

Evangelical Historiography: The Debate over Christian History

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Recent evangelical approaches to history are conflicted, as the debate over the legacy of D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones (1899–1981) illustrates.¹ In the book *Engaging with Martyn Lloyd-Jones*, scholars critically evaluated aspects of their subject's ministry and thought.² Iain H. Murray, a twentieth-century biographer of Lloyd-Jones, wrote a review-essay of the book for *Banner of Truth* magazine in which he criticized a number of the contributions specifically and evangelical historiography in general. Murray argued against Christians doing 'scholarly' research with 'neutral objectivity'.³ Historian Carl R. Trueman responded to Murray's 'attack on historical method' and chastised him for conflating 'neutrality' and 'objectivity'.⁴ While neutrality is impossible, according to Trueman, objectivity 'simply acknowledges the fact that history is a public discipline, the results of which can be assessed by public criteria'. He argued: 'History has its sphere of competence and its ambitions, and its methods and results should be understood accordingly'.⁵

The two Reformed historians had engaged on the same subject in 2010, after Trueman published criticisms of 'the Doctor' in a volume honouring the Anglo-Canadian theologian J. I. Packer.⁶ In a review, Murray wrote that Trueman's chap-

1 This paper is adapted from the *status quaestionis* in my unpublished PhD *Reformed Evangelicalism and the Search for a Usable Past: The Test-Case of Arnold Dallimore, Pastor-Historian* (The University of the Free State [Bloemfontein], 2015).

2 *Engaging with Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Life and Legacy of 'The Doctor'*, edited by Andrew Atherstone and David Ceri Jones (Nottingham: Apollos, 2011).

3 Iain H. Murray, 'Engaging with Lloyd-Jones: A Review Article', *Banner of Truth* 585 (June 2012).

4 Carl Trueman, 'The Sin of Uzzah', *Reformation 21* (July 10, 2012), <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2012/07/the-sin-of-uzzah.php> (accessed December 5, 2013).

5 Trueman, 'Sin of Uzzah'. See also his discussion of objectivity and neutrality in *Histories and Fallacies: Problems Faced in the Writing of History* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 27–28.

6 Carl R. Trueman, 'J. I. Packer: An English Nonconformist Perspective' in *J. I. Packer and the Evangelical Future: The Impact of His Life and Thought*, edited by Timothy George (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 115–29; Iain H. Murray, 'J. I. Packer

ter had 'serious inaccuracies' and misinterpreted the contentious events involving the infamous split between Packer and Lloyd-Jones.⁷ Trueman responded in the e-zine *Reformation21*, focusing on Murray's historical method as expressed in the latter's two-volume biography of Lloyd-Jones.⁸ Of it, Trueman wrote: 'Instead of a genuine assessment of [Lloyd-Jones's] strengths and weaknesses which might have been of real value to the contemporary church, what we have is a personality cult, supported by a body of hagiography, and maintained by a defensive mentality, where all critics are dismissed as unworthy slanderers and mediocre historians.' Specific to hagiography Trueman critiqued Murray for writing 'a massive two volume biography of MLJ which contained virtually no criticism whatsoever'.⁹

This twenty-first century interchange is a microcosm of a larger discussion that was held in the twentieth century over how to write history as a Christian. The question under review was, 'Is there a Christian way to do history?' Evangelicals generally answer in the affirmative, but there are clearly two different paths that evangelicals take in answering thus. One, illustrated by Murray, argues that Christians must not adhere to the canons of academic neutrality to faithfully do history. The other, illustrated by Trueman, maintains that faithfulness to Christianity is not forfeited by 'objective' historiography.

I. History wars: 'Natural' vs. 'supernatural' historiography

The debate illustrated in the introduction to this essay is not just about how an historian's work is publicly perceived, but has as much to do with how the historian understands his or her own vocation.¹⁰ Historians are faced with many self-reflective questions. Is it appropriate for a professional historian to write for a popular audience and do so in a way that reveals their own faith commitments? Can an evangelical historian write for a scholarly audience without abandoning religious principles? Does Christian history require recognition of divine provi-

and the Evangelical Future – A Review by Iain H. Murray', *Banner of Truth* (March 2010); Carl Trueman, 'On the Gloucestershire Way of Identifying Sheep: A Response to Iain Murray', *Reformation 21* (March 2010), <http://www.reformation21.org/articles/on-the-gloucestershire-way-of-identifying-sheep-a-response-to-iain-murray.php> (accessed December 5, 2013).

