

Historiographical issues related to the writing of contemporary history of Christianity

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ABSTRACT

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Contemporary history is a fluid concept. Its writing implies commitment and self awareness. The former canons of objectivity, subjectivity and progress as they have traditionally been understood are anachro-nistic. Some of our most valued historical sources were, in their own time, products of contemporary history. Consequently, it may be argued that all history is interpretation and that conclusions reached are, at best, provisional. They are determined by the context, vision and values of the historian which can locate him in terms of the subject under research. Sources are also subject to bias. Church History is goal oriented towards the kingdom of God. The material and outcome of Church History and secular history are the same.

1 INTRODUCTION

We begin with Bloch's (1954:27) definition of history as 'the science of men [sic] in time' which extends into the past and future and is eternally changing and is inescapable:

There is no getting away from the past, ie. from those who record, interpret, argue about and construct it. Our everyday lives, the states we live in, the governments we live under, are surrounded by, drenched in, the products of my profession. What goes into school textbooks and politicians' speeches about the past, the material for writers of fiction, makers of TV programmes and videos, comes ultimately from historians. What is more, most historians ... know that investigating the past, even the remote past, they are also thinking and expressing opinions in terms of and about the present and its concerns (Hobsbawm 2002:282).

The matter of what constitutes contemporary history is a valid concern for the historian.

1.1 Contemporary History

A central concern is what constitutes contemporary history in a topic which is very recent and which is still being worked out in reality? This brings into play our notion of time with its relative understandings of past, present and future. Time might be considered as an extension of past and future where the present is a fleeting interstice between the two and the distinction between them is contrived (Gaddis 1995:11). It 'has no more than a notional existence as an imaginary dividing line between the past and the future' (Carr 2001:102). 'Of course, past, present and future are part of one continuum' (Hobsbawm 1998:128). In a sense the present does not exist because as soon as we become aware of it, it has gone: 'everything that happened in the past is history; everything that happens now is history' (Hobsbawm 1998:78). The historical past is constituted by activated memory and the future is constitutive of hope. Bloch's (1954) concept of 'universal history' was an attempt to remove the distinction between past and present in the sense that it was difficult to understand either without the other. History is 'the central organising principle in our minds, for without memory our lives would be a series of meaningless and therefore terrifying impressions, rather like those of severely afflicted amnesiacs' (Gaddis 1995:5). Bloch (1954:44) extended this idea in order to express the relationship between past and present where the present serves as a hermeneutic for understanding the past through a deeply traumatic personal experience:

Did I truly know, in the full sense, of that word, did I know from within, before I myself had suffered the terrible, sickening reality, what it meant for an army to be encircled, what it meant for a people to meet defeat? Before I myself had breathed the joy of victory in the summer of 1918 ... did I truly know all that was inherent in that beautiful word?

It certainly allows us to proceed from what is known best what is known least. But what is clear from this is that:

[h]istorians do not and cannot stand outside their subject as objective observers *sub specie aeternitatis*. All of us are plunged into the assumptions of our times and places, even when we practise something as far removed from

today's public passions as the editing of old texts (Hobsbawm 1998:364).

From this we become clear that there is no such thing as clinically detached history from whatever time or context we write it.

Gaddis (1995:1) has pointed out the oxymoronic nature of contemporary history as a term but this simply emphasises the transient relationship between present and past. While contemporary history may well be susceptible to a lack of the objectivity, prejudices and biases of the contemporary historian, this might equally be true of historians and contemporary historians (eg. Thucydides, Herodotus) of earlier periods. Also, there is the concern about not knowing the outcome of a recent event or process when as in the United Kingdom there is an embargo of twenty five years on government papers, for example. But even beyond this 'even the recent past is beyond our reach' (Bebbington 1990:11), certainly in an absolute sense. However, this might be true of events which took place a long time ago whose effects are still being experienced. Studying long term trends can give a sense of how they affect the present and future. For instance, it might be argued that the effects of colonial missionary expansion are still being experienced in the minds of those personally affected by it in one way or another (cf. Duncan 2003). What is perhaps more important is its effects for understanding the future in 'rendering a service of genuine importance in running the risks involved in evaluating developments so close to their happening. The last two decades have been rich in important events and... full of promise.... This is sufficient justification' (D'Espine 2004). What is considered an ancient work of history, but was in its own time contemporary history, Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War* expresses this well:

It will be enough for me ... if these words of mine are judged useful by those who want to understand clearly the events which happened in the past and which (human nature being what it is), will, at some time or other and in much the same ways, be repeated in the future (1972:48; cf. Marwick 2001:54).

