Church History 80:2 (June 2011), 363–365.
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doi:10.1017/S0009640711000576

From Unity to Locality

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In 1932, Shirley Jackson Case, a recent president of the American Society of Church History, summarized the activities of the "The Church History Deputation to the Orient" by rehearsing some of the questions that the visiting scholars asked of their colleagues in Asia. Among those queries were these: "What service is the study of Church History as a whole rendering to Christianity today in your country? Could this service be improved, and, if so, in what practical way?" For Case and others, the study of church history was directly related to the practice of Christianity. To research, publish, and teach church history was to serve Christianity.

When *Church History* began publication in 1932, it was infused with Case's concerns and it carried forward some of the characteristic features of the scholarship previously published by the ASCH in its various annual *Papers* (1888–1896) and *Proceedings* (1913–1934). One of the emphases that remained for a while was the cultivation of mutual understanding among the Christian denominations. The society's founder Philip Schaff had envisioned the promotion of scholarship geared to that purpose, and in the 1930s and for some time afterward the society's membership obliged by contributing articles and reviews that foregrounded the theme of mutual understanding and, in its more pointed form, religious unity. It was in that spirit that Wilhelm Pauck, in his ASCH Presidential Address of 1936, "The Nature of Protestantism," reminded his audience that "the questions whether Protestantism is a unique feature of Christianity and whether it can express itself in a united action" were crucially important, and he sought to identify an "attitude in Protestantism" that would offer opportunities for fresh exploration of the possibilities of unity. Pauck also reported on a simpler understanding of Protestantism, one that he hoped would be made more complicated, but one that still framed scholarship. "The common feature of all Protestants," Pauck wrote, "is that they are not Roman Catholics.… Protestantism, therefore, is that form of Christianity which expresses its life on the soil of a civilization which has emancipated itself from the authority of the Roman Catholic church." The discussion about unity gradually turned to optimism about "ecumenism" in the journal's pages in the 1940s and

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640711000576 Published online by Cambridge University Press

1950s, as reviewers registered their approval of the outpouring of books on the topic. The journal nevertheless did not publish an article on the ecumenical emphasis in Christian history until John T. McNeill's "Calvin as an Ecumenical Churchman," which in 1963 distilled the core argument of McNeill's *Unitive Protestantism: The Ecumenical Spirit in Its Persistent Expression*, which had initially appeared in 1930 and was reprinted the following year, to strong critical notice in the journal.[1] With McNeill's writing the language of the journal began to shift from a focus on "unity" to "ecumenical" and, eventually, "non-denominational."

Pauck's effort to clarify an "emancipated" Protestantism and to locate the most promising pathways to Protestant unity represented a view that slowed progress toward publishing articles about post-Reformation Roman Catholicism. The society had from its beginnings debated the history of Christianity in its first fifteen centuries, but it was not until its tenth volume that the journal published a survey, "Recent Important Literature regarding the Catholic Church during the Late Renaissance Period, 1500–1648," that opened up space for consideration of other Christianities. Matthew Spinka, also an eventual president of the society, in the mid-1930s had published a short piece about eastern Orthodox churches after World War I, but it likewise was not until the 1940s that articles on the Orthodox Church began appearing with any regularity (and many of those were by Spinka). Orthodoxy in Africa was an occasional topic in the journal, but articles on Christianity that looked to sub-Saharan Africa did not begin to appear until the late 1960s and early 1970s. Those writings tended to focus on religious notions of covenant and errand in South Africa, and on missionary figures such as Thomas Coke. The first article on "African American" men and women, which also was focused on missionizing, appeared in 1991. Just as articles focused on race were slow in appearing in journal pages, so also were investigations of Christianity and gender. The first articles that the journal published on gender were in 1985. Prior to that, discussion of gender sometimes occurred, but with reference to a part of speech. Susan Lindley's study of women and the Social Gospel and Barbara Newman's piece on Hildegaard of Bingen opened the pathway for other studies of gender, focused on both men and women.

As new topics found their way into the journal's pages—albeit sometimes after peer journals already had ventured there—authors showed less interest in issues of Protestant unity and more engagement with a broader discourse about religion. The perspective of Adolf von Harnack's *What is*

[1]John T. McNeill, *Unitive Protestantism: A Study in Our Religious Resources* (New York: Abingdon, 1930); reprinted in its revised edition as *Unitive Protestantism: The Ecumenical Spirit in Its Persistent Expression* (rev. ed., Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1964).

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Christianity? (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1901), which had shaped the society's agenda in its early stages, gave way in the mid-twentieth century to fresh questions about the relation of religion to culture, the kinds of data that were useful to writing the history of Christianity, the engagement of Christianity with other traditions (including "folk" or "popular" religions), and the role of the religious historian as interpreter. That development was interwoven with the increase in attention to race and ethnicity, gender, colonialism, the body, and emotion, as well as debate about the consequences of the "linguistic turn," and the necessity of reform in social and intellectual history. The publishing agenda that had arisen partly in response to the questions "what is Christianity," "what is Protestantism," and "can the churches unite" was altered by scholars who asked, "what is religion?" and made efforts to ascertain how one religion, Christianity, has manifested differently over time and space. The journal's name change in the late 1990s to *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* reflected the spirit of that shift in scholarship. In the twenty-first century, articles bearing on Christianity in Africa, Asia, Australia, and South America have extended the range of the journal outside of Europe and North America. Coincident with that development has been greater involvement of scholars from those places in shaping the direction of the journal through their research, reviews, and peer evaluations. The extent of that involvement, as it develops, is likely to have a significant influence on the journal over the next several decades.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0009640711000576 Published online by Cambridge University Press