HAS ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY LOST THE PLOT?*

by SARAH FOOT

The Ecclesiastical History Society's fiftieth anniversary conference provides an opportunity both to celebrate the achievements of the society and to reflect on the current state of the discipline. In asking whether church historians have lost the plot, I do not mean to question colleagues' reason and sanity, but to wonder whether those of us who work in this field might have forgotten some of the objectives and principles that once distinguished our endeavour. Has ecclesiastical history lost its sense of purpose, its place at the heart of historical enterprise, to the extent that it has become not just marginalized and peripheral, but essentially irrelevant both to academic study and wider society?

Church history no longer enjoys the standing it once held within the historical profession. Over the last half-century, the number of established chairs of ecclesiastical history in British universities has dwindled from ten to two – the Regius chair in Oxford, and the Dixie Professorship in Cambridge.[1] Several contemporary historians who hold personal chairs in history have assumed titles that reflect their specialism in church history, but those posts are particular to the individual scholars, and will not necessarily be filled by ecclesiastical historians when the present incumbents retire. Church history might be expected to have a more secure status within departments of theology and in seminaries training ordinands for future ministry, but the redesignation of some university theology departments as schools of theology and religious studies has sometimes involved the loss of posts in church history (more properly seen as falling within history). We might want to ponder the implications of that for the future of

* I gave an earlier version of this essay as my inaugural lecture in Oxford on 18 May 2011: 'Thinking with Christians: Doing Ecclesiastical History in a Secular Age'.

[1] David Bebbington, 'Response: The History of Ideas and the Study of Religion', in Alister Chapman, John Coffey and Brad S. Gregory, eds, *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion* (Notre Dame, IN, 2009), 240–57, at 243–4.

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church history, particularly against the background of the increasingly secular society in which we live.

Essentially, this address will explore why ecclesiastical history has become marginal to the contemporary understanding of history as a discipline. Perhaps we have just reached that point on the natural curve in the fortunes of our subject when it has fallen temporarily out of favour at the expense of a rise in prominence of other areas of study. All subjects or periods within any discipline naturally endure spells in the doldrums, when they seem to lie away from the mainstream, divorced from current fashionable trends; not all aspects of a discipline can be cutting-edge, innovative and exciting at the same time. But it does matter that those periods of relative downturn in one area do not pass entirely unnoticed, that complacency does not prevent critical introspection. And that seems to me precisely what is happening in church history: the crisis in ecclesiastical history is that there is no crisis. Or at least, there does not seem to me to be enough anxiety about the subject in Britain or within our society; elsewhere in Europe and perhaps especially in North America the matter is rather different. My remarks will, however, be directed to the British case.

Defining the Plot

To accuse today's church historians of having lost their sense of direction, to assert that they have lost the plot, is to presume that there was once a plot that shaped the writing of the history of the church that has since been forgotten. From its inception there was *indeed* an overarching narrative that conditioned church history; its plot was entirely obvious and readily understood both by those who wrote such histories and their audiences. From Eusebius onwards, historians of the church had a clear story to narrate, traceable back to the time of the apostles and to the narratives of the Book of Acts. They told the story of the salvation of humanity as revealed through the growth and development of the institution (latterly institutions) devoted to the worship of the Christian God, the church (or, in a modern world, churches). As the *Catholic Encyclopaedia* defines it, 'ecclesiastical history is the scientific investigation and the methodical description of the temporal development of the Church considered as an institution founded by Jesus Christ

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and guided by the Holy Ghost for the salvation of mankind'.[2] Essentially, if we take a generous definition of scientific investigation and method, that is what Eusebius thought he was writing, and also what the first historian of the English, the Venerable Bede, believed he wrote in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed around 731.[3] Bede provided a clear account of the salvation of his own people; his central plot revolved around the narrative of the conversion of the separate English kingdoms and the creation of the first institutions of a national church. A major sub-plot of his history lay in the consequent invention of an identity for that English people as a single nation in the sight of God, a story that later generations of especially English Protestants would also prove keen to develop.[4] We need not doubt that patristic, medieval and early modern church historians, whether tracing universal narratives of the growth of ecclesiastical institutions or looking more parochially at the church or churches of their own regions, understood clearly the larger, overarching framework of salvation-history into which they set their accounts. The same conceptions and clear narrative understanding underpinned the work of those great monastic scholars, the Bollandists and the Maurists, who first began the collection and editing of sources for the study of saints, churches, monastic orders and ecclesiastical institutions.[5] To David Knowles, the great Maurist Jean Mabillon (1632–1707) 'stands next to the Venerable Bede, whom he resembles so closely in mind and character, as an embodiment of the ideal monk-scholar'.[6]

When history became a professional discipline in the nineteenth century, ecclesiastical history lay at its heart. Indeed, to Victorian

[2] *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, *s.v.* 'Ecclesiastical history', online at: <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07365a.htm>, accessed 2 April 2011.

[3] Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, transl. G. A. Williamson, rev. edn Andrew Louth, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth, 1989); *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. and transl. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, OMT (Oxford, 1969).

[4] Patrick Wormald, 'The Venerable Bede and the "Church of the English" ', in Geoffrey Rowell, ed., *The English Religious Tradition and the Genius of Anglicanism* (Wantage, 1992), 13–32.

[5] C. N. L Brooke, 'Problems of the Church Historian', in C. W. Dugmore and Charles Duggan, eds, *Studies in Church History* 1 (London, 1964), 1–19, at 1.

[6] David Knowles, 'The Maurists', in idem, *Great Historical Enterprises* (London, 1963), 33–62, at 50.