7 Iain H. Murray, 'Review of J. I. Packer and the *Evangelical Future*', *Master's Seminary Journal* 21.2 (Fall 2010), 238.

8 Iain H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First Forty Years, 1899–1939* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1982); Iain H. Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The Fight of Faith, 1939–1981* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1990).

9 Trueman, 'Gloucestershire Way'.

10 For reflections on the historian and vocation see Arthur S. Link, 'The Historian's Vocation', *Theology Today* 19 (April 1962), 75–89; Douglas A. Sweeney, 'On the Vocation of Historians to the Priesthood of Believers, A Plea to Christians in the Academy', in *Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Historian's Vocation*, edited by John Fea, Jay Green and Eric Miller (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 299–315.

dence in the events of the past? This section considers the different ways that evangelicals in the twentieth century have sought to answer such questions.

1.1 *The history of history writing: Historical background on historical thinking*

Broad discussions about the relationship between Christianity and history have occupied church historians from the mid-twentieth century onwards. For instance, in the United States the Conference on Faith and History (CFH) began in 1968 as a loose gathering of Christian historians who met to discuss such issues, among other things.¹¹ Its journal *Fides et Historia* published conference proceedings, and in the early years focused largely on the relationship between faith and history. In its second volume one of the founders of the CFH, Charles J. Miller, asked the question 'Is there a Christian approach to history?'¹² Citing the historian's own personal philosophy that biases their scholarship, Miller answered in the affirmative: 'As long as Christians are writing history, there is a Christian approach to history'.¹³ Just as there can be a Communist approach to history, so too is there a Christian one. However, Miller admits, 'There is no one Christian approach to history – there are many'.¹⁴ Miller, who taught at Calvin College, was deeply shaped by Neo-Calvinism, a philosophical-theological outlook that takes its cues from the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper (1837–1920), who famously put all of reality – including academic disciplines – under the lordship of Christ, and argued for a distinctly Christian and all-encompassing *Weltanschauung*.¹⁵ Historian David W. Bebbington cited the Dutch-American theologian Cornelius Van Til (1895–1987) as popularizing Kuyper's philosophy in America and this in turn had an impact on Christian historiography. Notre Dame's George Marsden, who once taught history at Calvin College, spoke of the influence Van Til had on his own historical method including the idea 'that the very facts of history differ for the Christian and the non-Christian historian'.¹⁶ The influence of neo-Calvin-

11 D. G. Hart notes the discrepancy in accounts over when the CFH was born; some involved testify that it began in 1959. See D. G. Hart, 'History in Search of Meaning: The Conference on Faith and History,' in *History and the Christian Historian*, edited by Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 72.

12 Charles J. Miller, 'Is There a Christian Approach to History?' *Fides et Historia* 2.1 (1969), 3–15.

13 *Ibid.*, 4.

14 *Ibid.*, 12.

15 Cf. Abraham Kuyper, *Pro Rege: Of, Het Koningschap Van Christus* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1911); Abraham Kuyper, *Calvinism: Six Stone-lectures* (Amsterdam/Pretoria: Hoveker & Wormster, [1899]).

16 George M. Marsden, 'The Spiritual Vision of History,' *Fides et Historia* 14.1 (1981), 56. See also C. Gregg Singer, 'The Problem of Historical Interpretation,' in *Foundations of Christian Scholarship: Essays in the Van Til Perspective*, edited by Gary North (Vallecito: Ross House, 1976), 53–74; William VanDoodewaard, 'Van Til and Singer: The Theological Interpretation of History,' *Puritan Reformed Journal* 3.1 (January 2011), 339–62.

ism was so strong in discussions of historiography that D. G. Hart referred to the 'Calvin College' stage in the history of the CFH. According to Hart, it spanned the years 1974–84.¹⁷

On a smaller scale in Britain was the founding of the Historians' Study Group in the early 1960s. Like the CFH, it was initially a casual group of Christian historians who met under the auspices of the Inter-Varsity Fellowship. As Bebbington explained, 'Although for many years the Historians's Study Group did little more than hold a couple of small gatherings a year, it fostered the idea that historical research and teaching could be a sphere for Christian enterprise.'¹⁸ Later the group morphed into the Christianity and History Forum that continues to meet to this day.¹⁹ Elsewhere similar fraternities arose, as in Australia with the Evangelical History Association that began in 1987.²⁰ All of them wrote not only about church history, but also reflected on the discipline of history itself from a Christian viewpoint.

