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Leaving Providence Behind

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The first issue of the journal *Church History* appeared in 1932—seventy-nine years ago—the year William Warren Sweet was president of the American Society of Church History. It was a time of considerable pain and social stress in many parts of the world. Perhaps in response to this turmoil, the inaugural issue conveyed a deep-seated optimism about the future. A bracing faith in the providential course of history characterized the three essays in that first issue and the authors conveyed that faith with erudition, narrative flair, and sweeping knowledge of Christian history. Few authors today exert such broad command of events in the larger history of Christianity, or display such facility with a wide range of primary documents, and few write with such ebullience. Such may be the price of leaving behind a world where providence is clearly in sight.

The lead essay in 1932 was the Presidential Address delivered the preceding December by Abdel Ross Wentz. As the title, "Permanent Deposits of Sectionalism in American Christianity," suggested, Wentz perceived American history as a process of buildup and wash. More specifically, he viewed the new spirit of Christian unity after the Civil War as an achievement built on the proliferation and splintering of denominations prior to the war, and he perceived this emergence of unity out of disunity as a teleological process. "The Civil War period was not an interruption in the course of history," Wentz argued, but "a period of definite progress." In politics, American progress was manifest in a "new nationalism" that "multiplied the powers of the central government" without "for a moment" lessening "the powers and joys of the individual states." As in politics, so in religion: a "new kind of denominationalism" characterized by "general recognition of the generic claims of Christianity" bathed the "permanent deposits" of sectionalism in a softened but compelling "persistence of the denominational type."

Discernment of a moral trajectory operating within history also informed the second essay by John T. McNeill on a very different topic, "Medicine for Sin as Prescribed in the Penitentials." Locating eleventh-century Irish manuals for administering penance in the context of ancient and early medieval theories

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of disease and beliefs about the debilitating powers of sin, McNeill praised the penitentials for "their moderation, fundamental humaneness, and freedom from fanaticism." With an eye to the drive toward enlightenment within Christian history, he found it "remarkable how unobtrusive is the supernatural element in these documents, how rarely appears any suggestion of spiritual terror." The cure of a man's soul described in these manuals was essentially the "recovery of his self-respect." As foreshadowings of modern psychology, the penitentials' "emphasis on the private character of penance" marked "an advance psychologically on the public humiliation" endorsed by Tertullian, Basil, and other earlier church fathers. As seeds of humanitarianism that would eventually flower over the course of time, the penitentials "offer the means of the rehabilitation of personality," McNeil wrote, to "bring the penitent into harmony with himself, and into right relations with the church, society and God."

Belief in the driving force of Christianity in history and its liberating trajectory also informed the last essay of the March 1932 issue, "The Anabaptists, the Reformers, and the Civil Government," by Harold H. Schaff, grandson of the founder of the American Society of Church History. Identifying Anabaptists as "early and outspoken protagonists of the principle of separation of Church and State," which Schaff viewed as a major landmark in the providential course of history, he chastised Luther, Bullinger, and Zwingli as obstructionists in their hostility to Anabaptist demands for religious freedom. In accusing them "of organized resistance to all civil authority and government," Schaff asserted Luther, Bullinger, and Zwingli had "gravely misjudged and misrepresented Anabaptists." For the most part, Schaff argued, Anabaptists aimed not to overturn civil authority, but simply to offer a "more spiritual form of religious discipline" than the heavy hand of religious establishment. Thus Schaff viewed Anabaptism's focus on the "inner man" as a significant moment in the unfolding of history, much as John McNeill viewed the penitentials as a breakthrough of Christian sensitivity heralding modern psychology. These two arguments nicely complemented the essay by Ross Wentz treating cooperative denominationalism after the Civil War as evidence of a liberal Christian spirit working through history toward the kingdom of God. While their areas of specialization differed, these three scholars shared a providential understanding of the history of Christianity.

Midway between that inaugural issue of *Church History* and now, Albert C. Outler published a provocative essay noting how much had changed. Reflecting the diminished sense of providence among historians of Christianity in his day, Outler titled his September 1965 essay, "Theodosius' Horse: Reflections on the Predicament of the Church Historian." At a time of social upheaval in the United States and rising protest against American

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military aggression, Outler claimed that in 1965, "The notion of 'providence' has simply dropped beneath the mental horizon of modern historiography."

Outler invoked Theodosius' horse as a point of departure for reassessing the providential framework apparent in earlier historiography. At the second general council in Ephesus in 449, Outler reminded his readers, the Alexandrine christology promoted by Theodosius won out over the christology developed at Antioch, and favored by Rome. But when Theodosius was thrown from his horse the following summer, Outler wrote, "the whole course of Byzantine history veered onto another track." With Theodosius accidentally out of commission, the council rulings of the previous summer could not be upheld, and the eastern Church weakened and eventually failed to halt the spread of Islam. In other words, Outler challenged the notion that events followed an inevitable course; "Historical accidents," he wrote, "have no such *logos*."

For Outler, that recognition of the role that chance played did not mean loss of faith in either Christianity or history. It only highlighted for Outler "the historians' obligation to rehearse the past in light of the Christian world view." Responsibility for maintaining "the Christian world view" now fell squarely on the shoulders of historians who were in the business of creating "plausible historical narrative[s]" that, in the last analysis, were "incurably subjective." The "real presence" of God, he wrote, was not in every event, but "in every crisis of human decision," and it was up to historians to show that, and keep the Christian worldview alive.

Forty-plus years after Outler, the editors of *Church History* continue to receive manuscripts that carry this kind of theological burden. But we also receive an increasing number of manuscripts that do not reflect a providential, Christian worldview or seek redemptive meaning in events of the past. To recall Outler's image of modern historiography, if that faith of providence evident in the journal in 1932 had dropped beneath the mental horizon for some contributors by 1965, we might ask if many of the historians who write for the journal today are not living in entirely different orbits.

Leaving providence behind has enabled many advances, opening windows, removing blinders, and abetting understanding of the forces Christianity has exerted within historical events. It should be acknowledged, though, that such relief from providence is partly a legacy of the faith in progress and penchant for iconoclasm evident among earlier historians. To use the image Ross Wentz chose, we build on the deposits of historians whose investments in providence led them to establish a journal. That journal enables historians today to examine investments such as those in light of their cultural contexts.

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