A Plot of Possibilities: Elizabeth Clark's *The Fathers Refounded*

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Elizabeth A. Clark's immensely learned new book, *The Fathers Refounded*: *Protestant Liberalism, Roman Catholic Modernism, and the Teaching of Ancient Christianity in Early Twentieth-Century America*, which follows directly on her examination of the nineteenth century in *Founding the Fathers: Early Church History and Protestant Professors in Nineteenth-Century America*, is a joy to read and from which to learn about the histories of our discipline, the history of Christianity. Chiefly, the book documents, through in-depth study of three fascinating figures, the severance of the field of "church history" from "theology" and, in particular, its pivotal moments within Protestant and Catholic "modernism."

Clark brings us vividly into the life, publications, institutional settings, and classroom teaching of three well-chosen figures of the early twentieth century: Arthur Cushman McGiffert at Union Theological Seminary (1893–1933), George LaPiana at Harvard Divinity School (1915–1947), and Shirley Jackson Case at the University of Chicago Divinity School (1908–1938). Based upon extensive archival research about all three of her subjects, close engagement with important scholarship on the Continental and American scenes in theology, history, and the ecclesial structures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and animated by her own wise, discerning, and critical acumen, the book has a strong and even passionate governing thesis: "The first decades of the twentieth century saw a flowering of scholarship on early Christianity that resonated with work by classicists, historians, philosophers, and sociologists at major universities. The study of Christian history could take its place alongside other humanities and social sciences disciplines." However, on both the Catholic and Protestant fronts, that "flowering" was to fade, in the first instance "decisively squelched by Vatican decrees" and in the latter beset by "severe setbacks from the devastations of World War I, the rise of Neo-Orthodoxy, and the backlash of American Fundamentalism." Even so, it was "perhaps the socio-historical, 'functionalist' approaches . . . [that] fared best in the long run: its emphases resurfaced in late twentieth-century social and cultural approaches to early Christianity."[23]

In regard to the last point, this book is not only the sequel to *Founding the Fathers*, but it is also the prequel to *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (2004), which in its final chapter laments that the field of "late ancient Christian ('post-New Testament'[24]) studies . . . developed under the aegis of a confessional

[23]Clark, *The Fathers Refounded*, 6.

[24]I am (not surprisingly) in line with the long-standing tradition at the University of Chicago that does not separate out New Testament from "Early Christian Literature" or early Christian studies, either on chronological or canonical grounds. Clark recognizes this tradition, writing: "At Chicago, 'New Testament' was not always siphoned off from 'post-New Testament Christianity' of the first three centuries" and "unlike many Protestant professors in the nineteenth century, Case did not treat New Testament texts as

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theology and leaped somewhat precipitously from this orientation to that of social history and social theory in the 1970s and 1980s."[25] The present book fills in some key pieces in the gap that was "leaped," while also introducing a new gap between the three "modernist" figures and the decades that immediately followed. Hence, these three books by Professor Clark are in a sense a trilogy and a set of tales of what has and what has not happened from a master storyteller, intellectual and social historian, and pedagogue working to fashion late ancient Christian studies as a properly scholarly discipline within the humanities and the social sciences, particularly within the American academy.

Training our focus on the new book as a self-contained volume, how does the narrative of *The Fathers Refounded* work, and for whom will it be compelling as an argument? A course I teach every other year at Chicago (often in the Shirley Jackson Case Early Christian Archaeology Seminary room, Swift Hall 403) on "Narratives of the 'Rise' of 'Christianity'" is organized around the question: if some such "narrative" can be told (say, to the end of the fourth century), can it be anything other than a *romance* (the stories of Eusebius or Rodney Stark, or other "triumph" narratives) or a *tragedy* (those of Maximinus Daia, Nietzsche, and others)? To explore that question, over the quarter we analyze historiographic works from Paul, Luke-Acts, Irenaeus, Eusebius, and other ancients through to moderns such as Edward Gibbon, Rodney Stark, Catherine Nixey, Bart Ehrman, Peter Brown, Kate Cooper, Robert Wilken, Ramsay MacMullen, Nicola Denzey-Lewis, and others, according to the famous typology of Hayden White in *Metahistory*. White argued that all historiographic narratives engage in four forms of explanation: (1) by (archetypal) plot (romance, satire, comedy, or tragedy), (2) by figurative mode (metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, or irony), (3) by formal argument (formist, organicist, mechanistic, or, contextualist), and (4) by ideological implication (anarchism, conservatism, radicalism, or liberalism).[26] White's grand proposal insists that we look closely at the choices an author has made in constructing their written narrative, on the assumption that historiographic work is a literary form that contains and shapes, and in turn is shaped by, its content.[27]

Using White's typology as a heuristic device (to do a historiographic analysis of a historiography of historiography), we find that Clark's *The Fathers Refounded*, in terms of plot structure, could be read as either a tragedy or a comedy. The ambiguity is a significant and (dare I, on this side of the linguistic turn, hazard an opinion on

qualitatively different from those of the patristic era" (*The Fathers Refounded*, 249, 295). The relationship between the "New Testament" and the study of ancient Christianity is a fundamental issue for the definition of the field, design of research projects, and training of students. How and why the two are still so often separated (at the very least, a legacy of the Protestant roots of American higher education and the sociology of institutions training ministers in that tradition) is a subject for a study of its own. Ironically, this may come about more because of a decrease in funding for all humanistic fields in the corporatized American university than because of a principled decision made on intellectual or pedagogical grounds that these do not in fact constitute two separable bodies of material or disciplines.