As will be seen in the next section, supernatural history was a prevalent method for Christians since the founding of the religion and was a common perspective for historians in the twentieth century. Books written from this view were often popular biographies or denominational histories written with the intent of encouraging readers in the Christian faith or as a 'branch of denominational apologetics'. Such biography, like the early church biographies, lent themselves to hagiography, or their subjects were manipulated 'to fit the preconceptions of... biographers so that their twentieth-century priorities could bask in the glow of [historical] authority'.²¹ According to Bebbington, change started in the 1940s, when scholars began to examine theology in an intellectual context. For instance, Harald Lindström's 1946 book *Wesley and Sanctification* was an intellectual study of John Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfectionism.²² Timothy L. Smith (1924–97), who wrote the foreword for a later edition of Lindström's book,²³ and who is often cited as a paragon of evangelical historiography, took social conditions into consideration in his seminal work on social reform. A

17 Hart, 'History in Search of Meaning,' 78–82. Sweeney also referred to the 'Calvin College School of Historiography' that included Marsden, Frank Roberts, Ronald Wells, James Bratt, Harry Stout, Dale Van Kley, Joel Carpenter, Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll. See Douglas A. Sweeney, 'Taking a Shot at Redemption: A Lutheran Considers the Calvin College School of Historiography', *Books and Culture* 5 (May/June 1999), 43–45.

18 David W. Bebbington, 'The Evangelical Discovery of History', in *The Church on Its Past: Papers Read at the 2011 Summer Meeting and the 2012 Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical Historical Society*, edited by Peter D. Clarke and Charlotte Methuen (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2013), 344.

19 <http://www.chf-online.org.uk>.

20 <http://evangelicalhistory.org>.

21 Bebbington, 'Evangelical Discovery,' 334–35.

22 Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification: A Study in the Doctrine of Salvation* (London: Epworth Press, 1946).

23 Harald Lindström, *Wesley and Sanctification* (Wilmore: Francis Asbury Publishing Co., 1984).

Nazarene pastor in Boston and professor of history at Johns Hopkins University, Smith was one of the first to gain respect for American evangelical historians in the academy. His doctoral dissertation, submitted to Harvard University, and for which he received the Brewer Prize from the American Society of Church History, was published as *Revivalism and Social Reform*.²⁴ In it, he studied the positive effect evangelicals had on poverty and slavery, an approach that was at that time largely unheard of in studies of American history. As important as this book has become, Smith considered his history of the formative years of the Church of the Nazarene his greatest scholarly achievement.²⁵

In Britain, Sir Herbert Butterfield (1900–79) led the way for Christian reflection on history. Butterfield was Master of Peterhouse, Cambridge, and eventually became Vice-Chancellor of the university, Regius Professor of Modern History, and editor of the influential *Cambridge Historical Journal*. He was also a committed Protestant. Butterfield wrote a number of books on historiography including his important *The Whig Interpretation of History* (1931) – a critique of the assumption of progress in history – and his work reflecting on faith and the historical profession, *Christianity and History* (1949).²⁶ Interestingly, he criticised the idea of progress in the first book, and advocated for providence in the second.

All of this helped set the stage for evangelicals to contemplate their own history, and explore the methods used in their vocation in the late twentieth century. Before the 1960s evangelicals were indisposed to serious reflection on history, due in large part to their reluctance to explore the life of the mind, favouring evangelistic pursuits instead.²⁷ Many evangelicals were also premillennial – in Bebbington's discussion of this, it appears that he refers to the rapture theology of Dispensationalism – and believed that scholarly pursuits were a waste of time if the second coming was imminent.²⁸ However, as the discussions about Christian historiography developed, whether in conference lectures or in the pages of bulletins and journals, the discussions became more specific and acrimonious, so much so that *Books & Culture* dedicated much of their May/June 1999 edition to what they called the 'history wars'.²⁹

24 Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (New York/Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957).

25 Timothy L. Smith, *Called Unto Holiness: The Story of the Nazarenes: The Formative Years, Volume 1* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1962). See Floyd T. Cunningham, 'Common Ground: The Perspectives of Timothy L. Smith on American Religious History', *Fides et Historia* 44.2 (Summer/Fall 2012), 21–55.

26 Herbert Butterfield, *The Whig Interpretation of History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1931); Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and History* (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1950).

27 Mark Noll traced the history of 'the evangelical mind' in his *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 59–148.