The same is true of Herodotus (Koch 2005:212-214). Within the realm of Church History, we may quote Eusebius (Lawlor & Oulton 1927:255):

Having concluded the succession from the apostles in seven entire books, in this eighth treatise we regard it as one of our most urgent duties to hand down, for the knowledge of those that come after us, the events of our own day, which are worthy of no casual record...

What gives history its *raison d'être* is its contribution to the formation of the future. At issue here is the questionable distinction between 'facts' and 'memories' or interpretations in the struggle for objectivity or neutrality, especially taking account of the deficient nature of memory.

The actual definition of contemporary history is problematic in terms of periodisation. 'For most historians contemporary history does not constitute a separate period with distinctive characteristics of its own; they regard it rather as the most recent phase of a continuous process...' (Barraclough 1964:11). Collingwood (1999:242) defines it as 'history of the recent past in a society which the historian regards as his own society', that is of which he has personal experience ie. as a 'participant observer' (Hobsbawm 2002:xiii cf. Hobsbawm 1995:ix-x; 1998:304-305;) while Barraclough (1964:20) himself offers a helpful consideration: '*Contemporary history begins when the problems which are actual in the world today first take visible shape*' [emphasis in original]. He somewhat predates Kuhn's (in Küng 1995:60; Bosch 1991:183-189) theory of paradigm shifts where 'there was a long period of transition before the *ethos* of one period was superseded by the *ethos* of the other' (Barraclough 1964:20; cf.:26). This is related to the 'idea of progress, as seen in the dissolution of one and the rise of another epoch of universal history, [which] consisted in what was latent becoming spiritually active' (Harland 2003:84). From a Christian perspective, Latourette (1953:xxi) also developed a similar helpful insight:

One age has a way of running over into its successor or of being foreshadowed before it is born. The eras are realities, but there are no sharp breaks between them which can be identified by particular years. Advance and retreat often begin at different times in the several areas in which Christians are found and the first indications of revival are frequently seen before decline has been halted.

Clearly we may operate with different definitions of what constitutes contemporary history. It is a fluid term which denotes ‘ever-changing boundaries and an ever-changing content, with a subject matter that is in constant flux’ (Barraclough 1964:14). Again the present is only an infinitesimal moment which separates one era from another. One approach is to consider contemporary events as the source of our reflection on the past in order to shed light on the present (Gaddis 1995:18); hence ‘history enlarges experience’ (1995:19); it is also subject to revision in the light of new discoveries. This problem is resolved by Croce (1941:19):

The practical requirements which underlie every historical judgment give to all history the character of “contemporary history”, because, however remote in time events thus recounted may seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate.

Collingwood (1999) summarises thus: ‘The past which an historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present’. From a somewhat different perspective Fernandez-Armesto (2002:151) claims that ‘[E]verything that we do or think, everything that we imagine about the future passes instantly into the past and becomes a proper subject for historical enquiry’.

The advent of a contemporary/post-modern approach arising out of ‘the deep-seated connections between history and postmodernism’ (Walia 2001:10) has contributed to a revision of the concept of history which goes considerably beyond Carr’s reliance on grand narratives. The rapidly changing nature of the post-war world (ie. post-1945) we inhabit has necessitated this. Further, the idea that history has a single purpose or end has been seriously challenged, though this might be considered problematic from a Christian perspective. This movement facilitated a novel approach to history whereby the vanquished rather than the victors became the subject of study. The day of cultural history in which:

[t]he belief that historical writing can enhance our appreciation of the human condition by bringing to life and explaining beliefs and cultures that are very different from our own, and perhaps adding to the richness of human experience and understanding, and fostering

tolerance of different cultures and belief systems in our own time (Evans 2002:9)

had arrived. The value of culture lies in its ability to locate and discern relations of power, a vital aspect of any historical project. It also enables us to extend our field of study, particularly into the social sciences and humanities for history is a 'field encompassing field' (Harvey 1966:55) though not all other fields yield the same rich resources, eg. 'a history fertilised by the social sciences' (Hobsbawm 2002:288) is a particularly rich combination. It also helps to achieve greater depth of analysis. Another significant feature of our contemporary period is its inclusivity, the way in which 'the world was integrated in a way it never had been before; and this meant that no people, however small and remote could "contract out"' (Barraclough 1964:42).

