Response to Comments on *History, Theory, Text*

I am honored to have my book discussed in this *Church History* "Forum." I thank the editors for this opportunity and the commentators for their reflections, critiques, and questions. By "history," I mean a discipline of the modern academy, differentiated from "the past," an entity that no longer exists and is available only through its reconstructed traces. By "theory," I mean (with Rey Chow) "the paradigm shift introduced by post-structuralism, whereby the study of language, literature, and cultural forms becomes irrevocably obliged to attend to the semiotic operations involved in the production of meanings, meanings that can no longer be assumed to be natural."[1] In medievalist Paul Strohm's definition, "theory" signals, quite simply, "any standpoint from which we might challenge a text's self-understanding."[2]

How did I—not a theorist—come to write *History, Theory, Text*? For those whose profession is the teaching and writing of theory, the book is an unnecessary rehearsal of past issues. And so it is, for *them*—but not, I think, for *us*, that is, for many readers of *Church History*. Scholarship in the history of Christianity still awaits enrichment by the theoretical currents that intrigued scholars in other Humanities disciplines a dozen or more years ago, as well as by more recent developments.

History, Theory, Text was prompted by the intersection of my institutional and disciplinary settings. At Duke in the late 1980s and early 1990s, colleagues in Literature or French were not interested in antiquity; if professors of early Christianity wished to engage them in conversation, it was necessary to grasp the rudiments of *their* language.[3] Yet in my own department, Religion, as in the larger world of religious studies and theology, there was considerable ignorance of and resistance to theoretical reflection. Nor was poststructuralist theory more warmly received within the larger discipline of history, where social history was still the order of the day. But then, even Mark Vessey, located in a Department of English, confessed (in the session of the ASCH from which this "Forum" emerged) that he, too, slept through the revolution that was sweeping literature departments circa 1990. So inattention was not a problem peculiar to religious studies scholars and historians!

A further stimulus to my interest in theory emerged from the changed situation of early Christian studies in recent decades. The traditional home for the study of patristics was, and in many places still is, the seminary. But with the move of scholars of late ancient Christianity into religious studies departments in colleges and universities, social-historical and cultural approaches to "the Fathers'" writings replaced a more theological orientation; the very word "patristics" came to seem too male, churchly, confessional, and "orthodox." By the late 1970s, scholars of early Christian studies had embraced the social sciences, eagerly appropriating grids and groups, liminality, and (later) network theory as "cutting edge" theoretical tools. If Geertzian interpretive anthropology proposed that cultures could be read like texts,

1. Rey Chow, "The Interruption of Referentiality," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101 (2002): 172.
2. Paul Strohm, "Introduction," *Theory and the Premodern Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, xiv.
3. Now, however, Derrida, Lyotard, Jameson, and Badiou have demonstrated their interest in early Christian texts, and scholars of early Christianity have become contributors to theoretical discussion.

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why should we not read our texts like anthropologists, engaging the "native informants" within?

Yet at the very time that scholars of early Christianity were immersing themselves in the social sciences, other currents had developed within the Humanities that would, belatedly, lead some of us to reconsider our adoption of social-scientific methodology. So eager to appropriate anthropology, we (myself included) did not immediately register that field anthropologists operate with assumptions and methods quite different from those of scholars who study ancient texts. Far from the "face-to-face" contact of the anthropologist, we deal with texts that have broken free from their place of origin and have been read through the centuries by new readers in unexpected contexts. In some cases, the authors and dating of the texts are either unknown or dubiously identified, so that historians' appeal to "context" is less certain. Granted, we rarely face the dilemma posed by the famous sentence standing alone in Nietzsche's notebooks, "I have forgotten my umbrella"; this extreme case nonetheless well illustrates the problem of "context."[4] In my field, not knowing the "original context" of the Nag Hammadi documents, for example, has left room for ample disagreement on the meaning and purpose of that collection.

At the same time, within historical studies Foucault was challenging traditional assumptions. Foucault argued that traditional history understood the document to be the sign of something else, something that ought to be, or to be made, transparent. Reading "through" the document was historians' (he thought illusory) attempt to lend speech to what was not verbal, to see a past that had disappeared.[5] (Patristics scholars also looked "through" the text, Mark Vessey notes—but to discover the saving knowledge within.) Foucault and other theorists proposed that scholars not look "through" texts, but look "at" them.[6] Richard Lim, who is sensitive to this issue, asks how historians are to move "from speaking about the function of events in texts to discussing the so-called historical events themselves"—yet his very language ("so-called historical events") highlights the problem that historical events come to us in textualized form. For historians to discount this claim and write as if we have access to the events themselves mires them in a positivism that they themselves claim to have abandoned.

