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Musings and Reflections

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Our fellow historian Peter Brown reports that according to a memoir written, sometime around 1900 by a contemporary of Benedetto Croce, the eminent Italian philosopher, Croce challenged a colleague to a duel over an issue of metaphysics. What a startling report that makes you eager to turn the page—as in a John Gresham volume—in order to find out what happened. But nothing more is said in the book, compelling the conclusion that for the author, this was routine, unimportant, and even normal for professors to challenge each other to deadly duels. He must have thought that no explanation was necessary. And so a single sentence stands alone, tantalizing, unexplained—for contemporaries commonplace; for posterity altogether startling. What a splendid introduction to how to see the past offered us by Peter Brown!

Well. As far as I know, there have been no recent reports of American Academy of Religion (AAR) or American Society of Church History (ASCH) members challenging one another to duels (or other expressions of physical force as takes place in the parliamentary chambers of some democracies) over competing interpretations of Christian history, though I suspect that some of us may have harbored the thought. But the Croce reference should alert historians of Christianity, indeed all historians, to resist their notion of what is noteworthy and what is mundane onto the past when this past frequently had different notions of the commonplace and the extraordinary.

My reflections on the journal *Church History*, then and now, are to be placed into this broader context. They will seek to highlight what from the present perspective might seem unusual and different, but was at the time altogether commonplace. I trust I will be forgiven for offering some personal recollections along the way.

I appeared on the scholarly scene in the 1960s, and if my arithmetic and my memory are correct, I have published something on the order of a dozen articles in *Church History*, by all odds not a particularly striking record, considering that my professional life has spanned almost fifty years. My first article appeared in the early 1960s and was a rather intrepid assessment of the place of sixteenth century Anabaptist theology (whatever at the time was taken to

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be valid Anabaptist theology) in the broader context of Reformation theology. I offered, understandable in view of my youth and exuberance, a critique of the then normative "Anabaptist Vision" understanding of Anabaptist theology. I still think that my assessment was correct, though at the time I hoped for a robust conversation about my thesis which did not take place. A partial explanation might well be that theological topics soon became peripheral.

In those days the annual membership dues of the ASCH were five dollars, which—I suspect—would translate into roughly thirty-five dollars in 2010 dollars. Each issue of the journal *Church History* was easily recognizable by its blue cover, which at the time also listed the articles in the issue. The two editors were Jim Nichols and Frank Norwood, with a board of editors consisting of Roland Bainton, Ray Petry, Robert Grant, Winthrop Hudson, Wilhelm Pauck, John Dillenberger, Matthew Spinka, Edward Downey, and Sidney Mead.

This list deserves reflection. Its members may well be said to have constituted the North American church historical establishment of the time. One might think of only one or two eminent church historians at the time (John McNeil and Cyril Richardson come to mind) not on this list. Not surprisingly, this board of editors was all male, and one suspects all Protestant. Moreover, every member of the board of editors of the journal taught at a Protestant seminary; the field and the journal thus offered what might well be called a Protestant understanding of the history of Christianity. It was, in other words, a carefully defined universe. Something else is worthy of note. Of the eleven members of the board, only one was a historian of American religion and, with the scholarly preoccupations of Downey, Dillenberger, Pauck, Grant, even Mead, the board represented a heavy theological orientation; the impact of Neo-Orthodoxy was felt in historical studies.

The annual December meetings of the Society drew not more than fifty registrations. This small number had undoubtedly several reasons. For one, graduate students in those days were not expected to have read a paper at a national meeting prior to finishing the Ph.D.; consequently, graduate student attendees at the annual meeting were rare, even as college and university administrators had not as yet invented the dubious system of providing travel subsidies only when actually appearing on the program, as if hearing papers would not enhance teaching and research. Even as now, the hordes of American Historical Association (AHA) attendees (or AAR attendees) overwhelmed the little flock of church historians, and even then we were not allowed into the AHA book exhibit, short of registering at the AHA. But there was the advantage of smallness so that at the ASCH meetings everybody knew everybody, though the attendees came mainly from prestigious institutions or were in one way or another publishing scholars.