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minds the study of history and the study of ecclesiastical history amounted in essence to the same endeavour. In the peroration to his inaugural lecture in Oxford as Regius Professor, not of ecclesiastical but of modern history, William Stubbs asserted:

> There is ... in the Study of living History, a gradual approximation to a consciousness that we are growing into a perception of the workings of the Almighty Ruler of the world; ... that we are coming to see, not only in His ruling of His Church in her spiritual character, but in His overruling of the world ... a hand of justice and mercy, a hand of progress and order, a kind and wise disposition ... bringing continually that which is good.[7]

The chair of ecclesiastical history, which Stubbs long coveted without success, had been established by Queen Victoria in 1842, together with a chair in pastoral theology as part of an attempt to improve the education of the mid-nineteenth-century Anglican clergy. The holders were to be in priest's orders and held (and indeed still hold) their posts in conjunction with canonries at Christ Church. As Thomas Gaisford, then dean of Christ Church, wrote to the archbishop of Canterbury, William Howley, in October 1840: 'the establishment of a professor of Ecclesiastical history would, I apprehend, meet with the approbation of all – and the duties such a professor would have to discharge need little or no specification'.[8]

Cambridge took longer to create its own chair in church history, with the establishment of the Dixie Professorship of ecclesiastical history in 1874. Its first holder, Mandell Creighton, had no doubts as to the nature of ecclesiastical history, or the means of studying it.[9] In his inaugural lecture he asserted unambiguously: 'One point cannot be too clearly stated ... : science knows

7 William Stubbs, 'Inaugural Lecture, 7 February 1867', in idem, *Seventeen Lectures on the Study of Mediaeval and Modern History and Kindred Subjects* (Oxford, 1900), 1–28, at 27.

8 Copy of letter from Dean Gaisford to Archbishop Howley, 28 October 1840, preserved in Oxford, Bodl., University Archives, MS N.W.21.5, 'Memoranda respecting the Professorships of Pastoral Theology and Eccl. History and the Statute De Disciplina Theologica', fol. 15 (in the handwriting of T. Gaisford, dean of Christ Church).

9 Frank Stubbings, *Forty-Nine Lives: An Anthology of Portraits of Emmanuel Men* (Cambridge, 1983), 37.

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no difference of methods, and that ecclesiastical history must be pursued in exactly the same way, and with exactly the same spirit as any other branch of history. The aim of the investigator is simply the discovery of truth.'[10] He admired the historical turn taken by theology in his own day, but saw no need for church history to turn theological. He did, however, deplore the restricted nature of English views of church history (especially the failure to take the Roman church seriously after the Reformation and the narrow view church historians took of Nonconformity). He intended to work on a wider period 'to kindle a greater interest in the nature and influence of ecclesiastical organisation as a factor in European civilisation'.[11] For, he argued, 'till the end of the seventeenth century, ecclesiastical history is the surest guide to the comprehension of European history as a whole'.[12] In a later lecture delivered in 1887, he went further in arguing that ecclesiastical history could not safely be studied on purely ecclesiastical lines: 'The history of the Church cannot at any time be severed from the history of the nation, nor can ecclesiastical questions be considered apart from the background of the national life in which they were inextricably interwoven'.[13] His successor, H. M. Gwatkin, agreed: 'ecclesiastical history is simply the spiritual side of universal history'.[14]

For all these men, the study of church history did more than help its students to understand the present-day Christian churches,[15] or to provide time-depth to current doctrinal or ecclesiological controversies. Rather, at least in Britain, it explained the origins and the workings of the Protestant state.[16] It is not surprising that so many prominent church historians were experts in the medieval church when the history of the medieval church held so clear a

[10] Mandell Creighton, 'The Teaching of Ecclesiastical History' (Inaugural lecture delivered in Cambridge, 23 January 1885), in Louise Creighton, ed., *Historical Lectures and Addresses* (London, 1903), 1–28, at 5.

[11] Ibid. 2–3.

[12] Ibid. 15.

[13] Mandell Creighton, 'The Church and the Nation' (paper delivered at the Wolverhampton Church Congress, 1887), in Louise Creighton, ed., *The Church and the Nation: Charges and Addresses* (London, 1901), 156–65, at 156.

[14] Michael Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism* (Cambridge 2005), 67; see also H. M. Gwatkin, *The Meaning of Ecclesiastical History: An Inaugural Lecture* (Cambridge, 1891), 8.

[15] Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian History: The Challenge of the Churches' Past* (Oxford, 2005), 3.

[16] Bentley, *Modernizing*, 46–9.

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place in an overt grand narrative of state-making. When Zachary N. Brooke (father of this society's distinguished former president, C. N. L. Brooke) assumed the professorship of medieval history in Cambridge in 1944, he noted that although he had only one predecessor in that newly established chair (C. W. Previté-Orton, appointed in 1937), medieval studies in Cambridge had long been sustained by the Dixie professors of ecclesiastical history; he thus named Creighton, Gwatkin and Whitney as his intellectual forebears.[17]

We should further recall that all these men, the holders of the Dixie as well as the Oxford Regius chair, were clergymen. In Britain and elsewhere in Europe, church history was largely written from the inside, usually from a specific confessional perspective.[18] The most visible change in ecclesiastical history since its late nineteenth-century glory is thus its increasing laicization, even though there remain, of course, prominent and significant historians of the church in monastic orders and among ordained ministers, many of them active members of the Ecclesiastical History Society. To explore how ecclesiastical history has changed since the Victorian era, we need to consider it against the background of the shifts made in the wider discipline of history over the second half of the twentieth century.

Shifts in the Historical Discipline since the 1950s

Before the middle years of the twentieth century, church history saw itself essentially as a form of institutional history, different from other historical disciplines within theological studies (such as the history of doctrine, historical theology, or the history of liturgy), and a specific strand within historical studies through its concern with the institutions of the Christian church (or churches). This society's founder, Clifford Dugmore, defined the business of church historians: '[t]o trace the origin and development of Christian ideas, customs, dogmas, liturgies, laws and institutions'.[19] Proper subjects for church historians to explore thus

[17] Z. N. Brooke, *The Prospects of Medieval History: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered at Cambridge 17 October 1944* (Cambridge, 1944), 3.

[18] Olwen Hufton, 'What is Religious History Now?', in David Cannadine, ed., *What is History Now?* (London, 2002), 57–79, at 58.