However, Hastings (2005:xiv) points to a limitation in contemporary history: '... it is not possible to write the history of the immediate past with a durability comparable to that attainable for developments of even thirty years ago' (cf. Raiser 2004:xiv). We have to take this comment seriously, but nonetheless even recently written history of the contemporary period has a relevance even though it is subject to constant revision. And this is no less true of ancient history. This leads to a necessary discussion of objectivity and subjectivity in historical research.

1.2 Objectivity

'There is no "objective" historical truth' (Clark in Carr 2001:2; cf. Evans 2001:xi; Latourette 1953:xx). Yet, Carr could affirm:

To assert that fallible human beings are too much entangled in circumstances of time and place to attain the absolute truth is not the same thing as to deny the existence of truth; such a denial destroys any possible criterion of judgment, and makes any approach to history as true or as false as any other [he consequently opted for a view] where it is possible to maintain that objective truth exists, but that no historian by himself or no school of historian [sic] by itself can hope to achieve more than a faint and partial approximation to it ('Truth in History', Times Literary Supplement [TLS], 1 September 1950 in Evans 2002:xii).

So truth is relative and it may be determined by the coherence theory: 'A statement is true if it coheres with reality' (Bebbington 1990:148), that is if it makes coherent sense when it makes sense with the totality of experience. And if that experience is the result of faith then the 'insight that is born of faith can bring illumination' (Latourette 1953:xx). Where does this leave the issue of fact? Are these not objective realities? For the Christian, this is perhaps less of an issue for the Truth is the Word of God, who is Jesus Christ (Jn 14:6) and all other truth is measured against his standard. However, for Carr, these facts are

determined by the – perhaps unconscious – beliefs and presuppositions which guide the search. The very conviction that "facts" are neutral, and that progress consists in discovering the facts and learning lessons from them is the product of a rational-liberal outlook on the world which cannot be so easily taken for granted today as it was by our more fortunately placed nineteenth century ancestors (in Evans 2001:xii).

It is interesting that even Carr admits the validity of 'beliefs', though perhaps not in the traditional sense which implies commitment. From a Christian perspective, 'That we fail to understand history is due to our lack of such a commitment. That we understand it partly but imperfectly arises from a commitment which is real but incomplete' (Latourette 1953:xx). The issue for Carr (2001:114) was that objectivity is elusive because it is the historian who selects which facts are to be considered and interpreted and here we are at the historian's mercy as to which facts are viewed as significant and so, 'Objectivity... cannot be an objectivity of fact', for 'facts no longer speak for themselves' (Walia 2001:12), but only of relation, of the relation between fact and interpretation, between past, present and future'. This is where the mind of the historian takes on a validity alongside the facts and this disposition needs to be guided by fairness and justice in judgment. Then, '[f]acts take place once for all and cannot be recovered afterwards in their full integrity' (Bebbington 1990:11). Carr has a similar view of the relativity of truth. In determining what is significant, there must be a distinction between significant and accidental facts. And further, it must be recognised that values (interpretation) are embedded within facts and these exist in a co-relationship. Hence, he is able to maintain his

integrity. Here we have to acknowledge the relativity of the definite in its relation to probability.

This is related to the relationship between past and present:

The present day philosopher of history, balancing uneasily on the razor edge between the hazards of objective determinism and the bottomless pit of subjective relativity, conscious that thought and action are inextricably intertwined, and that the nature of causation, in history no less than in science, seems the further to elude his grasp the more firmly he tries to grapple with it, is engaged in asking questions rather than in answering them (Carr in *Victorian History*, *TLS*, 19 June 1953 in Evans 2001:xiii).

For Berlin (1954), objectivity lay not in the method but in the interpretation, that is by multiple verification, logical consistency and general acceptance based on the historian's reputation for empirical research. This is related to the process by which historians 'select' what they interpret, revealing their subjectivity of choice. This selectivity of both fact and cause and effect relates to what is considered to be significant and can be accommodated in a pattern of logical interpretation. It is fundamental to the historiographical process. Further, this selectivity when linked to interpretation or judgment hampers the achievement of absolute objectivity. In addition, objectivity is elusive as a result of history constantly being rewritten and new sources emerging.

Does objectivity imply an acknowledged commitment? 'Certainly historians will write better history if they are self-conscious about their political and intellectual starting point' (Evans 2001:xxx), ie. their own prejudices. Carr believed that historians should attempt to distance themselves from their own biases and also that the sources placed limitations on historians' conclusions. However, he gives no guidance on how this is to be effected. He simply assumes that it is possible as well as desirable.