28 Bebbington, 'Evangelical Discovery,' 331. Noll (*Scandal*, 143) argued that rapture theology also had a 'bad influence' on the evangelical mind, particularly as it created a party spirit within evangelicalism.

29 See *Books & Culture: A Christian Review* 5.3 (May/June 1999).

With this historical sketch in mind, the following sections outline the two main ways that evangelical historians have approached historiography.

II. The supernaturalist perspective

Reflecting the historical illustration regarding Martyn Lloyd-Jones above, Henry Warder Bowden explains that there are ‘two distinctive attitudes’ that church historians have about their field of study, and that most find themselves spread along a spectrum between the two. On the one hand there are those who see church history as a ‘subsection of theology’ and, on the other, those who see it as a ‘branch of the humanities’.³⁰ The first group ‘expect to find providential significance in past experience’ and try to locate the intervention of God in ‘support of a favored movement’. The second studies the past ‘as an aspect of human behavior’ and focuses on the sociological conditions that shape religion.³¹ ‘From this perspective’, Bowden noted, ‘a reluctance to explain events by means of divine agency is a theoretical prerequisite for history’.³² At the extreme end of this latter perspective is a secular view of history and while not going that far, Christians find themselves using the toolkit of the academy in similar ways. Bowden spoke of Christianity in general, and his spectrum easily includes Christians of all denominational affiliations, including evangelicals and Roman Catholics.³³

On one end of Bowden’s spectrum is the supernaturalist perspective that uses divine intervention as a part of the interpretation of historical events. This ‘providentialist history’ is so-called because of its use of divine providence as an historical tool. Providence is best understood as God’s sovereign will that directs history.³⁴ In a sense, R. G. Collingwood was right when he claimed, ‘Any history written on Christian principles will be of necessity universal, providential, apocalyptic, and periodized’.³⁵ All orthodox Christians recognise God’s providence over history – both generally and particularly – but providential history as a technical term seeks to determine how God has moved in the specific events

30 Henry Warder Bowden, ‘Ends and Means in Church History’, *Church History* 54.1 (March 1985), 76.

31 *Ibid.*, 76.

32 *Ibid.*, 77.

33 For a Roman Catholic critique of natural historiography see Christopher Shannon, ‘After Monographs: A Critique of Christian Scholarship as a Professional Practice’, in *Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and the Historian’s Vocation*, edited by John Fea, Jay Green, and Eric Miller (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 168–86. A standard Catholic critique of providential history is Hugh F. Kearney, ‘Christianity and the Study of History’, *The Downside Review* 67 (1949), 62–73.

34 Cf. Paul Helm, *The Providence of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 122.

35 R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 49, cited in Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America*, *Cambridge Studies in Early Modern British History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 3–4.

of history. It is less about admitting God's providence, and more about how it should be interpreted.

Supernatural historiography has a long pedigree in the Judeo-Christian tradition, beginning with the Hebrew Bible and Christian scriptures.³⁶ The biblical example set a precedent for doing history that was the dominant model from the early church to the seventeenth century. A noteworthy providential historian from the patristic period is Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260–ca. 340) whose *Historia Ecclesiastica* (ca. 325) outlined how God raised up and protected the church from its birth to the time of Constantine (ca. 275–337). The other major patristic work of history was Augustine of Hippo (354–430), whose *De civitate Dei* (416–422) sought not only to defend Christians against pagan accusers, but also to show God's sovereign providence over history.³⁷ This method of history was common up to the seventeenth century where we see a similar pattern of scholarship in the works of the French bishop Jacques-Bénigne Bossuet (1627–1704), such as his 1681 *Discours sur l'histoire universelle*, which spanned from creation to Charlemagne. Catholic historian Patrick J. Barry calls it 'a work of apologetics...[a] demonstration of Providence from history'.³⁸ Bossuet's Irish complement Archbishop James Ussher (1581–1656) published *Annales veteris testamenti* (1650) and *Annalium pars posterior* (1654), a chronology of the world from creation, which he famously dated at 4004_{BCE}. Ussher's providential history was part of an eschatologically driven apologetic for the Protestant church in light of the rise of the antichrist within the papacy.³⁹ In the American colonies the Puritan Cotton Mather (1663–1728) wrote *Magnalia Christi Americana* (1702),

36 For example, 'The Lord does whatever pleases him/in the heavens and on the earth/ in the seas and all their depths' (Psalm 135:6); and 'And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose' (Romans 8:28, NIV).

