin theology, Augustine.

His late, and probably most intriguing work, deals with history. Even not focusing on Church history in particular, it contains an important advance in methodology and offers a substantial contribution to the understanding of the method of historiography. Facing the sack of Rome by the Goth's twice during his life, he felt the need for an apologetic. Not just an apologetic which comforts the afflicted Christians but an apologetic which fights the emerging polemic against Christianity: Since Christians ruled Rome, Rome's decline was overwhelming. Thus the ancient gods of the eternal city let down their wrath on the Roman citizens misled by their Christian authorities, using the Goth's and their threatening army as their instrument. Augustine outlines his understanding of history as the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation in response to this interpretation of the current events. Like the autobiography of his pagan life until his conversion to Christianity was sketched as proof of God's grace and

merciful patience until Augustine had found him – more or less a micro-history of God's Salvation plan – he now collects all events of the world's history and interprets them in the wider horizon of God's eternal will to become reconciled with his creation.

Unlike Eusebius, Augustine articulates a subjective interpretation of History that is clearly evident. He is not interested in the succession of the Apostles' experiences with the living and resurrected Christ – more or less “what had happened” – but a deeper understanding of the events that had happened in the light of the proclaimed gospel and within the revealed will of God to redeem the sinner. This has important methodological consequences: Augustine has not only to suck up some nectar of the blossoms spreading all over the meadow. He has to develop a certain critique about all the different events that had been reported. The main paradigm of his critique is the question of how much a reported event proves the over all thesis that God has a certain plan for salvation which he is nevertheless going to carry out anyway. Augustine seems to wear glasses which allow insight into the processes of the world. Like the prophets, he is able to look to the world and see a fourth dimension through the events and their contexts as pure evidence to their deeper inner connection to God's will and plan.

We cannot look to the many disciples of both Eusebius and Augustine in their various attempts to write some kind of history of the world, the Christian people, the Church or, finally, the spread of the gospel throughout the world, as we have books of Sozomenos, Orosius, Boethius and others. For our inquiry it will be important to bear in mind these two different concepts of how to develop the history of the Church as a succession of the Apostles and their proclamation of the Gospel or as proof for God's eternal plan of salvation.

With that in mind we go forward quite a few centuries to visit Daniel Friedrich Ernst Schleiermacher's "Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study." His three-part survey contains a long section on historical theology – certainly the most extended part of the book. The second paragraph of this lengthy chapter presents that...

*Church History ... is knowledge concerning the total development of Christianity since its establishment as a historical phenomenon.*

This knowledge is not to be gathered for its own purpose or dignity but as an auxiliary science to support "knowledge concerning the further career of Christianity." Again, another selecting principle is invented: Church history has its function in supporting a vision about the future of Christianity. On the one hand, it functions as 'tradition'-proofing the validity of inventions and innovations. On the other hand, it serves as a reservoir of experiences, errors, and, with it, limitations of legal, theological or ecclesiastical innovations. Church History - differentiated in the History of the Church and the History of doctrine/dogma – thus is just a part of history, even though a major part of it contains the essential information for a holistic interpretation of reality through the Christian Faith.

This – let me call it – functional, if not utilitarian, understanding of Church history reduces its meaning, even though this allows a precise description of its methods. As Schleiermacher has previously written in his outline:

*The historical knowledge of Christianity is, first and foremost, the indispensable condition of all intelligent effort toward the further cultivation of Christianity, and in this con-*

*nection all the other parts of historical study are strictly subservient to it.*

While Eusebius dealt with churches, Augustine focused on the one and only Catholic Church. Schleiermacher, well known as the intellectual leader of modern Protestantism, sees church – churches – as subjects of historical interest even though they are not the totality of the historical engagement. Faith and its performance as piety is much more closely related to the individual than the institutions. So in the center of his historical investigation Christianity as the wider understanding of various materializations of the Christian faith.