[25]Clark, *History, Theory, Text*, 158. The text continues: "These studies bypassed structuralism and other intellectual currents that were then informing scholarship pertaining to other ancient religions, the classics, and the New Testament."

[26]Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973). For Clark's assessment of Haden White, see Clark, "Narrative and History," chap. 5 in *History, Theory, Text*, 86–129.

[27]Hence the title of White's 1987 work, *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).

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authorial intention?!) a deliberate part of our author's poetics. According to White, both "Comedy and Tragedy. . . suggest the possibility of at least partial liberation from the condition of the Fall and provisional release from the divided state in which men [human beings] find themselves in this world."[28] The narrative within Professor Clark's book is a comedy in the sense that in her three case studies "hope is held out for the temporary triumph of man [humans] over his [their] world by the prospect of occasional *reconciliations* of the forces at play in the social and natural world."[29] In this case, the "friendship" between Christianity and the wider culture, and between the study of Christianity and other disciplines in the modern research university (two intersecting stories for Clark), can indeed take place. On the other hand, according to White: "In Tragedy, there are no festive occasions, except false or illusory ones; rather, there are intimations of states of division among men [people] more terrible than that which incited the tragic agon at the beginning of the drama. Still, the fall of the protagonist and the shaking of the world he [or she] inhabits which occur at the end of the Tragic play are not regarded as totally threatening to those who survive the agonic test. There has been a gain in consciousness for the spectators of the contest."[30]

The final paragraph of Professor Clark's book leaves readers both with a "gain in consciousness" and in a tensive position. They have seen the impressive and brave efforts of three early twentieth-century scholars "to modernize Christianity" and the study of its ancient roots but have also learned that their efforts "were of limited success." And yet, one might say that it is not the tragic that gets the final word in Clark's book, but the comedic, with this hopeful-sounding peroration: "Those versions of progressive thinking still can serve, yet today, to challenge obscurantist and reactionary currents in American religious life."[31] But, even without a more detailed diagnosis of those "currents," the reader is thereby situated not at the happy ending that a comedy expects, but still in a time of perduring threat to progressive thinking, which remains a vital (and yet untapped?) resource.

In terms of White's category of explanation by figurative mode, Clark's *The Father's Refounded* distinctly invokes the ironic in the conclusion, at least in two of its cases. There she writes: "McGiffert's position, we may note, contains a certain irony: he thought that no period of Christian history was more worthy of study than the patristic era, yet he thought it deeply flawed and no model for twentieth-century Christians."[32] The mode of irony appears also with her final assessment of LaPiana: "Hence LaPiana's work also contained an irony: his lifelong critique of 'one-man' rule in the contemporary Catholic Church and in Fascist Italy found no counterpart in his assessment of ancient Christianity: for the latter, the development of the papacy, rule by 'one man,' was necessary for the church's stability and growth."[33] But when it comes to Case, Professor Clark denies the ironic mode in favor of a stark negative verdict: "Here we have not so much an 'irony' as simply a failure," resulting in Case's "rather unsatisfactory treatment of Christianity in late antiquity."[34] And yet Clark's own treatment of

[28]White, *Metahistory*, 9.
[29]White, *Metahistory*, 9.
[30]White, *Metahistory*, 9.
[31]Clark, *The Fathers Refounded*, 329.
[32]Clark, *The Fathers Refounded*, 327.
[33]Clark, *The Fathers Refounded*, 327.
[34]Clark, *The Fathers Refounded*, 329. See also Clark, *The Fathers Refounded*, 260: "Although he lacked both the theoretical sophistication and the deep knowledge of ancient Christianity that enabled the rebirth of the social history of early Christianity in the late twentieth century, he had taken a step in that direction."