37 Cf. Eusebius: *The Church History, a New Translation with Commentary*, edited by Paul L. Maier (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1999); Augustine: *The City of God against the Pagans*, edited by R. W. Dyson, Cambridge Texts in the History of Political Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). An indispensable study of patristic historiography is Glenn F. Chesnut, *The First Christian Historians: Eusebius, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and Evagrius* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986, 2nd ed.). For Augustine's philosophy of history in *De civitate Dei* see Robert A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Matthew Levering, 'Linear and Participatory History: Augustine's *City of God*', *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 5.2 (September 2011), 175–96.

38 Patrick J. Barry, 'Bossuet's *Discourse on Universal History*,' in *The Catholic Philosophy of History: Papers of the American Catholic Historical Association*, edited by Peter Guilday (New York: P. J. Kenedy, 1936), 155–59.

39 Cf. Andrew Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 60. See also Crawford Gribben, *The Puritan Millennium: Literature and Theology, 1550–1682*, Studies in Christian History and Thought (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2008, Rev. ed.).

which, as the title suggests, celebrated the great works of Christ in America.⁴⁰

Yet things began to change for historiography at this period as well. With the development of textual criticism by Renaissance humanists, and new discoveries in the sciences, came a growing secular approach to history.⁴¹ By the 1700s '[s]ome historians were about to assume no less of a task than to give meaning to the multitude of mundane events whose significance hitherto had been provided by Divine Providence'.⁴² Such answers included patterns of progress or cycles of life that infused meaning into history. Mormon historian Brian Q. Cannon tracked the slow demise of providential history through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; it did not experience a renaissance until the 1940s.⁴³ During the Enlightenment, one of the strongest critics of providential history was Voltaire (1694–1778), who attacked its use by historians who defended the divine right of kings, seen most bluntly in Bossuet's work.⁴⁴ This was also the period that saw the scrutinizing of miracles, further casting aspersions on providence. There was a brief period of revival for supernatural historiography in the nineteenth century due to the work of François René de Chateaubriand (1768–1848) and historicist Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886), as well as the American historian George Bancroft (1800–91).⁴⁵ Yet industrialization, materialism, class conflict, higher criticism, and Darwinian evolution reduced the need for faith and fuelled scepticism about the miraculous, so that God's role in history was discredited.⁴⁶ It is noteworthy that as the historical profession was established in this nineteenth-century context, supernatural history began to wane. Ironically, with the rise of Marxist historiography in the early twentieth century, and the *Annales* School in France, Christian historians found an intellectual environ-

40 Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana: or, the Ecclesiastical history of New-England, from Its First Planting in the Year 1620, unto the Year of our Lord, 1698* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702). For Mather's historiographical approach see David Levin, *Cotton Mather: The Young Life of the Lord's Remembrancer* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978), 250–69.

41 Ernest Breisach, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval and Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007, 3rd ed.), 185, 196.

42 *Ibid.*, 199.

43 Brian Q. Cannon, 'Providential History: The Need for Continuing Revelation', in *Window of Faith: Latter-day Saint Perspectives on World History*, edited by Roy A. Prete (Provo: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University, 2005), 142–60. Available online: <http://rsc.byu.edu/archived/window-faith-latter-day-saint-perspectives-world-history/22-providential-history-need-conti>.

44 For Voltaire's criticism of Bossuet's providential history see Karen O'Brien, *Narratives of Enlightenment: Cosmopolitan History from Voltaire to Gibbon* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 51–53.

45 Cf. François René de Chateaubriand, *Génie du christianisme, ou Beautés de la Religion Chrétienne* (Paris: Chez Migneret, 1802); Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, edited by Georg G. Iggers (New York: Routledge, 2010); George Bancroft, *History of the United States of America, from the Discovery of the American Continent*, 10 vols (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1854–78).