Even though called “Church history”, the Church and its history is for Schleiermacher less important than the use of any kind of historical knowledge to develop visions for the ethical or foundational future of Christianity:

*If the historical material of Christianity is considered on the basis of the constitutive principle of theology, then historical knowledge of the present moment of history stands in the most direct relation to Church leadership, since it is that out of which future moments are to be developed. This therefore forms one special division of historical theology.*

Neither a merely concrete understanding of Church nor its institutional history serve exclusively to...for him, much more important for him is the selecting principle of his understanding of useful historical material and its relation to the constitutive principle of theology. I wonder whether this is possible: to combine the idea of a principle (immaterial and certainly belonging to the intelligible world) with its historical manifestation (matter of fact and with its material belonging to the world of sense experience). It is the understanding of his-

tory itself as a crossroads between the ideas and its historical materialization which makes the historiographical pattern for Schleiermacher. Although he does not reach the construction of Hegel, the romantic idealist is on its way to construct a Protestant Church history, for he says:

*The present, however, can only be understood as a result of the past, and thus the knowledge of the entire previous career of Christianity forms a second division of historical theology.*

History in general but Church History in particular becomes somewhat like the proof for systematic speculation with a certain orientation toward ethical questions, problems of Church leadership and pastoral care. These may become the leading questions and with that the main parameter for selecting the historical material. This endangers history and Church history to mislead by fulfilling just a doctrinal need: proofs from the past. The question about the past of the Church is not critical enough to formulate critique in addition to the dogmatic evaluation of present manifestations of Christianity.

Schleiermacher seems to recognize this missing critical dimension of historical theology when he states:

*Now since the Christian life has also become increasingly more variegated and complicated, while the final aim of its theology consists in representing its distinctive nature more authentically in every approaching instant of its history, therefore the knowledge of primitive Christianity naturally arises as a third special division of historical theology.*

Schleiermacher avoids the idea that Christianity has different and ever new historical manifestations in order to put one historical performance as critical orientation forward. Historical studies help to develop an idea about spiritual and intellectual heritage, about the forms of church and liturgy, and finally about the shape of common or individual faith and piety. With that he does not fill in the gap of a historical understanding of faith and piety: Still faith is something extra-historical which has just individual traces in history but not a complete historical setting.

Yet Schleiermacher's understanding of Church history contains – unspoken – the idea of salvation-history: that the history of the Church and, even more, the history of Christian dogma is the proof for God's increasingly revealed multi-presence which keeps the faith and leads step-by-step into a deeper understanding of the promise of the gospel.

This idealistic, finally, a-historical understanding of Church history impacted Protestant theology very deeply. Even approaches to history adopting the heritage of Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel for theology, especially the history of Christian doctrine (Ferdinand Baur), could not fully develop a less functional, if not utilitarian, view of history in general and Church history in particular. The distinction between the idea and its individual historical appearances finally led to more and more of an unhistorical understanding of history. Just not the matter of fact, its transcendent meaning became of importance. The description of Church history as an auxiliary discipline again became influential throughout the work of a great critic of Schleiermacher, the reformed father of dialectical theology Karl Barth. Initially, with the great success of dialectical theology, and then later

with reformed scholasticism, the dominance of systematic theology became established for more than a century.

Looking through the textbooks which became the books I studied theology and Church History with, I found little indication for a stronger shift. More or less, the dogmatic background formed the understanding of Church history in the post-war textbooks. Church history became dependent on dogmatic definitions of confessional identity. So Protestant Church history thus focused on the word, alone, and with it primarily to the history of doctrine – including a certain pattern of historical understanding that made the history of doctrinal development the mirror of God's plan of Salvation. Especially, the suppressed evangelical, that is, Protestant, doctrine (of ? – salvation history) became the proof of truth and was understood as the continuous evangelical stream within the whole of nearly 2000 years of historical decline. The Heidelberg Professor of Theology Heinrich Bornkamm defined Church history thus as the history of the gospel and its impact on the world. And the former Hamburg Church historian Martin Schmidt introduced Church history as the history of the proclamation [of the gospel] and its materialization. Heavily impacted by the development of dialectical theology and its dominant influence on Theology in Protestant, German-speaking countries, Gerhard Ebeling wrote his introduction to theology. In this little book he developed his understanding in a reaction to the factions of dogmatic and ethical accentuations. Deeply disappointed by the minor consequences the interference between Protestant church institutions and the national socialist (Nazi) regime in Germany, he defines Church history as the history of the interpretation of the Holy Scriptures to widen his view over the concrete church bodies and their manifestations in perverting evangelical faith.