An objective historian has a 'capacity to project his vision into the future in such a way as to give him a more profound and more lasting insight into the past' (Carr in Davies 2001:lx):

History requires the selection and ordering of facts about the past in the light of some principle or norm of

objectivity accepted by the historian, which necessarily includes elements of interpretation. Without this, the past dissolves into a jumble of innumerable isolated and insignificant incidents and history cannot be written at all (Carr in Davies 2001:lx).

This is supported by Gonzales (1970:23) although he contends that any degree of selectivity is necessarily subjective. The highest degree of objectivity is derived from the past illuminating our understanding of the future and vice versa. However, this very process distances the historian from his avowed aim of objectivity. Here we are constrained by the available facts in the sources which only reveal part of the past (cf. Butterfield 1954:94) and these are often the result of the selector's own subjectivity. Further, objectivity might be blurred by the variety of perspectives brought to bear on an incident: 'everyone is free to make his own assessment of their significance.... All require study and analysis in depth; they are part of a process which can never be fully intelligible if it is taken out of its historical context' (Barraclough 1964:17). And this is affected by the socially and culturally constructed medium of memory for 'the past is not preserved but is reconstructed on the basis of the present' (Halbwachs 1992:96-124 in Fernando-Armesto 2002:155). In oral cultures memory is recreated in the repeated retelling process, and even here embellishments may occur in the repeated process of retelling the story of an event or process. However, there is no guarantee that the future will occur as foretold by the historian.

The more conventional definition of objective research was judgment based on evidence that goes beyond the historian's preconceptions. Carr goes beyond this view however, for every historian is situated in a social, cultural and historical environment and context that is unique, therefore denying true objectivity or absolute detachment. Objectivity has its source in rising above and beyond an individual's limited context (cultural, political, social, religious and economic) and to extend a vision into the future with a view to gaining deeper insight regarding the past. Part of this context is, as mentioned above, is related to values which differentiate facts from truth. This process takes place in a dynamic context where history is characterised by progress in which 'Past, present and future are linked together in an endless chain of history' (Carr 2001:129). Seton-Watson (in Barraclough 1964:15) demonstrated

that from the time of Thucydides ‘much of the greatest history has been contemporary history’.

1.3 Subjectivity

It is impossible as we have seen above for a historian to approach his subject with absolute objectivity because ‘we ourselves are a product of that past. There is thus a complex, ambiguous boundary between past event, our present circumstance resulting on part as a product of the past, and our interpretation of the event’ (Bradley & Muller 1995:33). Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the subjectivity or bias of the historian and how this affects his view of history. Marwick (2001:48) seems to prefer the term ‘fallibility’. This will, to an extent be determined by his attitude towards his own particular context, his vision of its future and the values he brings to the exercise. This may be clearly demonstrated in how our political commitment affects our historical writing. For instance, Carr writes as a committed socialist and his interpretation of history will be considerably at odds with a totalitarian approach to history. This points us to the issue of commitment:

The personal participation of the knower in the knowledge he believes himself to possess takes place within a flow of passion. We recognise intellectual beauty as a guide to discovery and as a mark of truth (Polanyi 1962:300).

This passion or drivenness distinguishes the serious scholar and provides the staying power necessary to sustain research. Further, each historian is required to exercise judgment and to do this uses certain criteria which are formulated in interaction with his social, cultural, political and religious commitments: ‘Value neutrality is impossible’ (Bebbington 1990:6). This is the source of differing perspectives on any subject of historical enquiry; each historian brings his own history and vision to the investigation. A further limitation placed on the historian is his personal ability and wisdom, and intuition and empathy which are deeply subjective but without which much academic research in all fields of study could not progress.

While it is possible to state objectively that certain facts occurred at a certain place and time, this objectivity is limited by their dependence on cause and effect to establish them as significant events and part of a historical process: ‘And is it not the case that

judgment of importance depends on the subjective point of view of the historian?’ (Bultmann 1957:117). Biases cannot be completely eradicated and it is now acknowledged that the process of interpretation begins as soon as we start to think about the past. Kalu (2005:11) views this approach as ‘more realistic [for] [E]xposed biases can be accepted and critically tested by moral standards’. This is much to be preferred to:

a bland, uninvolved distancing of the self from the materials that must, ultimately, remove the importance from history.... The goal of the student is to pursue balance and objectivity without abdicating one’s personality or losing entirely one’s sense of involvement in and with the events of history.... Historical objectivity results from a methodological control of the evidence, of the various levels of interpretation both inherent in and related to the evidence and of one’s own biases and opinions concerning the evidence and the various known interpretations (Bradley & Muller 1995:49).