[19] Kings College London, College Archive, K/PP097, box 2: C. W. Dugmore, 'Ecclesiastical History No Soft Option', 25; quoted by Stella Fletcher, *A Very* Agreeable

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included the papacy and papal government; monastic orders and individual monastic houses; bishops, priests and ministers; conventicles, synods and church councils (the 'pitched battles of ecclesiastical history', as A. P. Stanley described them).[20] The first presidents of the Ecclesiastical History Society all conformed to this conventional understanding of the nature of the subject. David Knowles was a noted historian of monasticism, especially of his own Benedictine order; Dugmore himself (trained in biblical studies), wrote on the Reformation; and Stanley Greenslade's expertise lay in the patristic period.[21] E. F. Jacob's work on the later Middle Ages extended far beyond church history, but his publications on ecclesiastical history included a four-volume edition of the register of the fifteenth-century archbishop of Canterbury, Henry Chichele.[22] Several of the early themed volumes of the society's proceedings, Studies in Church History, reflected the same sort of conception of the nature of the field: *The Province of York* (SCH 4); *The Mission of the Church and the Propagation of the Faith* (SCH 5); *Councils and Assemblies* (SCH 6).[23]

In the mid-twentieth century our discipline had a clear sense of its own distinctive identity and purpose. As it had been practised and understood in the generation before the founding of the Ecclesiastical History Society, the plot narrated by church history involved less the story of ideas, but rather the narrative of the development of the organization, the body of Christ, its growth, leadership and conflicts; one of its strongest elements lay in its diachronic coherence, the possibility it offered for cross-

Society: The Ecclesiastical History Society 1961–2011 (Southampton, 2011), 6. Dugmore's lecture was later published by SPCK: *Ecclesiastical History No Soft Option: An Inaugural Lecture* (London, 1959).

[20] A. P. Stanley, *Three Introductory Lectures on the Study of Ecclesiastical History* (Oxford, 1857), 39.

[21] David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England: A History of its Development from the Times of St Dunstan to the Fourth Lateran Council, 940–1216* (Cambridge, 1940); C. W. Dugmore, *The Mass and the English Reformers* (London, 1959); Stanley Greenslade, *Schism in the Early Church* (London, 1953).

[22] E. F. Jacob, *The Register of Henry Chichele, Archbishop of Canterbury 1414–43*, 4 vols, CYS 42, 45–7 (Oxford, 1937–47); *Essays in the Conciliar Epoch* (Manchester, 1943); cf. also his contribution to the Oxford History of England, *The Fifteenth Century, 1399–1485* (Oxford, 1961); or *Henry V and the Invasion of France* (London, 1947).

[23] The first volume of SCH included an essay by Christopher Brooke reflecting on the problems of the church historian, covering many of the same issues raised by this paper: see n. 5 above.

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temporal comparisons.[24] In England, as we have seen, that narrative was closely intermeshed with a story about the creation of a Protestant nation. Young scholars determined to work in the field of church history came to their research projects with well-established and clearly understood notions of the sorts of tasks on which they would be set to work. Peter Brown tells of his interview as a potential graduate student (in the mid-1950s) in Oxford by the then Regius Professor of Modern History, V. H. Galbraith. Galbraith's advice, he reports, was 'brusque and to the point. Vigorously poking the coal fire in his rooms in Oriel College, he barely looked up at me: "Brown. [he said] So you wish to do ecclesiastical history? Have you got a bishop? Everyone must have a bishop, you know. Go and read his register"'.[25] Brown, of course, followed that advice tangentially, by choosing to work first on that great bishop of Hippo, St Augustine, but not at all as Galbraith might have imagined.

Yet even at the point of the creation of the Ecclesiastical History Society, and while the first Summer Meetings took place in Herbert Butterfield's Peterhouse, the wider discipline of history had begun to change in ways which would come in time to threaten the securities on which ecclesiastical history had formerly rested. We might wonder whether there was something slightly defensive about the creation of an ecumenical organization devoted to the study of the church at the start of the 1960s. After all, as Stella Fletcher shows clearly in her history of this society, a number of organizations devoted to the history of different denominations among the English churches already existed: a flourishing non-denominational Scottish Church History Society had functioned since 1922; the American Society of Church History dated back to 1888, and the French Société d'histoire ecclésiastique de la France to 1914.[26] Looking for positive motives for the creation

[24] David Brakke, 'The Early Church in North America: Late Antiquity, Theory and the History of Christianity', *ChH* 71 (2002), 473–91, at 475. That has been one of the guiding principles underpinning the Society's annual publication, Studies in Church History, whose volumes survey particular themes across the two millennia of ecclesiastical history.

[25] Peter Brown, 'What's in a name?', lecture inaugurating the Centre for Late Antiquity in Oxford, online at: <http://www.ocla.ox.ac.uk/pdf/brown_what_in_name.pdf>, accessed 15 April 2011.

[26] Fletcher, *A Very* Agreeable *Society*, 2.

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of the Ecclesiastical History Society, Fletcher has rightly stressed the optimism of the period, and especially the hopes then vested in ecumenism. She has located the society's foundation in 1961 in a series of related contexts: the launch of the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* by Dugmore in 1950; F. L. Cross's invention of the International Conference on Patristic Studies in 1951; and the creation of the international commission on ecclesiastical history within the Comité International des Sciences Historiques.[27] In retrospect, however, one could also ask if the making of this society also (perhaps unconsciously) represented a last ditch attempt to save ecclesiastical history from the external threats presented both by changes within history and by the increasing secularization of lay society.

While it is possible to identify significant developments in ecclesiastical history in the first half of the twentieth century, especially as the field moved away from the constrictions imposed by purely confessional approaches, it faced both greater opportunities for evolution, as the wider discipline of history itself started to change from the late 1950s onwards, and also potentially greater problems. These would come to dent the confidence with which church history had once been pursued. The declining role of the church and of other forms of organized Christianity in Britain and elsewhere in the West across this period constitutes one element that helps to inform, and also a key context by which to explain, both methodological and disciplinary changes. It is striking that the now celebrated special number of the *Times Literary Supplement* entitled 'New Ways in History' which Geoffrey Barraclough put together in 1966 had much to say about new methods in history (for example, in Keith Thomas's essay on the tools and the job[28]), about the geographical expansion of the discipline outside the West, and about the relevance of technology to historians, but it had *no* essay on religion or the history of the churches.[29]

Let us look more closely at how those changes within history affected students of the history of the church. At first, moves

[27] Ibid. 3.

[28] Keith Thomas, 'The Tools and the Job', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 April 1966, 275.

[29] This is the more surprising given Barraclough's own distinguished contributions to church history, especially papal history: cf. G. Barraclough, *The Medieval Papacy* (London, 1968).