The commentators have raised many issues, only some of which I can here address. Should I not (Virginia Burrus asks) have extended my argument to cover modern as well as premodern history? Although I left modern history aside in *History, Theory, Text*, I nonetheless think that historians of modernity—those who work in archives and on "documents"—might have something to gain from these discussions. (A good example that illustrates how even historical work based on statistical records is amenable to theoretical

4. As Derrida asks, what is it? "A citation? the beginning of a novel? a proverb? someone else's secretarial archives? an exercise in learning language? the narration of a dream? an alibi? a cryptic code?" and so on (Jacques Derrida, "Limited Inc a b c," in Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 163.
5. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972 [1969]), 6–7, 138.
6. Foucault dramatized his point (and scandalized historians) by suggesting that historians look at texts as historical objects in the same way that they might look at tree trunks (Michel Foucault in *France-Culture*, July 10, 1969).

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analysis is Joan Scott's essay, "A Statistical Representation of Work: *La Statistique de l'industrie à Paris, 1847–1848*," in which Scott critiques historians' unproblematized reliance on statistics as offering "pure" evidence.[7]) I think it is true, as Burrus suggests, that the texts studied by scholars of late ancient Christianity offer especially fitting illustrations of the complexities and ambiguities of historical research, such as those relating to context and authorial intention. Yet numerous points that theorists and theoretically oriented historians raise—such as the social location of the historian, the social and institutional specificity of historiographical production, the conditions that made the text possible, the historian's creation of the object of study, the alterity of the past, the denaturalization of culture, the shift from author to reader—are relevant to the study of the history across various chronological periods.

Does this book signal that I have abandoned my earlier concern for social history? I trust not. I argued not for "excision," but rather for filling in an omission. I proposed that many historians of premodernity had overlooked something that might now be ripe for retrieval. The "high" literary texts of a strongly rhetorical and ideological nature on which we work, I claimed, make them particularly suitable objects for theoretical analysis. To recombine social history, literary theory, and cultural studies approaches—depending on the topic of one's exploration—is admittedly the work of a *bricoleur* who pieces together materials he or she finds at hand. Although this is not a "pure" approach to theory, it well suits the purposes of scholars of late Christian antiquity (and probably most historians).[8] Some texts (for example, those that reveal a triumphalist Christianity's collusion with the Roman Empire) suggest the utility of postcolonial theory—and I ended my book with an excellent example from Andrew Jacobs's *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity*.[9] Other texts that naturalize gender and sexual arrangements (with which Christian history abounds) cry out for a dose of ideology critique that would explore their "strategies of containment" (to use Fredric Jameson's phrase). Still other texts might benefit from a Derridean reading—and so forth. Gabriel Spiegel's notion of "the social logic of the text" offers a particularly fruitful way to merge social, cultural, and intellectual history.[10] Forcing one stripe of theory on all texts is artificial and unhelpful.

7. Joan Wallach Scott, "A Statistical Representation of Work: *La Statistique de l'industrie à Paris, 1847–1848*," in Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 113–38, (notes) 217–21. As an alternative to a positivistic use of statistics by historians, Scott urges an approach that "situates any document in its discursive context and reads it not as a reflection of some external reality but as an integral part of that reality, as a contribution to the definition or elaboration of meaning, to the creation of social relationships, economic institutions, and political structures. Such an approach demands that the historian question the terms in which any document presents itself and thus ask how it contributes to constructing the 'reality' of the past" (137–38).
8. The essays and books by the commentators of this "Forum" provide some excellent examples of how these approaches can be combined, as does Patricia Cox Miller's forthcoming book, *Signifying the Holy: The Corporeal Imagination in Late Antiquity*.
9. Andrew S. Jacobs, *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity*, Divinations: Rereading Late Ancient Religion (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2004.
10. See discussion in *History, Theory, Text*, 162–65.

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Can we retrieve "social history" from "texts," asks Richard Lim? He points to the example of sermons as a form of ancient Christian writing that might lend a favorable opening for the social historian. Sermons pose an interesting case, in that they were originally given orally but then were revised for literary consumption, a process that implies two different (although somewhat overlapping) audiences—how much overlap, however, is a question for which we have few resources that would enable an answer. From sermons, to be sure, historians have made reasonable inferences about context and audience (Lim mentions William Klingshirn's work on Caesarius of Arles's sermons as a good example.[11]) Yet the issue becomes more complex when we take the case of Augustine's sermons, for here we are faced not just with the problem of the textualizing of an originally oral presentation. Augustine delivered "low-level," brief sermons, composed of short, choppy sentences filled with imperatives ("be good," "never sleep with anyone but your wife"), but also extended, rhetorically ornate, and subjunctive-ridden ones—better thought of as treatises—on the niceties of Trinitarian doctrine. Were the latter actually given as sermons, even in more rudimentary form? And if so, do the two types of sermons presume different audiences? How did hearers from different social classes receive them? We have limited evidence to answer that question: not only has the oral been textualized, but we often have only "one side." Nonetheless, we should try when possible to deal with audience and reception. Here, the importance of reception theory and reception history is evident—topics that have been engagingly explored by Mark Vessey and Kim Haines-Eitzen in their own work. And, as Virginia Burrus adds, scholars of early Christianity might similarly analyze other forms of writing (hagiography, martyrology, church histories, and I would add, legal texts) to see how fruitful might be the intersection of critical textual analysis and social history. A good example, alluded to by Burrus, is Derek Krueger's *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East.*[12]