46 Cannon, 'Providential History'.

ment where they could again ground their view of history in faith. This was not because Marxists or the *Annales* advocated a Christian reading of history per se, but because they offered models of doing history from open presuppositions. Brian Cannon referred to a number of European philosophers and theologians at this period, such as Nikolai Berdyaev, H. G. Wood, and John MacMurray, who 'eloquently pled for a reappraisal of God's role in history'.⁴⁷

Probably the most significant British historian to adhere to a form of providential historiography was Herbert Butterfield. In his *Christianity and History* he dedicated a chapter to exploring 'providence and historical process'.⁴⁸ In the opening sentence of the chapter he wrote, 'In a sense everything with which we deal when we are discussing Christianity and history... must be a commentary on the ways of Providence'.⁴⁹ Butterfield distinguished three levels of historical thinking that use different methods of analysis. The first two – biographical and narrative – are subsumed under what he called 'technical history' and can be performed without reference to the third, which is providence.⁵⁰ What marks out the third is the personal commitment of the historian. In a stark statement about providence and the historian's own religious perspective he said,

I am unable to see how a man can find the hand of God in secular history, unless he has first found that he has an assurance of it in his personal experience. If it is objected that God is revealed in history through Christ, I cannot think that this can be true for the mere external observer, who puts on the thinking-cap of the ordinary historical student. It only becomes effective for those who have carried the narrative to intimate regions inside themselves, where certain of the issues are brought home to human beings.⁵¹

Immediately after this statement, Butterfield chastised those historians 'who say that everything in history can be explained without bringing God into the argument': such 'would be doing no more than walking around in a circle'.⁵² In bold words he wrote, 'There is no such self-contained intellectual system as would forbid a man who was an historian to believe that God Himself is a factor in history'.⁵³ Keith Sewell thus rightly argued that providence was a belief basic

47 Ibid.

48 Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, 93–112. Studies include C. T. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield: Historian as Dissenter* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004); Robert Clouse, 'Herbert Butterfield', in *Historians of the Christian Tradition: Their Methodology and Influence on Western Thought* edited by Michael Bauman and Martin I. Klauber (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 519–29; William A. Speck, 'Herbert Butterfield: The Legacy of a Christian Historian', in *A Christian View of History?* edited by Frank Roberts and George M. Marsden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 99.

49 Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, 93.

50 Cf. McIntire, *Herbert Butterfield*, 263.

51 Butterfield, *Christianity and History*, 107.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid., 108.

to Butterfield's historiography, not mere rhetorical flourish.⁵⁴ This is not to say, however, that Butterfield's providentialism is the same as that of later evangelical historians. Providence was his presupposition as an historian, but he wrote his own historical works with little reference to the hand of God in particular events. He said, 'I could not go to people and say that if they studied nearly two thousand years of European history this would be bound to make them Christian; I could not say that such a stretch of history would prove to any impartial person that Providence underlies the whole human drama'. One can study history, but 'all this will not show you God in history if you have not found God in your daily life'.⁵⁵

Butterfield's equal in America was the Baptist historian Kenneth Scott Latourette (1884–1968), Sterling Professor of Missions and Oriental History at Yale University.⁵⁶ Both a church historian and an historian of mission, he wrote multi-volume works in each field that have had lasting influence.⁵⁷ In 1948 he was elected as the president of the American Historical Association, and at the end of his term dedicated his presidential address to the question of 'The Christian Understanding of History'.⁵⁸ He wrote of the necessarily subjective element to history writing, saying, 'History cannot be written without some basis of selection, whether artificial and purely subjective or inherent in man's story'. Thus the historian 'is confronted with the necessity of acting on some principle of selection, even though it be arbitrary, and is haunted by the persistent hope that a framework and meaning can be found which possess objective reality'.⁵⁹ Then, to ground history in something objective, instead of arbitrary, he proposed a return to the Christian understanding of history:

May I make bold under these circumstances to invite your consideration to one of the oldest interpretations of history, the one which bears the name Christian? I do so realizing that many now regard it as quite outmoded, as associated with a stage of thinking which mankind is discarding, and as being held only by those who are victims of what is indulgently denominated social lag. I do so as one who accepts the Christian understanding of history and is more and more attracted by what he believes to be the

54 Keith Sewell, *Herbert Butterfield and the Interpretation of History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 94–95.

55 Herbert Butterfield, *Writings on Christianity and History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 11.

56 Richard W. Pointer, 'Kenneth Scott Latourette', in *Historians of the Christian Tradition: Their Methodology and Influence on Western Thought*, edited by Michael Bauman and Martin I. Klauber (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 411–30.

57 Cf. Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975, rev. ed.); Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Volume 2: Reformation to Present* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975, rev. ed.).

58 Kenneth Scott Latourette, 'The Christian Understanding of History', *The American Historical Review* 54.2 (January 1949), 261.