Catholic theology and Church history likewise accentuated the Church as visible proof of God's eternal grace. Through the Church, his love and mercy are distributed to his creation. That understanding allowed Catholic theology to better adopt historical methods and develop a more historical understanding of the Church itself. The father of modern Catholic Church history in Germany, Hubert Jedin, thus writes: the object of Church history is the growth of the Church as it was founded by Christ in the categories of space and time. And even in the last edition of the great dictionary for Catholic theology – *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche* – the Wuerzburg Church Historian Klaus Ganzer accentuates the historical dimension of his understanding of Church and with it the need for a historical approach to its description.

After the war, the ecumenical movement felt empowered by the need for a common Christian orientation in the life and work of people: What helped us to envision a time after the war and imprisonment cannot be without value in times of peace. This notion initially not related to academic theology became of great importance when Protestant theologians started to revise the theological development under the strong influence of Karl Barth and his disciples. Even though strongly criticised for its lack of historical understanding – especially by the Marburg theologians surrounding Rudolf Bultmann who came to their views through his view of New Testament studies – it was Wolfhard Pannenberg who, supported by a small group of young scholars, whom I have the honor to call my teachers, started this last dispute with a tiny collection of articles around the subject: revelation as history. In this tiny collection of presentations from a symposium in 1960, six young theologians, heavily impacted by a modern reading of Georg Wilhelm Hegel, tried to find their way back to a stronger and deeper understanding of theology and its relation

to history. Coming out of these experiences, Wolfhart Pannenberg finally wrote a very influential study *Wissenschaftstheorie und Theologie* which is a serious inquiry into the future of theology in competition with the natural sciences and their respective interpretations of reality and the future of humanity.

Pannenberg became both (“both” here makes it sound like he became an advocate of salvation history *and* a natural scientist): one of the leading figures in German ecumenical theology and the first, if not the major figure, of a non-Barthian, more historical understanding of theology and, in consequence, a stronger influence on Church history in the circle of theological disciplines.

While this happened long before I began my studies in theology, the development after Pannenberg and others continued. Today’s theology is not accepted without a certain historical background. The German tradition especially experiences a strong influence of Church history and (!) historical studies without a certain theological connection.

Next to this (do you mean “In addition to this...?”), Church history is probably one of the most harmonizing fields in ecumenical theology. The definitions, as much as the methods used and their hermeneutical backgrounds do not completely match but rather show a much greater compatibility than other disciplines – except the (historical) exegesis of the Testaments.

Nevertheless, that makes Church history suspicious to many other theologians. It seems that theology, especially in its doctrinal parts, feels a certain offense when historical requests or comments are made. Church history seems to level doctrinal differences and, with them, to equalize confessions, Christian identities and truth. With

that, the question about the meaning and need of Church history within the study of theology arises anew.

I will start with a brief definition and then extract that definition with regard to the field of theological studies. Finally, I will – in order to satisfy the systematic theologians in the fore – draw some conclusions which we might discuss after the lecture.

## **2.2 Definition**

Church History researches the history of the development and reception of Christianity. In concentric circles, the interest starts with a focus on the interpretation and exegesis of Scripture in preaching and teaching, and then it moves over to the diversity of manifestations of faith and piety, churches and their growth, defense and decline, coming finally to the wider realm of secular interrelations between Christian approaches to the modern mind and their denial. Thus Church history does not concentrate on the history of institutions alone. Simultaneously, Church history can not focus exclusively on 'mainstream' theology, i.e., doctrine approbated by the majority or the ecclesiastical authorities. Church history deals with non-conformists and dissidents as much as with religious phenomena at the margins of Church and society. Even though this is quite enough material for a life-long study, students of Church history have to look closely to the larger structure of the development of faith, piety, intellectual development and Church. That is my introduction to the WebSite of the department for Theology at the University of Frankfurt. In more detail we may distinguish between the history of church(es) and ecclesiastical institutions, the history of doctrine, and a broader approach to religious history with a certain focus on Christianity. That includes a certain Euro-(if not Germano-)centrism which, in connection with mission and ecumenical theology, widens

intensively. Although not free from dogmatic prefiguration of the individual researcher, Church history in recent years found it not helpful to continue the programmatic dogmatic settings of the years after the war. During the last year, the question of Church history as a non-theological discipline became influential among Catholic writers.