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towards the social, increased interest in studying history from below (looking not at kings, bishops and nobles but at people of lesser status, women as well as men), and the new availability of the sources and tools with which to do so, played readily into the hands of a new generation of church historians. Quantification and developing statistical methods opened routes into reconsideration of the economy of the church, for example Christopher Hill's *Economic Problems of the Church* (1956), Ian Kershaw's study of Bolton Priory, Edward Miller's work on Ely and that of his pupil, Edmund King, on Peterborough.[30] Similarly, Alan D. Gilbert's study of *Religion and Society in Industrial England* attempted a statistical analysis of the rise of Nonconformity.[31] Quite how far one could hope to get in testing the religious enthusiasms of past populations by counting, measuring or weighing evidence of their participation in religious life, for example through analysis of the quantities of wax candles offered to churches, or the numbers of new members who joined religious confraternities over a given period, is less clear.[32] Various *annaliste* efforts in this sphere were less than successful.[33]

Other ecclesiastical historians found new routes into the exploration of religious behaviour in the localities and from the perspective of the laity. Archbishop William Temple's decision to open diocesan registers to historical enquiry and the relocation of those materials from ecclesiastical archives to newly established county record offices provided a plethora of material; local studies in different periods of ecclesiastical (and secular) history

[30] Christopher Hill, *Economic Problems of the Church: From Archbishop Whitgift to the Long Parliament* (Oxford, 1956); Ian Kershaw, *Bolton Priory: The Economy of a Northern Monastery, 1286–1325* (Oxford, 1973); Edward Miller, *The Abbey & Bishopric of Ely: The Social History of an Ecclesiastical Estate from the Tenth Century to the Early Fourteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1951); Edmund King, *Peterborough Abbey, 1086–1310: A Study in the Land Market* (Cambridge, 1973).

[31] Alan D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change, 1740–1914* (London, 1976).

[32] For a positive assessment of the value of such work, see Miri Rubin, 'Religion', in Ulinka Rublack, ed., *A Concise Companion to History* (Oxford, 2011), 317–30, at 318, quoting Pierre Chaunu, *La Mort à Paris XVI^e, XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris, 1978), and Jacques Chiffoleau, *La Comptabilité de l'au-delà: les hommes, la mort et la religion dans la région d'Avignon à la fin du Moyen Âge* (Rome, 1980).

[33] François Furet, 'Quantitative Methods in History', in Jacques Le Goff and Pierre Nora, eds, *Constructing the Past: Essays in Historical Methodology* (Cambridge, 1985), 12–27, at 18.

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thus abounded in the 1960s and 1970s.[34] Many of today's leading church historians began their careers with such projects, including a number of our former presidents: Patrick Collinson encompassed a number of localities in his survey of the Elizabethan puritan movement, while Bill Sheils explored puritans in the diocese of Peterborough. In later historical periods we may discern a similar move towards the local in studies of Nonconformity; first, histories of individual Nonconformist groups, such as the four-volume *History of Methodism* edited by Rupert Davies and Gordon Rupp, or Clyde Binfield's work on Congregationalists, and latterly the more global work of David Bebbington on Evangelicalism from the eighteenth century onwards.[35] Nonetheless one may here, too, discern a parallel tendency towards increasing localism, one reflected in some of the papers in SCH 16, *The Church in Town and Countryside*.

Relevant of course to these changing intellectual currents were various shifts in contemporary religious culture. The churches began to articulate new attitudes towards the laity in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council; all denominations started to encourage the full, conscious and active participation of Christian people in the liturgy, which may have helped inspire interest in lay devotion in earlier eras. Similarly, contemporary ecclesiastical debates about the participation of women in ordained ministry found reflection in historical enquiry into the roles taken by women in the early church and in later periods. Claire Cross's choice of theme in 1989, 'Women in the Church', thus proved highly topical. Yet I should concede that only in retrospect did I fully appreciate how much my study during the 1990s of the significance of women in Anglo-Saxon monasticism related directly to my engagement in debates about the place of women in the Church of England.[36] For all the public attention afforded to such matters, however, in contemporary society, religion – or at least church attendance – declined sharply. As Simon Green has shown recently, this represented no

[34] Christopher Haigh, 'A. G. Dickens and the English Reformation', *HR* 77 (2004), 24–38, at 29–30.

[35] David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London, 1988); idem, *The Dominance of Evangelicalism: The Age of Spurgeon and Moody* (Leicester, 2005).

[36] The fruits of that research were published as Sarah Foot, *Veiled Women: The Disappearance of Nuns from Anglo-Saxon England*, 2 vols (Aldershot, 2000).

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new development but one traceable back to the 1920s.[37] Further, Frank Prochaska has demonstrated how governmental reforms in the provision of education and welfare in the 1940s removed from the churches much of their role in social, educational and charitable provision, thus undermining the associational citizenship that went with church membership.[38] In this secular, or at least desacralized, environment, historians generally treated religious belief as one among many social or political phenomena, and not necessarily one that needed handling with especial care.[39]

Paralleling the focus on the local, and especially the laity in the localities, we may discern a growing historical interest in the 1970s and beyond in those who were outside the orthodox religious mainstream, and more generally in popular piety – lived religion – as opposed to the practices of elites or of ecclesiastical institutions. W. R. Ward chose 'Popular Belief and Practice' for his presidency in 1970–1. Stella Fletcher sees this conference as a watershed, 'privileging the popular over the elite and coming as close as the EHS ventured to the Marxist interests of that era'.[40] Eamon Duffy's approach to the same topic in 2004 – 'Elite and Popular Religion' – took a rather different line, urging consideration of the ways in which different expressions of piety have interacted rather than seeing them in opposition to one another.[41] Here the society responded outwardly to moves elsewhere in the discipline of history, but perhaps without fully recognizing just how secular historians had begun to talk about the religion of the people. From the 1970s onwards, popular religion came increasingly, as John Van Engen has argued, to be 'imagined and presented as an autonomous religious outlook, ancient in origin and belonging to the people', a phenomenon 'which could be explored as a set of indigenous sacred practices overtly or covertly resistant to the Christianising forces of the elite'; it may, he suggests, have owed something to Gramscian visions of resistance from below, and this new approach profitably opened up new ways of thinking