But it has to be noted that bias or prejudice is not the preserve of the historian but the sources may also be redolent with their own biases for those who provide us with primary sources have their own predisposition towards the truth of their context eg. political and/or theological commitment.

For Bultmann (1957:117) there is a difference in approach between objectivity in the natural sciences and historical science. That approach is characterised by ‘the perspective or viewpoint of the historian... [and] the existential encounter with history’. The former is based in the political and social nature of human beings who exist in ‘personal relationship’ (Bultmann 1957:118). The particular interests of the historian do not constitute a problem so long as they are not absolutised ie. that it is recognised that other viewpoints exist. Therefore:

truth becomes manifest objectively to each viewpoint. The subjectivity of the historian does not mean that he sees wrongly, but that he has chosen a special viewpoint, that his research starts with a special question. And we must remember that it is impossible to trace out a historical picture without any question, and that it is possible to perceive a historical phenomenon only from a

special point of view. To this extent the subjectivity of the historian is a necessary factor of objective historical knowledge (Bultmann 1957:118-119).

Further to this, Bultmann (1957:119) suggests that the historian's existential encounter with history is a vital factor as he stands within and participates in history. For Bultmann (1957:122): '... the most subjective interpretation of history is at the same time the most objective. Only the historian who is excited by his own historical existence will be able to hear the claim of history'. Eakin (in Popkin 1999:739-740) takes up this idea through an understanding of 'what it means to be living in history'. Freeman (in Popkin 1999:740) asks if historians make a special contribution through autobiography: 'Don't some people manage somehow to acquire a consciousness *of* history? Don't they become aware – more aware than others, at any rate – of the ways in which they have been determined' (cf. Hobsbawm 2002:xiii-xiv).

1.4 Progress

For our purposes, we will transcend the normal discussion of what constitutes progress in the historical process. Up until the beginning of the twentieth century, the concept of linear progress was popular in certain Christian historical circles with its confident approach to the future, its enormous expectations and its immutable criteria. The events of the last century devastated these elements of progress as war, famine, poverty, increased militarization and disease (notably the HIV/AIDS pandemic) destroyed human confidence in the future.

Progress is not only defined by its more comfortable relationship to the social sciences (Hobsbawm 1998:83f.), but also by a new approach to historiography:

... history has moved away from description and narrative to analysis and explanation; from concentrating on the unique and individual to establishing regularities and to generalisation. In a sense the traditional approach has been turned upside down

A historian needs to be able to articulate the present and project a view of the future for 'an understanding of the past... carries with it an enhanced insight into the future' (Carr in Davies 2001:lxxvii).

Perhaps this is what Butterfield (1954:66) was referring to in his claim that:

...the purpose of life is not in the far future, nor, as we so often imagine, around the next corner, but the whole of it is here and now, as fully as it will ever be on this planet. It is always a "NOW" that is in direct relation to eternity – not a far future; always immediate experience of life that matters in the last resort.

Bultmann (1957:141) views the present as a constant opportunity for decision and in which 'the yield of the past is gathered in and the meaning of the future is chosen'. He believes that being a historical being means living 'from the future' within history. This applies also to the Christian believer because since faith and freedom belong to the 'eschatological event they can never become facts of past time but are reality only over and over again as event' (Bultmann 1957:152). History can only be realised in the religious (ie. sacred worldly) experience of those who are 'in Christ'. Thus can history's meaning be discerned through responsible decision making (Bultmann 1957:155). These are critical actions which foster a new present which inevitably past (Bultmann 1957:4).

'Carr equated progress with objectivity' (Evans 2001:xxvii) ie. a historian who had 'the capacity to project his vision into the future in such a way as to give him a more profound and more lasting insight into the past than can be attained by those historians whose outlook is entirely bounded by their own immediate situation' (Carr 2001:117). For Carr, this was related to serving a political or social purpose. However, there is no guarantee that the future will occur as foretold by the historian. Fernandez-Armesto (2002:154) rather views all fields of study as having the dual purpose of enhancing life and preparing for death. Thus it might be said to have a moral purpose. From a more positive perspective Hobsbawm (1998:89) refers to the main question of history as 'the transformation of humankind'. However, from a Christian perspective Butterfield (1954:67) asserts a more positive view of preparing for death:

We envisage our history in the proper light, therefore, if we say that each generation – indeed each individual – exists for the glory of God; but one of the most dangerous things in life is to subordinate human personality to production, to the state, even to civilisation

itself, to anything but the glory of God'. But this is not a static glorification for this glorification is part of the dynamic 'progressive character of the Kingdom of God (Paas 2000:13).