In the following I will deal with Church history as a theological discipline and discuss the question of the relation between Church history and history in general in an additional section at the end.

### **3 How is Church History interconnected with Theology?**

As we will see later, Church history is a discipline closely connected to theology with its controlling questions and its respective set of answers serving as that which significantly distinguishes the work of a Church historian from any other historical work. While this relationship can be made evident quite easily by a superficial comparison of results, Church history's relationship to theology is not that obvious. Still, quite a number of, first and foremost Catholic, colleagues raised the question within the last year as to whether Church history is a theological discipline. Likewise, a large number of historians have claimed authority in the field of theological interpretation of history.

With this statement, a key word has been mentioned: historical theology, which raises questions and searches for answers within the field of Christianity and its impact on history. Thus the questions and answers of the historical theologian have to be verified and answered in the wider context of the theological interpretation of reality – ultimately, the Christian answer to the question of truth.

### **3.1 Exegetical studies**

First of all, this question has been raised within the theological interpretation of its foundational document: the Scriptures. The historical method and hermeneutics of exegetical studies are unquestioned. Is the contribution of historical theology superfluous? Certainly not!

While exegetes have to concentrate on their interdisciplinary work to verify the philological and historical quality of the source, the Church historian deals with the history of exegesis and interpretation. In this context, Gerhard Ebelings definition of Church history unfolds its full intention, despite describing just one dimension of its total meaning: Church history is the history of the interpretation of Holy Scripture.

Looking to the broad stream of material which flows endlessly as more is collected from the margins of antiquity into our contemporary setting, it seems completely irrational to wade through just a small stream of historical work coming throughout the centuries. With regard to some suggestions of my Muenster colleague Albrecht Beutel, I would like to suggest at least three restrictions in order to not get drowned in the rich material of exegetical writings throughout the millenniums:

- a) To concentrate on the texts which the early Church coordinated with the lectionary of the first centuries until the medieval times. Interestingly enough, these texts have not been investigated thoroughly.
- b) To analyze the use of Scripture in times of greater change and challenge (*Schwellen- oder Achsenzeiten*) between epochs or periods. Without doubt, the reformations in Wittenberg, Zurich, and Geneva arose from a certain intensive work

on and with the Bible. Certainly, it was not the quest for change that provoked these studies.

- c) To investigate the use of specific passages of Scripture which were used all throughout Christian history, e.g. in liturgy, prayer, common use, or as proofs in theological debates. A certain attention should be paid to Augustine, Peter Lombard, and Thomas Aquinas. Exemplary studies can be found with Martin Schmid, Albrecht Beutel and Gerhard Hammer, to name only a few.

### **3.2 *Practical theology***

Closely connected to these directions in historical research, historical theology can also basically contribute to practical theology in the fields of homiletics and liturgy. Neither a history of homiletics nor a concise history of liturgy – probably reduced to the Western, Latin liturgy – have been written in the last decades. Both genres certainly have their methodological problems, to name only the two most striking ones: sermons have been delivered orally, that is that the written source for the historian is either merely a written preparation or a more or less qualified protocol or report of which its value has to be verified in a complicated process of proofs. The other problem is especially with regard to sermons, it is the amount of sources. Probably has a first approximation to that field to develop a method of order: either in deduction of traditional patterns of (theoretical) homiletical rules and advises. Or – and that will be probably the greater challenge – an inductive method which takes off from a certain group of sermons verifying the values of the qualified method throughout the years. I share the expectation that such an analysis will carefully but intensively shift traditional understandings of certain periods of Church history.

### **3.3 Systematic Theology**

While systematic theology – and in the following I do not distinguish between the different fields of fundamental theology, dogmatic theology, and ethics – gives its answers without regard to time and context, historical theology looks exactly to that and analyses different sets, terminology, conditions etc. in which the answer(s) was/were given historically. I was told that there is a growing development in systematic theology to recognize that one is doing theology “in context” – that is, from one’s own temporal, cultural, and gender’s standpoint. The prime, yet older, example of this is liberation theology. But more and more mainstream theologians are doing this. I am aware that this is a “hot topic” in systematics, at least in the US, right now, which challenges historical work.