37 Simon Green, *The Passing of Protestant England: Secularisation and Social Change c.1920–1960* (Cambridge, 2011).

38 Frank Prochaska, *Christianity and Social Service in Modern Britain* (Oxford, 2008).

39 John Van Engen, 'The Future of Medieval Church History', *ChH* 71 (2002), 492–522, at 496–7.

40 Fletcher, *A Very* Agreeable *Society*, 34.

41 Ibid. 103.

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about superstition and above all heresy. Freed from the confessional perspectives that had formerly dominated its study, heresy represented an ideal lens through which to explore manifestations of popular religious sentiment and fervour.[42] Now heresy could become – as it did perhaps most powerfully in Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou* (1975) – just another way of expressing the overlapping beliefs and practices of medieval peasant life; as Le Roy Ladurie put it: 'the sacred *is* only the social'.[43] R. I. Moore also developed a Durkheimian reading of the church's response to heresy (and other forms of deviance) classically articulated in his *The Formation of a Persecuting Society* (1987). Little of such trends emerged in the society's first venture into this area in 1971 with *Heresy, Schism and Religious Practice*, but later volumes of Studies in Church History (*Persecution and Toleration*, *Elite and Popular Religion* and *Discipline and Diversity*) testify more to a shifting agenda.

After the social turn, anthropology has perhaps had the greatest measurable impact on church history and the wider study of religion over the last five decades.[44] In a seminal article on the Balinese cock fight, Clifford Geertz offered a methodology for the analysis of culture as a signifying system, demonstrating how a dense web of symbols and meanings could be unravelled and decoded to discover and give meaning to complex cultural systems as well as individuals' expressions and actions.[45] Influenced by Geertz and also by the work of the French *Annales* school (itself drawing on Durkheim, Mauss and later Lévi-Strauss) as well as the growth of interest in *mentalités*, a school of historians emerged who looked not at the church and its institutions but at religion as a social and cultural phenomenon. By studying religion comparatively and with close reference to folklore, they found it possible to analyse a popular, oral and customary religious culture, quite distanced from the clerical and bookish expressions of formal, institutional

[42] Van Engen, 'The Future', 498.

[43] E. Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou: Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294–1324* (London, 1978), 352; quoted in Peter Biller, 'Through a Glass Darkly: Seeing Medieval Heresy', in Peter Linehan and Janet L. Nelson, eds, *The Medieval World* (London, 2001), 308–26, at 320.

[44] Keith Thomas, 'History and Anthropology', *P&P*, no. 24 (1963), 3–24.

[45] Clifford Geertz, 'Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight', in idem, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York, 1973), 412–53; see also Megan Vaughan, 'Culture', in Rublack, ed., *Concise Companion to History*, 227–45, at 233–4.

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Christianity which used to be the preserve of the church historian.[46] Keith Thomas's *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (1971) used anthropological techniques to bring to light manifestations of popular religion reflecting widespread belief in magic and popular superstition both before and after the Reformation, drawing a distinction between elite and popular cultures with widely divergent religious views. For medievalists, opening up hagiography, accounts of the lives of saints, and miracle stories to new modes of enquiry, the popular and the cultural became evident.[47] Not everyone followed with such enthusiasm into these waters. John Bossy's inaugural lecture at the University of York, 'Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim', offered a sophisticated and linguistically turned critique of the Durkheimian proposition on which so much of this anthropologically inspired history has turned, that the object of religion is society.[48]

Amid these forces – the moves to the local, the popular, and even to the superstitious or frankly deviant – church history at first continued to thrive. For nothing in these methodological shifts to look at history from below, through sociological or anthropological lenses, threatened the basis on which all ecclesiastical history must rest: the inspired narrative of the origins and development of the churches since the days of Christ. Stella Fletcher has written engagingly about their impact on the society during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, and argued that during that period there was no dramatic difference in how the EHS 'did' history. Although not unaware of methodological shifts, she suggested that 'EHS stalwarts tended not to be much exercised by the latest academic fashions and many of them saw no reason to change'.[49] Flirtation with 'deliberately inclusive' themes such as 'Religion and humanism' and 'Religion and national identity' did not prove universally popular. Fletcher quotes James Cameron's insistence that the EHS should remain committed to specifically ecclesiastical history and

[46] Ibid. 235; see also Rubin, 'Religion', 317–8.

[47] e.g. Jean-Claude Schmitt, *The Holy Greyhound: Guinefort, Healer of Children since the Thirteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1983); Miri Rubin, Corpus Christi: *The Eucharist in Late Medieval Culture* (Cambridge, 1999); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (London, 1980).

[48] John Bossy, 'Some Elementary Forms of Durkheim', *P&P*, no. 95 (1982), 3–22.

[49] Fletcher, *A Very* Agreeable *Society*, 92.

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resist the temptation to widen its remit to the history of religion.[50] Anthony Fletcher's conference on 'Gender and Christian religion' in 1996 might have started a move towards trendier, more fashionable topics, and Stuart Mews with his sociological training also had more sympathy for innovative approaches to church history,[51] but little in the following years points to a fundamental shift in method.

Meanwhile, however, in the late 1970s or early 1980s something had happened that profoundly disrupted the securities on which ecclesiastical history had always rested: the epistemological shift now loosely described as postmodernism. Most succinctly defined as a disbelief in meta- or grand narratives, postmodernism argues not against the notion that stories can be told, but against the confident understanding that one can construct overarching narratives of grand themes: the rise of a nation, the history of liberty or the story of Christianity. Rather, it argues, there must be plural narratives, multiple truths; there is no single Authorized Version, but many discourses about the past. All branches of history found the postmodern challenge to the availability of a true past that their careful, trained, disciplined investigation could uncover painful and difficult to reconcile; Marxist historiography, which depends on a different grand narrative, has struggled particularly. But to argue that there is no past there to recover – a corollary of relativizing epistemological claims – challenges most profoundly the foundations on which ecclesiastical history has always rested, and threatens to unpick the endeavour itself, unravelling the plot that lies at its heart.

Ecclesiastical historians responded to these challenges in a variety of ways, turning to literacy to explore modes of religious discourse; redefining the place of women in religious culture and using gender as a tool to analyse masculinity too; thinking about the body and asceticism, images and the ordering and use of sacred space, and the performance of religious ritual. In this ever more culturally turned understanding of the nature of historical enquiry, church history seems to have lost a good deal of what once made it distinctive, especially its former interest in the institutional context that regulates and sets limits to religious behaviour.

[50] Ibid. 93.
[51] Ibid.