1.5 The ecumenical perspective

This perspective is important because it is difficult in the discipline of Church History to talk about mission independently of unity (cf. Saayman 1984) and it was the modern missionary movement that provided the ecumenical impetus for the Church. For Kalu (Kalu *et al* 2005:21) the theological motivation and destination is ecumenism referring to God's lordship and reign in his Kingdom. Church History, therefore, is God's presence in human communities in the process and progress towards that goal. Consequently, a broader concept of the Church is necessary. For the unity of all God's people requires all to exercise responsible stewardship and mission. This approach to history is holistic and universalistic, and denies any group the right to dominate another. A further responsibility is to view the world from the perspective of those who stand with Christ outside the gate (Heb 13:12 cf. Costas 1993:188ff.) – the poor, oppressed and dispossessed:

The ecumenical perspective in church history, therefore, reconstructs, from the grass roots, the experiences of men and women in a community and the meaning of Christ in their midst. It assumes that as the Spirit of God broods over the whole inhabited earth; men [sic] increasingly recognise the divine presence and their lives are changed in the encounter.

Dialogue becomes a vital part of the process which requires transparency and accountability. In sum, the ecumenical approach in church history becomes a liberating experience for individuals and communities.

1.6 The destination of history

Since Christianity is a historical materialistic faith it must move towards a certain specific goal. For our purposes this must be the complete fulfilment of the Kingdom of God which lies in the future beyond our concepts of space and time. Carr might agree with this grand narrative conclusion though he would deny its specific goal. Carr quotes Huizinga's (1957:293 in Carr 2001:102) affirmation

that: ‘Historical thinking is always teleological’ (cf. Butterfield 1954:67). God is recognised by humans as Lord of History who guides the process to its designated goal. Christians are a pilgrim people of the Way, journeying onwards towards the future in which ‘each present hour is questioned and challenged by its future’ (Bultmann 1957:140). In this sense each moment is an eschatological opportunity and history and eschatology are identified.

Christian history is often considered to be linear in opposition to a cyclical approach to history, as it proceeds towards its destination. However, this distinction is rather facile, for within the progress towards the Kingdom is a cyclical process where God annually intervenes in nature in the course of the progress of the seasons, culminating in the Feast of Tabernacles or the Great Autumnal festival alluded to in the Enthronement Psalms (eg. 47, 93, 96-99). However, it must be admitted that this process is secondary to the great interventions of God in the history of his people. But even in this cyclical process, history is moving on towards a goal which is beyond itself – a new cosmic order. This order was inaugurated in the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth which marked the onset of the *eschaton* – the beginning of the end time – ‘the kingdom of God is upon you’ (Mark 1:15) which was marked by ‘Christ reconciling the world to himself’ (2 Cor 5:19). This era was distinguished by the eschatological happenings of Jesus’ ministry which will culminate in his delivering ‘up the kingdom to God the Father, after deposing every sovereignty, authority, and power’ (1 Cor 15:24). Consequently, ‘the full course of the Gospel is not and cannot be contained within history, that God had made Christ Lord not only in this age but also in that which is to come’ (Latourette 1953:1474).

1.7 The ‘end of history’?

This is not to be confused with the goal of history. This question arose as the result of the publication of Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992) whose prime thesis was that history as we know it has come to an end with the triumph of liberal democracy, aligned with liberal capitalism, over communism. An immediate question that arises here is that is there nothing beyond liberal democracy? Is this the high point and goal of history? Is this the best we can expect? This is a critical interstice when the practical premise of this theory is the suppression of political creativity of the new powers. What is perhaps a more accurate definition of

Fukuyama's theory is that it refers to the end of a particular concept of history – the 'end point of mankind's [sic] ideological evolution' (Fukuyama 1989:3-18):

A remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy as a system of government had emerged throughout the world over the past few years, as it conquered rival ideologies like hereditary monarchy, fascism, and most recently communism (Fukuyama 1992:xi).