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In those days the serial publication options in the field of church history were limited, and with only a slight simplification one may say that *Church History* was the only outlet for publishing articles on church history themes. This, of course, is rather strikingly different from our own day. In my field of Reformation studies, for example, there is a large number of periodical options, such as the *Sixteenth Century Journal*; *Renaissance and Reformation*; *Lutheran Quarterly*; and the *Journal of Early Modern History*, none of which existed a generation ago.

The authors publishing in *Church History* in those days were either established scholars or talented young Turks—I cite at random Heiko Oberman, Edward Dowey, Francis Oakley, Leo Solt, Robert Grant, Ray Petry, Bill Clebsch, John Wilson—but the important point to be made is that the senior scholars published repeatedly on the pages of the journal at a rate the current senior phalanx of the profession does not. The roster of authors also reveals an intriguing array of scholars whose commitment to research-scholarship found expression in a single publication, often a chapter from their dissertations. If the establishment figures dominated, in a way, the essays in the journal, the same is to be said about the book review section of the journal, a fact that provided the reader with the assessment of monographs of younger members of the profession by the establishment elites, which was, of course, an "old boys club." Roland Bainton, Sidney Ahlstrom, Ray Petry, and a young historian just appointed at the University of Chicago by the name of Martin Marty were frequent reviewers. In four consecutive issues of the journal in the 1960s, the reviewed books included monographs not only in English, but also in German, French, and Polish. By way of comparison, if indeed contrast, I note that for years (including the time I was one of the editors of the journal) the review section of *Church History* has tended to review books in English. It is not clear how this strangely parochial vision of our scholarly universe became editorial policy and whether it was a subtle expression of U.S. cultural hegemony or a lack of linguistically competent reviewers. In either case, it was a serious shortcoming that has fortunately been remedied.

The articles in the journal tended to be on the brief side, yet they addressed broad topics—the Reformation scholar Harold J. Grimm wrote on the social forces in the Reformation on twelve pages, Egil Grislis on Calvin's doctrine of baptism on twenty pages, or Jerald Brauer on images of religion in America on fifteen pages, and on the "American Religious Depression, 1925–1935" on thirteen pages. Not to mention myself with "Anabaptism and the Reformation" on thirteen pages. This broad perspective may have reflected the state of North American scholarship at that time or the determination of the editors of the journal to produce a journal that could be read with interest by specialists of various aspects of the history of

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Christianity. Even the non-specialized is not likely to get lost with short essays on broad topics. Other broad titles were "The Disappearance of Christianity from North Africa in the Wake of the Rise of Islam" and "Puritan Radicalism and the Enlightenment." While some broadly based articles brought new insights, others contained an inordinate amount of scholarly fluff, causing some embarrassment when rereading them today.

A change of editors took place in 1961 and brought the appointment of the triad of Martin Marty, Robert Grant, and Jerald Brauer, from the University of Chicago. The editorial board disappeared, and on the front page appeared now the listing of articles. Marty, Grant, and Brauer must receive credit for having had the longest tenure as journal editors which encompassed slightly over thirty years. At the same time, the journal became more scholarly in the sense that word applied to other humanities and social science disciplines.

By the mid-1970s, the articles in *Church History* were narrower in scope. I can only divine if this represented editorial policy or the pool of available manuscripts. I cite as illustrations two titles: "Career Patterns among the Clergy of Lincoln Cathedral, 1660–1750" and "Spanish Missions, Cultural Conflict and the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and The Abbatial Election at Citeaux in 1625." A journal of general provenance (covering all of the history of Christianity) became an organ of specialists.