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Instead, it has allowed itself to be subsumed into cultural studies, in which religious behaviour has less to do with the sacred than with the construction of identity, or to become part of the wider – and extremely vibrant – branch of the study of religion. Instead of studying the church, historians began increasingly to look at Christianity in comparative focus beside other world religions, and indeed to talk not of Christianity, but of Christianities. Consider, for example, the recently published nine-volume *Cambridge History of Christianity*, not a complete chronological account of the history of the church (or churches) but rather a survey 'of the development of Christianity in all its aspects – theological, social, political, regional, global – from the time of Christ to the present day'.[52] Church history is here subsumed within the larger – and arguably healthier – umbrella of the study of religion, and Christianity is shown to be not a singular phenomenon. Several of the volumes indeed state overtly that they explore plural Christianities. As Tom Noble and Julia Smith argue in their preface to the third volume of this series, the plural 'denotes not chaos, confusion or disunity, but richness, creativity and complexity'; to them, Christianity is 'a lived experience as much as or more than a set of doctrinal formulations'.[53] Such work sheds important light on the social and cultural contexts for religion and reflects a wider displinary move away from institutional towards cultural history, but it contributes less to our understanding of spirituality and devotion in earlier eras.

In some spheres church historians have not only accepted this change of direction towards the cultural but affirmed their desire to redefine the field. Thus the Dutch journal *Nederlands archief voor kerkgeschiedenis* reinvented itself in 2006, shifting from Dutch to English language publication and renaming itself *Church History and Religious Culture*. The journal of the American Society for Church History also subtly moved away from the terms in which it had defined its objects on the foundation of *Church History* in 1932. In 1998 it added a subtitle 'Studies in Christianity and Culture' and announced the adoption of a new editorial strategy that sought to look not narrowly at the history of the church but

[52] *Cambridge History of Christianity*, 9 vols (Cambridge, 2005–9).

[53] Thomas F. X. Noble and Julia M. H. Smith, 'Preface' to *CHC*, 3: *Early Medieval Christianities, c.600–c.1100* (Cambridge, 2008), xvi.

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rather to consider the intersection between Christianity and other faiths. It declared a self-conscious intent to draw on a wider range of historical approaches, including critical theory and the methods of the social sciences, along with more traditional modes of archival research and interpretation.[54] In the year 2000 the journal organized a conference to explore present trends in the study of Christian history, publishing the papers in a special issue. All raised serious methodological concerns about the state of church history in an increasingly secularized world and – as Hartmut Lehmann contended the most forcibly – a global environment in which Christianity plays substantially different roles in the northern and southern hemispheres. This is clearly the background against which we should understand the University of Cambridge's recent redefinition of the subject the Dixie Professor of ecclesiastical history should profess,[55] and the decision to appoint to it a historian of the social context of relations between African traditional religion and Christianity.

Beset by these conflicting cross-currents, where should ecclesiastical history go? Does it need to 'go' anywhere, or can it quietly go on doing what it has always done best? And what should be the role for our society in this post-ecclesiastical world? As decreasing numbers of people in the West participate in organized religion, fewer identify with specific ecclesial bodies. Christianity, once the bedrock of European civilization, has become increasingly remote from the daily experiences of most of its modern-day citizens. Although a central, defining feature of Europe's history, it resonates little with the cultural preoccupations of the modern age. Where does this leave a society devoted to ecclesiastical history? Who still wants to hear the stories that we can plot?

Future Prospects for Ecclesiastical History

Hitherto, as already suggested, this society has not much favoured the adoption of innovative approaches to the study of the churches' past, and the Ecclesiastical History Society does not stand alone in

[54] 'Editorial', *ChH* 67/1 (March 1998), v–vi.

[55] The further particulars for the chair when it was advertised in 2010 situated the post within the expansion of ecclesiastical history in recent years 'to include the broader history of the Christian religion, which may include its relations with or comparisons to other major world religions'.

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preferring a conventional understanding of the field. The editors of the *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* have not thought it necessary to adopt a new name for the journal, nor indeed did they choose to offer reflections on the direction of the discipline at the moment of its fiftieth anniversary, which coincided with the Millennium. One of those editors, Diarmaid MacCulloch, recently produced a highly acclaimed *History of Christianity* offering a magisterial survey over three thousand years.[56] Although his title implies a shift towards the sphere of the study of religion, and in places he talks overtly about Christianities, not a single, monolithic faith, in method the book owes much to his training in Cambridge with Geoffrey Elton. MacCulloch does not analyse belief systems as manifested in ritual or collective or individual Christian behaviour; he devotes little space to the beliefs or actions of lay Christian believers (although much to the history of theology). Centrally the volume supplies a history of the key figures and institutions of organized churches: popes, bishops, pastors and preachers; creeds and councils; theologians and theological controversy. He explores the relationship between shifts in theological understanding and the evolution of organized churches, and focuses overwhelmingly on the relationships between churches and secular political and military authority. This is church history, in other words, as traditionally understood, although accomplished on a vast and far from conventional scale, and with a mastery of a range of material and a geographical scope that few could equal. Its very success – as a well-received series of television programmes as well as a book – shows powerfully how a church historian can still tell a narrative of the evolution of the churches across time.

Others have, however, followed different methodological paths. The turn to the social which so dominated ecclesiastical history in the 1970s appears much reduced (indeed, to the extent, as Hugh McLeod and Simon Green have argued, that the social history of religion seems to have less and less to do with ecclesiastical and intellectual history).[57] In its place, it is the cultural history of religion that now dominates the historiography. Contributing

[56] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years* (London, 2010).

[57] Hugh McLeod, 'Varieties of Victorian Belief', *JMH* 64 (1992), 321–37, at 322–3, 337; Green, *Passing of Protestant England*, 8–9.