Ideology is a tool of the enemy whereas the liberal democrat stands for freedom, peace and plenty. Fukuyama's *telos* has been achieved: 'there would be no further progress in the development of underlying principles and institutions, because all the really big questions had been settled' (Fukuyama 1992:xii). This constitutes an ideal which 'could not be improved upon' for 'the logic of modern natural science would seem to dictate a universal evolution in the direction of capitalism (Fukuyama 1992:xv). However, this might seem to be too good to be true:

The life of the last man is one of physical security and material plenty ... is the danger that we will be happy on one level, but still dissatisfied with ourselves on another, and hence ready to drag the world back into history with all its wars, injustice and revolution (Fukuyama 1992: 312).

Fukuyama's views are mirrored by such post-modern thinkers as Jean Baudrillard whose discussion of what is called 'endism' was stimulated by the arrival of a new millennium and the threat to the environment as we know it. It is claimed that it is no longer possible to operate with grand narratives for a post-scientific discourse. Baudrillard (1986:23) asserts that history is its own worst enemy: 'It is precisely in history that we are alienated, and if we leave history we also leave alienation (not without nostalgia, it must be said, for that good old drama of subject and object'. The falsity of this approach may be noted in realising that the end of history indicates also the end of the possibility of any political, and other, change, and much more significantly of hope for the poor of the world. But perhaps not just for the poor since all, certainly including the rich suffer from a loss of hope associated with increasing meaninglessness in life. Derrida (1994:85) points to a moral issue in this regard:

For it must be cried out, at a time when some have the audacity to neo-evangelise in the name of the ideal of a liberal democracy that has finally realised itself as the ideal of human history: never have violence, inequality, exclusion, famine, and thus economic oppression affected as many human beings in the history of the earth and of humanity.

Yet, ideology is not just a tool of the enemy but even of the supporters of the 'endist' concept of history which is based in a spirit of triumphalism and even intolerance towards those who choose a way of life other than that of capitalism with its 'unlimited power and authority to exploit and control the lives of defenceless individuals – especially individuals with no alternative whatsoever to turn to in the political lives of their own countries' (Sim 1999:59). The danger of ideology lies in its ability to demonise all alternatives to itself. This has been a timeless problem of both Christian and world history. This view of history is incompatible with a Christian perspective since the dominance of liberal capitalism would be equated with the dawn of the kingdom of God.

1.8 The role of ideology

Costas (1993:121) derives his definition of ideology from the conviction that Christianity cannot exist independently of political involvement. For him, political ideology involves a 'vision of the future, a coherent interpretation of reality, and a programmatic line of action conducive to the reorganisation of society'. Ideology can perform a positive function because it offers faith a 'historical rationality' (Costas 1993:122) that requires flexibility in thought and action. This understanding of history has both negative and positive aspects and so a critical consciousness is vital in order to avoid support of the civil order becoming idolatry. Costas (1993:76) quotes Jenson in this regard: 'evangelical religion becomes in truth the comfort of the oppressors and the opiate of the oppressed', though we also have to take seriously Bredekamp and Ross' (1995:2) view that from the 1830s in South Africa 'Christianity has provided many of its adherents with the strength to confront the many injustices they have suffered'. Such a growing awareness empowers the church to call the social order into question rather than support it uncritically. Cochrane (1987:168ff.) draws on Fierro's (1977) three broad uses of the term 'ideology' in order to highlight the exact nature of the church's responses to political-economic developments. Fierro's first

level in which ideology is a consciously held 'system of representation' involves adopting a 'critical distance' from the dominant ideology which prevails. The second level is unconscious and is conditioned by the material, socio-economic base of society (Fierro 1977:244). Bourdieu's (1977:94 in Comaroff 1985:5) comment is apposite here: 'Ideology is most effective when it is interred in habit and is "beyond the grasp of consciousness"'. The third level involves a conscious attempt to legitimate a specific dominant class and is not amenable to critical change. In this context early twentieth century South African 'church views were most commonly shaped by a position of dominance or at least dependency on the dominant' i.e. a bourgeois capitalist society. Comaroff (1985:10) agrees 'for the ideological forms of nineteenth century Protestantism were derivative of British industrial capitalism, projecting its values of individualism, spiritual democracy, and rational self improvement through labour'. Despite a positive definition of ideology having been offered (cf. Saayman 1991:8-9), the church appears to have operated predominantly at levels two and three of Fierro's broad uses of the term. By and large, it became and remained captivated by the ideology of its sending bodies and cultures, i.e. western European. There is a deep issue of faith here which is ideologically based and is related to the reality of the context. We may conclude that a critique of ideology involves theological commitment, a constant socio-political analysis of society and an element of self critique which will develop a theology of liberation, renewal and transformation which will produce such an eschatological vision of the Kingdom of God that will challenge acceptance of the contemporary political status quo. This brings us to the interface between ecclesiastical and secular history.