59 *Ibid.*

accuracy of its insight. But it is not as an advocate, as one in the long succession of those who would seek to justify the ways of God to men, that I would once more draw your attention to it. I would, rather, raise with you the question of whether the Christian understanding of history may not offer the clue to the mystery which fascinates so many of our best minds.⁶⁰

He then explained what he meant by 'the Christian understanding of history'. While recognizing that there may be different Christian approaches, he argued for a view where different Christian perspectives achieve common assent. For Latourette, the Christian understanding of history is found under the universally-held belief in God as creator and ruler of the universe. 'This means, that man lives and history takes place in a universe, that all of reality is one and under the control of God, and that the human drama is part and parcel of the far larger unity of God's creation'.⁶¹ At the heart of this understanding is not 'a set of ideas but a person', namely Jesus of Nazareth who is the full disclosure of God in history.⁶² History is teleological and under the guide of God's sovereign hand. He said that '[t]he course of history is God's search for man... God's grace, the love which man does not deserve and cannot earn, respects man's free will and endeavours to reach man through the incarnation, the cross, and the Holy Spirit. Here, to the Christian, is the meaning of history and its unifying core'.⁶³ Latourette outlined a number of practical applications that this should elicit for the historian, not the least is that to have God's view of history, one must focus attention on events that would normally be ignored. Latourette's ground-breaking focus on Christian mission is an illustration of this practical principle.⁶⁴

In America there was also a protracted debate between members of the CFH over the nature of Christian historiography, in particular the Lutheran historian John Warwick Montgomery's philosophy of history.⁶⁵ Both of his books were less about history, properly speaking, and more about evidential apologetic treatments of historical issues such as the reliability of the Bible or the veracity of the resurrection. The debate was sparked in 1970 by a review of Montgomery's first book by Ronald J. VanderMolen published in *Fides et Historia* at the editor's request.⁶⁶ Montgomery wanted to determine the meaning of history to help historians understand the purpose of their profession. He did so by critiquing a number of historical perspectives and putting forth a Christian approach to the

60 Ibid., 262.

61 Ibid., 263.

62 Ibid., 264.

63 Ibid., 265.

64 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, 7 vols (New York: Harper, 1937-47).

65 John Warwick Montgomery, *Where Is History Going? Essays in Support of the Historical Truth of the Christian Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1969); John Warwick Montgomery, *History and Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1972).

66 Ronald J. VanderMolen, 'The Christian Historian: Apologist or Seeker?' *Fides et Historia* 3.1 (Fall 1970), 41-56.

past. For VanderMolen, Montgomery made 'dubious assertions regarding historical scholarship'.⁶⁷ His concern was Montgomery's rejection of the subjective, interpretive stance of the historian in light of objective historical facts.⁶⁸ In the words of Hart, he 'objected to Montgomery's wooden epistemology, which, to VanderMolen, failed to recognize the subjective aspects of Christian faith as well as the interpretive nature of historical scholarship'.⁶⁹

As Hart said of the entire debate, 'The crux of the matter had to do with the reliability or epistemic certainty provided by historical studies'.⁷⁰ Montgomery accused modern historians of denying the reality of past facts; VanderMolen defended them by arguing that historians do, generally, believe in the reliability of the past: 'I can accept Montgomery's view of the reality of past facts, but find his criticism of historians quite out of line'.⁷¹

Germaine to this study, VanderMolen also took issue with Montgomery's notion 'that progress can be identified in the historical process and that God's intentions can be discovered in historical events'.⁷² Montgomery responded, not to VanderMolen, but to William A. Speck, who had written an essay critiquing Herbert Butterfield's attempt to trace the Christian influence on history, which Speck thought failed.⁷³ Though Speck had critiqued Butterfield for an inadequate consistency in his attempt to do history from a Christian perspective, Montgomery and his co-author James R. Moore did not believe Butterfield went far enough. Butterfield had, according to all three disputants, undermined his Christian commitment when he sought to write 'technical history' – by this, they mean objective, or natural history; though Montgomery and Moore accused Speck of not ultimately believing that Butterfield was wrong in his approach to technical history. For them, 'Butterfield somehow believes he can have historical objectivity with its description and explanation of tangible evidence and still retain "religious orthodoxy, moral absolutes, and... a spiritual interpretation of life"'.⁷⁴ In other words, there is to be no wedge between technical history and Christian commitment: they are one and the same.

Speck offered a short reply in a subsequent article, chastising his opponents' tone and asking, 'How can [Butterfield's] methodology or any truly historical methodology confirm Christian belief?'⁷⁵ If historians, even Christian historians,

67 *Ibid.*, 42.