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the 'Religion' essay to a recently published concise companion to historical study, Miri Rubin argued for the value of anthropologically informed study of Christianity. She asserts that the historian should search for the inner logic to be found inside each religious culture and trace that logic through the narratives and rituals enacted collectively by members of that society, searching for explanation and meaning in all areas of their lives.[58] In her view, faith is no longer a prerequisite for the effective and illuminating study of the history of religion; indeed she seems positively to think disbelief an advantage: 'It is only when religion is understood as clusters of ideas and practices expressed and embedded with material objects, lived as stimuli to the senses, prompting memory and securing identity, that historians will be able to contribute to the understanding and interpretation of religion throughout the world.'[59] Thus historians should not, in her opinion, see religion as reflecting temporal avenues to the divine, nor as expressions of sanctity within the mundane world, but as 'cultural forms constitutive of the identities of individuals and groups'.[60]

Clearly, as Rubin's abundant examples demonstrate, this new cultural study of religion has shed fresh light on formerly neglected areas of the history of Christianity. I would follow her in accepting the enormous benefits that have followed from the move away from confessional histories that defended particular sectarian corners. Where I struggle is with the dogmatic assertion that disbelief is a positive advantage. For although this focus on ritual (and ritual agents), the spaces, sights, sounds, smells, rhythms and dramas of performed religious acts can reveal much, it readily descends into Durkheimian reductionism and functionalism. When it does, it becomes potentially as misleading as the confessional interpretation it eschews.[61]

Members of the Ecclesiastical History Society will not dissent from my own view that to write about any religion it is essential to take that religion seriously, to engage directly with the intrinsic nature of the belief systems which adherents espoused and thus to explore what those beliefs meant to their practitioners. The paral-

[58] Rubin, 'Religion', 319.
[59] Ibid. 329.
[60] Ibid.
[61] John Van Engen, 'The Christian Middle Ages', *AHR* 91(1986), 519–52, at 544.

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lels here with Stuart Clark's arguments about the need to take demonology seriously as expressed in his *Thinking with Demons* are obvious.[62] It is not the purpose of ecclesiastical history, or the study of any other religion, to formulate twenty-first-century social theory, still less to use anthropology to explain away confessional ecclesiastical history in such a way as to make the study of religion legitimate aspects of our own present, and thus to support current notions of gender, identity, liberal humanism, secularization or globalization. Nor, of course, can the writing of church history merely to defend a particular confessional position any longer be accepted.

On the other hand, if church history has any hope of regaining any of the ground it has lost in recent decades, it will need to engage with these historiographical trends. It is not sufficient to say that we do not follow fashion and so ignore it. To counter the arguments of those critical of conventional ecclesiastical history and defend our own corner, we need not just to know what those critics are saying, but to locate our responses in a historiographically considered context. Specifically, church historians need to reclaim the importance of religious belief and practice from anthropological systems and reaffirm a commitment to making faith and spirituality matter in consideration of the past of the churches. But we cannot do so in a narrow-minded way that returns us to the old faith-based, confessionally determined models that used to dominate our subject. Rather we need to look for ways of engaging with the methodological shifts in the wider profession and challenging the reductionism from an informed standpoint.

One possible way forward here is suggested by what has come to be termed the 'religious turn'. This has emerged especially in early modern English literary studies but also in intellectual history, and in the history of modern Germany. Those who have advocated this turn to religion argue for the need to restore consideration of faith issues to the study of texts against the backdrop of the increasing secularization of the modern world. As John Coffey and Alister Chapman have argued, modernization and secularization have gone hand in hand in the West, so that reason and science have come to replace faith and dogma. Secularization has indeed been

[62] Stuart Clark, *Thinking with Demons: The Idea of Witchcraft in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford, 1997).

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the dominant paradigm for understanding the religious history of modern Europe for some time. Charles Taylor demonstrated in *A Secular Age* that this results from a series of largely unrecognized assumptions that 'religion must decline ... because it is false ... because it is increasingly irrelevant ... and because religion is based on authority'.[63] Just as in the study of medieval and early modern religion, the study of religious history in the modern era has tended to analyse religious life in ways that the participants in religion find almost unrecognizable.[64] The secularization thesis is of course itself open to challenge; we need more nuanced readings of the relationship between the unquestionable decline in church attendance on the one hand and continuing public interest in, and espousal of, other articulations of religious and spiritual expression on the other. But we also need to recognize and respond to the damage that secularizing tendencies do to our own discipline.

The essays edited by Chapman and Coffey directly challenge the work of Quentin Skinner for its failure to engage with issues of faith (indeed their title 'seeing things their way' is one of Skinner's phrases). They also call into question the work of some of the Sussex school, for example the late John Burrow and Stefan Collini, whose visions of intellectual history have tended to be divorced from consideration of religion. Coffey and Chapman argue not that religious ideas should have a special status as the primary category of intellectual history, but that religious thought should have the same respect and be studied in the same way as scientific or political thought. Religious ideas should not be seen as a separate area left to specialists; indeed, they contend, in most historical periods it is anachronistic to separate religion from other parts of life: religion and church history should not be ghettoized, but more closely integrated.[65] As early as 1964, Henry F. May argued that American historiography had rediscovered religion,[66] and we might note the significant place that religion plays in much American historiography, just as it does in Amer-

[63] Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 428–9.

[64] Alister Chapman, 'Intellectual History and Religion in Modern Britain', in Chapman et al., eds, *Seeing Things Their Way*, 226–39, at 229.

[65] John Coffey and Alister Chapman, 'Introduction: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion', in Chapman et al., eds, *Seeing Things Their Way*, 1–23, at 4.

[66] Henry F. May, 'The Recovery of American Religious History', *AHR* 70 (1964), 79–92.

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ican national life. Think, for example, of the work of Richard Carwardine, both his work on Evangelicalism in America before the Civil War and also the significance he gave to religious opinion in his biography of Lincoln.[67] In Britain, however, the turn to religion is a much more recent phenomenon; while its impact is now widely recognized in literary studies and increasingly in intellectual history, it might profitably be extended more obviously into the sphere of church history. Sarah Apetrei has energetically engaged with this new trend, locating her work on women in Enlightenment England in the framework of this religious turn, and urging the need 'for a fresh engagement with the mysterious, transcendent aspects of religious commitment and thought', in order to put religion at the centre of intellectual history.[68] One might also single out the recent collection of essays edited by Jane Garnett and others, which seeks consciously to take the study of religion, and of Christianity and the church specifically, out of the shadow of secularization theory into new light. Recent books by two of Garnett's co-editors, Matthew Grimley and William Whyte, also integrate church history and intellectual history with notable success, drawing on ecclesiastical sources in order to do so.[69]

If British ecclesiastical history has lost its way over the last half-century, this cannot be unrelated to the churches' own loss of direction. Bishops and clergy no longer occupy the central position in our public and intellectual life that they did in the nineteenth century; the church does not play the same role in the life of the nation; and the new forms of religious expression manifest in our society do not lend themselves towards the creation of new modes of church history. Our failure is to have lost sight of the fundamentals of church history and the elements that made it distinctive; we have allowed secularist historians – many of them seduced by fashionable trends in historical method – to reduce our field to one where religion has merely social or cultural meaning.