1.9 The relation of church history to world history

This is not a contemporary issue for Eusebius (Lawlor & Oulton 1927), and others before him (Bultmann 1957:57), who wrote his *Chronicle* beginning with Abraham and placing it in the wider context of empire: 'With this, world-history in a strict sense comes into being' (Bultmann 1957:57). The decisive incarnation of Christ gives a new meaning to history for 'a precondition of the coming of Christ and the propagation of the Gospel was the empire of Augustus and the "Pax Romana"' (Bultmann 1957:58). Following this theme, Dodd (1938:166) cogently writes:

The material of history is the whole succession of events in time, in which the spontaneity of the human spirit interacts with outward occurrences. ... The biblical record is a source of evidence for secular history dovetailing into the records of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Greece and Rome. But the events are presented in the Bible as a history of the dealings of God with men, interpreted by the eschatological event of the coming of Christ, His death and resurrection.... It is important to bear in mind that the same events enter into sacred and secular history; the events are the same, but they form two distinguishable series.... Since God is the Maker and Ruler of all mankind, who created all things for Himself, and redeemed the world to himself. That is to say, the whole of history is in the last resort sacred history, or *Heilsgeschichte*.

This reflects a similar view from a vastly different perspective: 'Christianity is historical in another and, perhaps, even deeper sense.... It is in time and, therefore, in history that the great drama of Sin and Redemption, the central axis of all Christian thought, is unfolded' (Bloch 1954:4-5). Hence, a teleological view of history was introduced.

It is impossible to write the history of the Christian Church independent of world history because the Christian faith is contextual:

One reason... for our interest in politics, though it must not be regarded as standing by itself, is that we cannot obtain a hearing for the Gospel if it has nothing to say about the struggles and fears, ambitions and evils of which men are most conscious in Africa today – and this applies to the white African as well as the black or brown African. And are they to blame if they turn away from a Gospel which has nothing to say to them in their present historical situation? The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the God of all history, ancient and modern (Dougall 1963:92 in Ross 2006:4).

Further, the Incarnation occurred in a specific context and that context impinged upon and to an extent determined the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth. Further, it is problematic to separate the two in

the light of Jesus' exchange with Pharisees (Mk 12:13-17) concerning the payment of tribute to Caesar. Here Jesus makes it clear that God's authority is not limited but all-embracing and that all history lies within the divine order. A contextual approach to history does, have a certain universality:

Contextualisation places more emphasis on the *specific* contexts of people than on the *universal*. The supposition behind this is the conviction that in being true to one's *particular* locality (the total context), that one can also be fully true to the *universality* of the Christian community (Saayman 1995:191).

Kalu (2005:12) points out several problems relating to the definition of church. First, there are the many images of the Church which appear in scripture; then there is the vast number of different denominations; finally there are the unique claims which Christianity makes of all history proceeding to a God ordained goal. These issues are dealt with in large part by abandoning the term Church, a comparatively recent phenomenon, in favour of Christian (McIntyre 1974) when referring to a specific relationship to history. Referring to McIntyre, Kalu (2005:13) affirms that:

The legacy and contributions of Christian historiography are within the central concepts of historical time; periodisation; history as a process; historical universality; historical contextuality; human-beings as the makers and creators of history; and the coherence and meaningfulness of historical reality.

Kalu (2005:14f) critiques various approaches to Christian historiography. He charges that the institutional model is bound to the development of institutions of faith which strengthen the view of church history as an extension of salvation history and tends towards exclusivism, is susceptible to co-option by the state, promotes denominationalism and becomes divorced from the people. This departs from the biblical notions of church which are relational and even anti-institutional. The church is constituted by the entire people of God – powerful and poor, male and female, powerful and weak.

2 CONCLUSION

Writing contemporary history is a valid exercise which has been given new emphases in recent historiographical thinking. While it

may not have the same permanence as history written at a greater distance from the events portrayed, it can contribute much to our understanding of recent history and enable us to prepare more adequately for the future. The commitment and self discernment of the historian are integral components of this type of historical exercise and these provide a moral basis for historical investigation with integrity.

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