When the Duke cohort of Elizabeth Clark, Richard Heitzenrater, Grant Wacker, and I replaced the Chicagoans, it was driven by the energy and commitment of the new kids on the block. We decided to beef up appearance of the journal by replacing the blue of the cover with more brilliant colors, which changed with each volume. We also resuscitated a board of associate editors. The insertion of the subtitle *Studies in Christianity and Culture* stirred a discussion, since for some colleagues it reflected the uneasiness with the time-honored nomenclature "Church" History. The Duke editors meant to call attention to the reality that the manifestations of the Christian religion always take place in the setting of the surrounding culture. The notion to have the associate editors play an active role in setting editorial policy proved not altogether successful. There was also the issue of cost and identity of printer, but since the finances of the Society were in good shape, we lost little sleep over that matter. We briefly considered the possibility of a connection with Oxford University Press, but that did not work out.

Despite the attractive arrangement that associates the journal with Cambridge University Press, the publication of the journal is both editorially and fiscally a heavy challenge surely justified because the journal is the foremost tangible benefit of Society membership. However, the arrangements of journals of scholarly societies with outside presses, such as ASCH with Cambridge or AAR with Oxford, will work as long as the university presses find the arrangement attractive.

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The biggest challenge posed by a journal published by a broad-based scholarly society with a wide constituency is to walk the fine line between specialized current scholarship and articles of broad interest. That line is more easily observed by journals that are themselves specialized, for example, the *Journal of Early Christian History* or the *Sixteenth Century Journal*. For broadly based journals this is a challenge, since an article in one field should be of interest to colleagues working in other fields. The members of the ASCH will peruse the journal for obtaining resources for their teaching and for the book reviews.

The manuscripts that came in over the transom during the tenure of the Duke editors, however, were uniformly on focused topics, often mined from the writer's dissertation, and at the same time of high scholarly quality. In our editorial meetings I often tried to convince myself that narrowly focused articles, when done with insight, will command wide and broad reader interest. The survey finding, several years ago, that articles in humanities journals have not more than a handful of readers would, however, counsel skepticism in this regard. The key question faced by all editors of all scholarly journals (whether *Church History* or the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*) is, what kind of journal is of greatest benefit to the members of the respective societies? It is a question more easily answered in theory than in practice.

In order to respond to the challenge of securing a wide readership of articles in *Church History*, we tried "theme" issues. Some were successful, some not. In my own judgment, it remains unclear if such theme issues do, in fact, speak to the broad readership envisioned. The Duke editors also discussed the feasibility of launching an on-line electronic book review section, as is done, for example, by the Society of Biblical Literature, in order to allow for timely and comprehensive book reviews, but that simple idea faced formidable practical issues and nothing came of the idea. Such a venture would be a major benefit to the readers of the journal and the members of the Society.

So, where does this leave us? There will continue to be a steady supply of manuscripts because we scholars believe that we have something to say and are also determined to have an audience for our scholarly findings. Many will be of high quality, but most will probably be of benefit only to a portion of the readers of the journal. To make things even more complicated, historians of the Christian tradition have also come to embrace different methodologies and approaches; the day of all historians of Christianity in this country singing out of the same methodological hymnbook are over, in addition to our being too specialized to be able to rally around a common core. The controversy over the AAR decision to have its own free-standing annual meeting is a good case in point. Some bewailed this decision because historians of Christianity needed to be in touch with biblical scholarship,

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while others welcomed the separation because it affirmed kinship with such disciplines as anthropology or history. It should be the function of *Church History* to offer a voice to all of the above.

At the same time, the new options and possibilities afforded by technology to do things differently—e-books and so forth—will not go away despite our fealty to tradition and the printed page. The journal published by the comprehensive scholarly society faces great challenges. Perhaps scholarly societies should offer options to their members of a specialized journal; perhaps there should only be an annual issue containing essays of truly broad reader interest; perhaps there should be pedagogical contributions, course syllabi and so forth. The opportunities are, as Pogo said, insurmountable.

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