[67] Richard Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (New Haven, CT, 1993); idem, *Lincoln: A Life of Purpose and Power* (New York, 2006).

[68] Sarah Apetrei, *Women, Feminism and Religion in Early E lightenment England* (Cambridge, 2010), 42.

[69] Jane Garnett et al., eds, *Redefining Christian Britain: Post-1945 Perspectives* (London, 2007); Matthew Grimley, *Citizenship, Community, and the Church of England: Liberal Anglican Theories of the State between the Wars* (Oxford, 2004); William Whyte, *Oxford Jackson: Architecture, Education, Status, and Style 1835–1924* (Oxford, 2006).

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Ecclesiastical history should not seek to identify current political or cultural fashions in the past, or to deploy past eras to legitimate our particular present and its current preoccupations. We need to cleave to our plot, the grand narrative of the inspired origins and continuous – if complicated – development of the churches since apostolic times. And the Ecclesiastical History Society ought to be ideally placed to do just that. If this society is to have a future, it needs to engage directly with where secular historians have taken the study of Christianity and the churches, and to challenge those readings on methodological grounds. We should be promoting the argument that ecclesiastical history must be practised on the basis of an understanding and tolerance of the belief-claims of its adherents, not against predetermined frameworks that dismiss those claims at the outset. The annual volumes of Studies in Church History already demonstrate the additional substantial benefit that derives from the study of the history of the churches over long periods.

One aspect of this society in which its members rightly take pride lies in the assistance given by the conference, and the published proceedings, to promoting the careers of young scholars. What more could the society do to encourage new scholars in this field and especially to persuade graduate students to stay in church history, and not be seduced away into secular fields? The demographics of the conference speak for themselves: young people do attend, but many just pass through; they come to communicate (to read their own papers), but not to confer; we do not fully succeed in presenting the conference as an occasion to share ideas across time and space. Our future will lie in the hands of these younger generations: we need to work harder to engage them more directly in our activities. Another problem we should address is that ecclesiastical history not only does not dominate the discipline of history any more, in many institutions it no longer even occupies the same physical space. In so far as it thrives at all in this country, as already argued, church history may do best in institutions devoted to ministerial training (and perhaps in some theology departments). Of course we can affirm the value of ecclesiastical history as taught and studied beside theology, and recognize that ignorance of, and an inability to engage with, an informed understanding of the church's past remain as dangerous for today's clergy as for those

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of the mid-nineteenth century for whose edification my own professorial chair was created. Yet there are dangers in allowing church history to become merely a small element in the collection of disciplines that make up theology, for it risks becoming there little more than a brief guide to Patristics and the Reformation. Because the history of the churches and the history of theology penetrate all areas of historical enquiry, ignorance of the significant role of the churches in the past, or an acquaintance only with an ecclesiastical history purged of its spirituality, diminishes all educated members of a civilized society.[70]

My own ambition in writing and teaching about ecclesiastical history has always been to restore to past Christian generations their present, and to recognize the subjects of my enquiries as thoughtful, sentient and often genuinely spiritual people, not the victims of an oppressive ideology. In such aspiration, I adhere closely to the principles followed by our earliest leaders. David Knowles, our first president, wrote to a friend in 1964 remarking on how his teaching and writing had changed as a result of his move to Cambridge: 'I felt that, having arrived most unexpectedly in a chair, and being a catholic priest, it was right to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, not with apologetics but with history in which Christianity was taken for granted as true.'[71] From my own lay perspective, I tend to articulate such a view only in my capacity as a canon when preaching in Christ Church Cathedral. But I do aspire to write and teach a history of Christianity in which I take it for granted that those whose pasts I study, unless they provide direct evidence to the contrary, accepted their faith as true. For, if we do not hold onto the fundamental plot that defines our discipline and teach an ecclesiastical past, how can we hope to have an ecclesial present? In narrating the significance of those ecclesiastical pasts to a wider public, the Ecclesiastical History Society has a key role to play.

[70] J. G. Dowling, *An Introduction to the Critical Study of Ecclesiastical History* (London, 1838), 2: 'an acquaintance with the facts of Ecclesiastical history is as indispensably necessary to the statesman and the philosopher as it is to the professional divine. ... Whenever it has been neglected, the consequence has uniformly been a melancholy increase of disorder and error.'

[71] David Knowles, letter to 'JHCA', 14 April 1964, quoted in Alberic Stacpoole, 'The Making of a Monastic Historian', *Ampleforth Journal* 80/2 (Summer 1975), 17–38, at 17.

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As Stella Fletcher has reminded us, this is 'a very *agreeable* society'. I have been pleased to belong to it continuously since I first joined in 1988, to have been permitted to publish a small number of papers in Studies in Church History, and to have participated in several of its scholarly and convivial conferences, most recently in the company of some of my own graduate students. I was flattered to be asked to serve as the society's president in this anniversary year and am proud to do so. In our next fifty years, I sincerely hope we will be no less agreeable an organization. But I might further wish that we would engage more directly with the conceptual and methodological issues that concern the rest of the historical profession. Our reluctance to do so is not new. As early as 1964, David Knowles wrote about church historians, saying: 'No class of historian has found the presentation of its subject matter in terms of ideas so difficult and so perilous. ... Church historians in general say too little about the changes of cultures and of mental climates.'[72] If we would address more obviously contemporary cultural changes and the mental climate of the wider discipline to which we belong, we would be better equipped to fulfil our stated charitable objects, of advancing public education by fostering and promoting the study of and interest in ecclesiastical history. Agreeableness need not condemn us to the avoidance of disagreement. It is time for ecclesiastical historians to speak out against the secularizing trends evident most obviously in the new cultural history, to show how powerfully a religious turn can illuminate both ecclesiastical and secular pasts, and to reassert our centrality within the historical profession.

Christ Church, Oxford

[72] David Knowles, 'Foreword' to Albert Mirgeler, *Mutations of Western Christianity* (Mainz, 1961; English edn London, 1964).

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