Even though a question remains: Must the contents of an answer necessarily change throughout the centuries, if the setting and the performance of the Christian interpretation of reality develop so completely? Will the essence of a dogmatic understanding be recognizable in their individual settings? In this horizon, systematic theology and Church history are interconnected in a way that the historical theologian informs his systematic colleague about the tradition of the answer to the question of truth. He also sets a tension between tradition and innovation in which systematic theology may start its search for new ideas. Finally, historical theology collects different forms – which probably include different content – of the given answers to the question of truth. The last couple of results may be summarized in the discipline ‘history of doctrine’. With that I would like to raise attention to the fact that the growing number of history related dissertation in systematic theology is endangered to miss the point ...

The discipline of history of doctrine seemed to become less trendy within recent years. While some systematic study in the last few decades developed a certain historiography of systematic theology, historical theology shifted more and more towards social history, intellectual history, history of piety, and other emphases. This shift was certainly caused by the experience of a growing lack of knowledge and communicability in these fields. Nevertheless, the interest in classical historical theology should not be given up. With regard to my definition given before, it seems that Church history concentrated on specific dimensions in the second and third circles losing contact to the core which is the manifestation of the proclamation of the gospel and its consequences which still belong among the main features of historical theology. The sources still give rich material for research and interpretation. Certainly though, Church history should not be reduced to that inner circle. Historians as much as theologians have to learn that faith and piety may materialize in wider dimensions than in Church and – mainstream qualified – ecclesiastical institutions only.

### ***3.4 Historical Theology as an Auxiliary Science***

These features of historical theology are not necessarily “auxiliary”. The information the Church historian collects may provoke new research in systematics as much as a revision of previous given answers regarding history. On the other hand, historical theology is not dependent to/from systematic questions. In its non-utilitarian understanding, Church history is free to look for its questions and answers even in a manner disconnected from recent questions of dogmatical or ethical theology.

This was just a very superficial overview on some connections between historical theology, in particular, with other fields of theologi-

cal studies. Church history is not necessarily the center of theology even though it can serve as one focus of theological studies. Historical studies are connected to any field in theology and, with that, can become somewhat like a focal point of theological inquiries. In the heat of a focal point much speculation may melt away. Or, to use another metaphor, historical analysis can perform as cold water poured on the many "hot ideas" in other disciplines, disproving them. With this qualified method and hermeneutical reflection, theology is able to win back ground in the competition with other, non-theological disciplines which claim to have a comprehensive interpretation of reality. With this we come back to the question for the interconnection of historical theology and history.

#### **4 How is Church History Interconnected with History?**

To distinguish Church history, in particular, as a part of history in general is not an option. Church history has no equivalent in the history of music, technique, warfare or law. Church history deals with history in total and cannot be reduced to a certain field within the wider realm of historical studies. The universal dimension of Christian faith has its analogy in the universal meaning of Church history: there is no field in history which is not impacted, related or opposed to religious thoughts and insights. The neglect of religion within history leads to a distorted understanding. Likewise, the overestimation of religious dimension of History distorts the process of interpretation; or better and even more acutely, the neglect of recognition of historical interdependencies leads the theological interpretation astray. Thus Church history and history are interconnected. In fact, while historians seem to lose the basic questions about life to the multitude of questions and potential answers, theology at least may keep the holistic question of the meaning of its all in mind. Whether

theology can provide with a certain answer is again a question of historical investigation.

The close linkage can be observed with regard to method. Historical studies in the general discipline of history as much as in theology require a similar set of methods without which a serious investigation of historical phenomena cannot be done. A unique method for historical theology is, if not impossible, more or less without value. How would it be communicated? Following the principles of Ernst Troeltsch, critique, analogy, and correlation are the common grounds of any historical research.