Another clarification: I intended the term "the new intellectual history" to *include,* not *exclude,* postcolonial theory and material culture studies—the "new" was to indicate that the old "history of ideas" has been refurbished. Since I do not wish to sacrifice a political edge in my terminology, as Virginia Burrus fears "new intellectual history" might suggest, perhaps I should opt for another phrase, such as "the new cultural history." As Mark Vessey notes, literary scholars *assumed* that cultural studies was an extension of "poststructuralist textology"—and perhaps we can as well. (Nonetheless, I like the term "new intellectual history" in that it resonates with Gareth Stedman Jones's claim that history "is an entirely intellectual operation which takes place in the present and in the head."[13]) Although historians of modernity (along with Moses Finley) might argue that scholars of late antiquity, lacking "docu-

11. William E. Klingshirn, *Caesarius of Arles:The Making of a Christian Community in Late Antique Gaul,* Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).
12. Derek Krueger, *Writing and Holiness: The Practice of Authorship in the Early Christian East,* Divinations: Re-reading Late Ancient Religion (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).
13. Gareth Stedman Jones, "From Historical Sociology to Theoretic History," *British Journal of Sociology* 27 (1976): 296.

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ments," are not really historians, but literary scholars,[14] the renewed popularity of intellectual or cultural history suggests that scholars of premodernity might again claim a stake in the historical profession.

As an example of what "the new intellectual history" might include (as mentioned by both Mark Vessey and Kim Haines-Eitzen), we can note recent work on "the history of the book" by scholars such as Roger Chartier (as well as by Vessey and Haines-Eitzen themselves): here, intellectual history, social history, and interest in material culture meet. Haines-Eitzen's examples of how theory illuminates issues surrounding the transmission of early Christian literature provide excellent illustrations of the utility of theory for students of antiquity.

I did not explicitly discuss the "new historicism" in *History, Theory, Text,* because I think that this label seems better suited to literature scholars, not historians, the latter of whom sometimes find "new historicism" rather weak on the historical front. To be sure, the journal *Representations,* which promulgated "new historicist" approaches, has published many outstanding, indeed groundbreaking, essays by historians. And *Church History,* it bears mentioning, has added "culture" to its subtitle, which just goes to show "how far things have gone."

Is not theory "elitist," Richard Lim asks, in its concentration on literary and philosophical texts that are inaccessible to many? The charge of "elitism" has been leveled at intellectual history ever since social history came to dominate history departments. Did not "low" culture furnish more interesting (not to speak of more "politically correct") subject matter than "high" culture, as proved by the popularity of microhistory? In recent years, as Lim remarks, the rise of "public history" urges an approach to the discipline that is accessible to audiences who do not read "theory." Why—given history's dwindling popularity among undergraduates—should we render history even less accessible by introducing theory?[15]

These are interesting questions of pedagogy, but I think they do not touch the issue of whether a theoretically informed history contributes to intellectual elitism. In our teaching and writing we *already* operate with a hierarchy of interpretive practices: what religious studies professors tell their freshmen classes about "J, E, D, and P" differs considerably from the version they discuss in a graduate seminar; the papers we read at specialized professional associations are not those we give to local public audiences. "Theory" has not introduced a new note here.

There are other responses to the charge of elitism as well. Dominick LaCapra, for example, argues that "high" literary and philosophical texts quite often carry radically subversive messages.[16] Moreover, I would argue that even for undergraduates, postcolonial theory illuminates questions of race, imperialism, gender, while ideology critique can usefully interrupt the representation of women, sexuality, gender, and "hierarchy" in the texts we teach. And debates throughout American history over the Declaration of

14. See discussion of ancient historian Moses Finley's argument in *History, Theory, Text,* 166, 168–69.
15. Similar political concerns fueled the attack of humanistically inspired British Marxist historians on French poststructuralist (also Leftist) historians as elitists, as I detail in *History, Theory, Text* (79–85).
16. See discussion in *History, Theory, Text,* 126–29.

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Independence and the Constitution make evident how relevant theoretical questions of "original intent" and "original context" still are. (What are the political implications of "all men are created equal"? Can the Constitution be understood as guaranteeing a "right to privacy"?) Here, questions of interpretation raised by Derrida, Foucault, and others some decades ago are still highly relevant to our wider public life.

As for abandoning interdisciplinarity in the rush for literary theory, I think this is a false concern. We might rather wonder, with Mark Vessey, whether the intellectual boundaries between disciplines have not already so collapsed that we should abandon the attempt to prop up the fences so as to reach across them. To be sure, administrators like "disciplines," they even like "interdisciplinarity" (highly rewarded in some quarters), but these are organizational, not intellectual, matters. I think that we should continue to undertake our work with whichever "mental tools" seem most helpful.

I have not answered all my interlocutors' questions and critiques. I hope, however, that our reflections will spur some spirited conversations among the readers of *Church History*.

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