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Case, and what I have read of Case's work and legacy myself—including the incisively critical assessment of his legacy soon after his death by his student Paul Schubert[35]—shows at least two grand ironies that might have been accented to complete an ironic trilogy of the three figures: First, while Case was a thoroughgoing relativist, explaining phenomena in relation to the influence of their ambient environments, he also held absolutist claims about both truth and method in "scientific history."[36] And second, while Case eschewed entirely "supernatural" explanations of historical phenomena, he insisted emphatically that in Jesus there was a "spiritual energy" at work, and his history-of-religions convictions about the contingency of all religion (and his own skepticism about individual revelation to persons or via scripture, as for Barth) did not compromise his belief in the universality of an at least partially knowable God.[37] Hence Case, ironically, seems to deny the supernatural with one hand while welcoming it with the other, something that any social historian of late ancient Christianity today could not expect to go unchallenged. One might say that Case (if part of a "revolution") was both radical and conservative[38] as a scholar, as Schubert points out in relation to his critics, who found reason to excoriate him from both sides and even from the middle.[39]

Hayden White's theory of select tropological modes has been much critiqued, and in particular, we should not expect nor require that any given historiographic work embodies only one of the four (in this case, irony). Among the others, the category of metonymy is helpful to think with for Clark's book. Are McGiffert, LaPiana, and Case standouts or stand-ins for their age? Do three swallows a "heyday" make or are these exemplary of a fleeting age for Clark?

There is little to contest about Clark's form of argument on White's template, which is robustly contextualist. Through many hours in dusty boxes, she has sought to situate each of the three figures in their lives, institutions, classrooms, and intellectual ambits and currents, and *The Fathers Refounded* is filled with stunning and memorable detail. The rationale behind this kind of historical investigation is that one can learn more by placing the subject in his or her environment as thickly reconstructed as possible. There is also perhaps more than a glimpse of an organicist view (on White's terms) of the turning and returning of times and ages that embody principles and ideas from neglected eras in the past (in this case, of progressivism and modernism).[40]

One of the reasons is that "[Case's] attempt in middle age to remake himself from a New Testament scholar into a historian of late ancient Christianity was only partially successful: he lacked the deep knowledge of the texts and their contexts of McGiffert and LaPiana" (Clark, *The Fathers Refounded*, 329; interestingly, a similar complaint about McGiffert and LaPiana teaching very far outside their formal training or, in LaPiana's case, remaking himself as a scholar of Italian politics, is not made). Clark's chief critique about Case seems to be what she regards as the popularizing style and content of his publications (including a frustrating lack of footnotes for an archival historian to track down!), even when they do extend throughout the later patristic era and beyond.

[35]Paul Schubert, "Shirley Jackson Case, Historian of Early Christianity: An Appraisal," *Journal of Religion* 29, no. 1 (January 1949): 30–46. Clark effectively draws on this source in her analysis of Case.

[36]Clark, *The Fathers Refounded*, 288 appropriately cites Paul Schubert to this effect.

[37]Schubert, "Shirley Jackson Case."

[38]Which seems also to be the verdict of Clark, *The Fathers Refounded*, 328: "Shirley Jackson Case, at first glance, seems the most radical of the three scholars in his attempt to modernize Christianity."

[39]Schubert, "Shirley Jackson Case," 34.

[40]White, *Metahistory*, 16: "History written in this [organicist] mode tends to be oriented toward the determination of the end or goal toward which all the processes found in the historical field are presumed to be trending." In this instance, for Clark, Case presages the revival of social and cultural history in the 1970s and beyond.

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Lastly, in terms of ideological implication, Professor Clark's work is resolutely liberal, as White defines it: "Liberals imagine a time in the *future* when this structure will have been improved."[41] In that regard, liberalism is both the subject of the book and its animating ideological perspective. And yet, liberalism for White, as for others historically (and certainly some in the present moment in American life), frustratingly defers the moment of utopian resolution into the future, whereas it is the radical ideological stance that is "inclined to view the utopian condition as *imminent*, which inspires their concern with the provision of the revolutionary means to bring this utopia to pass *now*."[42] This prevailing outlook is also, probably, because Liz is committed to the task of education in a liberal mode, consisting of inquiry, exploration, and intergenerational possibility—and responsibility—for change and transformation, both in terms of disciplines and advancement of research and, as noted above, the possibility that educational transformation may be an agent of social transformation. I join her both in that commitment and in the frustrations that the tragic side of the tragi-comic plotline invokes.

I have profited much from Professor Clark's latest book, as, I predict, will everyone who reads it. As I hope this response demonstrates, it both recaptures a key moment in American history and scholarship and brings to the forefront crucial questions for all historians of ancient Christianity that we cannot avoid as we think about the present and future of this work, its assumptions, its methods, its research goals, and its pedagogical commitments. An ironic sensibility can leave one with a sense of either pessimism or possibility, of the obduracy of opposition or of open-eyed optimism for what can be. As scholars and educators in our own fraught moment, let us opt, if cautiously, for the latter.

[41]White, *Metahistory*, 25. The sentence continues: "but they [liberals] project this utopian condition into the remote future, in such a way as to discourage any effort in the present to realize it precipitately by 'radical' means."

[42]White, *Metahistory*, 25.

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