For any source that starts to speak in response to a certain question, we have to raise the problem whether theological inquiries are connected to a set of questions which cannot be linked to regular historical interest. It seems that at this point theology distinguishes itself from History. Next to his individual interests, the Church historian has the duty to reflect his self-understanding as a theologian and, with it, the processes of theological and ecclesiastical communication. Thus his controlling questions have to explain the orientation within these contexts. Any fact might be of interest, although the challenging point of engagement is its relation to the wider horizon in which the truth of its interpretation as the legal part of Church history has to be proven. While a historian might occasionally take this perspective within his arbitrary interest to the great variety of historical interpretation, the Church historian has no choice. He has to work on an answer to this question.

## **5 A Vision for the Future Needs to be Rooted in the Past – A Conclusion and Outlook**

Autumn 1873, Friedrich Nietzsche added a second “non-contemporary consideration” to his literary execution of David Friedrich Strauss. In his “About the Use and Disadvantage of History for Life”, he argues with contemporary historicism. Nietzsche differentiates between a monumental, an antiquary, and a critical mode of historical work. My above mentioned colleague from Muenster, Albrecht Beutel, adopted this distinction to his reflections about historical theology. I will take some of his ideas for my forward looking conclusion.

Even though J. Burckhardt once claimed that nobody – especially not Germans – would learn from history, there is, unspoken, a strong expectation both in university as in non-academic circles to “learn” from history. No anniversary, jubilee, or birthday of more or less important historical events and persons occur without some public presentations, including a lecture and/or an exhibition informing people about the event or the life and works of the theological “hero”. I am not going to talk about the canonization of Luther and the inclined hagiographic literature about the “Saint” of the evangelical church. Even less known persons receive museums, exhibits, pilgrimages and heritage tours. Obviously, there is a certain need for historical looks back which give an opportunity for a type of identification with the person or event – even though it is just for a short moment. This is closely connected to the expectation to receive clear advice with regard to contemporary questions and problems.

Two dangers should not be overlooked. First, monumental or heroic historiography reduces the greater picture and concentrates intensively on one event or person which ends up destroying the his-

torical context. The second danger is generated by the challenge of comparison. Each new development or even a statement in comparison with the heroes of the church must be less important and therefore useless ... A scholastic proverb gives witness to a useful humble approach to "great figures" of the past, wisely correcting monument-building historiography: "We all are dwarfs standing on the shoulders of giants."

On the contrary, archival historiography concentrates on the details. Especially the editors of the last few centuries have contributed inestimable efforts toward many types of historical research. They dug deep and found mines where no one else had ever looked before. Yet, this approach to historiography is, even more than monument-building, endangered by individualistic conceit combined with an overestimation of the particular part of research resulting in fatal consequences for publication and further work. Incredible diligence gets accompanied by boring presentation and a great incapability for communication. Schleiermacher already warns in his above quoted Outline:

*Nothing is more fruitless than a piling up of historical learning which neither serves any practical purpose nor offers anything for the use of others in its presentation.*

Even though no one argues for an elimination of the above mentioned approaches, I vote for a third modus: the critical approach to historiography. Theology is biography. Historical theology and its public presentation live from a balance between life and work, between the question and the questioner, between his individual faith and his loyalty to his ecclesiastical and/or pious tradition, from which his intellectual standards as much as his interest arose. This bal-

ance helps to avoid both the monumental overestimation and/or identification with the historical hero and the archivalistic conceit. With avoiding both needs a third factor to start work again arises: I would call that theological competence with regard to historical critique. This critique provokes three aspects of theological historiography:

- a) It provokes theologically founded modesty and simplicity holding a certain respect and interest for historical facts.
- b) It requires theologically grounded historical education and knowledge which leads individual experience into the wide lands of strange historical settings and information.
- c) It empowers Christian action with respect to its individual historical context and setting.

A vision for the future of Christianity as much as innovative solutions for contemporary problems needs grounding in the past. Only those knowing where they are from may develop an orientation for the future. How can I say where to go if I have no idea where I am from? Ignoring both, leads to disastrous lacks for defining one's position here and now. With regard to theological studies I thus recommend a thorough study of the past in order to not get lost in present questions and future plans.

For me, Church history is the certain ground from which I become enabled to explore the wider land. Be assured that I prefer the critical modus of historiography to develop my standpoint for present and future questions. This again should be contained in any theological education as much as in future programs (*curriculae*) here at Marquette.

Thank you for your patience and attention.