68 *Ibid.*, 47.

69 Hart, 'History in Search of Meaning', 77.

70 *Ibid.*, 77.

71 VanderMolen, 'Church Historian', 48.

72 *Ibid.*, 49.

73 William A. Speck, 'Herbert Butterfield on the Christian and Historical Study', *Fides et Historia* 4 (Fall 1971): 50–70; John Warwick Montgomery and James R. Moore, 'The Speck in Butterfield's Eye, A Reply to William Speck', *Fides et Historia* 4 (Fall 1971): 71–77.

74 Montgomery and Moore, 'Speck in Butterfield's Eye', 73–74.

75 William A. Speck, 'A Reply to John Warwick Montgomery and James R. Moore', *Fides et Historia* 5 (Fall 1972 and Spring 1973), 108.

are divided over materials in Christian scripture, how can they be sure of their position? Nine responses in all were published by defenders and opponents of Montgomery. Hart commented on the conclusion of the debate and its impact on the changing nature of CFH:

Perhaps the desultory nature of this debate revealed that the aims of the conference were considerably different from the uses to which evangelical seminary faculty put the study of history. Or perhaps the decision by conference membership to affiliate with the A[merican] H[istorical] A[ssociation] made Montgomery's apologetics an embarrassment. Whatever the explanation, the close of this debate seems to have marked a change in the CFH, from an organization open to interests of the neo-evangelical seminary leadership, to one that would focus on the teaching of history at colleges and universities.⁷⁶

The debate over Christian history has carried into the twenty-first century. Steven Keillor – who teaches history at Bethel University in St. Paul, Minnesota, is a fellow of the McLaurin Institute, and who writes on historical issues pertaining to the state of Minnesota – has attempted to revive providential history for professional historians. He argues for the judgement of God as an interpretive lens on the past.⁷⁷ Based on readings from the Old and New Testaments, he explained that God continues to judge nations for their sins, and that historians who fail to recognise this in their work are ignoring the Bible's own testimony to history. For instance, Keillor took two chapters to explain that the American Civil War was God's judgment against the United States for the institution of slavery.⁷⁸ Thus Keillor used God's judgments, as revealed in scripture and theology, to cast his own judgment on the past. In a largely favourable preface to the book, Mark Noll said that though Keillor did not fully convince, 'he has made me think, and think hard'.⁷⁹ Reflecting Noll's opinion, other evangelical historians have expressed a cautious admiration for the book. As a work of American history, it offered careful interpretations of the past, but his providentialism did not ultimately persuade. Glenn E. Sanders said that evangelical historians should not ignore Keillor's book, and that it offers a 'rich discussion' of the ways that Christian historians can do history. However, it is long on theological reflection but short on historical analysis. At the very least, *God's Judgments* offers an opportunity for believing historians to reflect on what things can be said in a profession that largely neglects Christian interpretations.⁸⁰

76 Hart, 'History in Search of Meaning', 78.

77 Steven J. Keillor, *God's Judgments: Interpreting History and the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007).

78 *Ibid.*, 119–53.

79 Mark Noll, 'Preface', in *ibid.*, 10.

80 Glenn E. Sanders, 'Review of *God's Judgments*', *Fides et Historia* 39.2 (Summer/Fall 2007), 111–12. See also the essays dedicated to reviewing it in *Books & Culture* 13.4 (July/August 2007).

Butterfield, Latourette, the CFH and Keillor are just a handful of examples of twentieth-century Christian historians who wrestled over their profession. While such professional historians were concerned about Christian historiography, popular historians were as well. A key example of the supernaturalist approach to church history is the already mentioned Calvinist historian Iain Murray and the Banner of Truth Trust. Murray is now retired as editorial director of the *Banner of Truth*, a ministry that was first located in London, and is now in Edinburgh, Scotland. In addition to his two-volume biography of Lloyd-Jones, Murray is well-known for his biography of Jonathan Edwards (1703–58), ‘America’s theologian,’ among many others.⁸¹ Andrew Atherstone described Murray’s historical output, in particular his various biographies, as ‘biblically faithful, pastorally applied and spiritually edifying.’⁸² Or, as Bebbington described him, ‘Iain Murray... believed that history books ought to subserve the twin causes of advancing spiritual religion and promoting Reformed orthodoxy.’⁸³ Mark Noll wrote that Murray’s ‘history is an explicit subdiscipline of theology’.⁸⁴

As we have seen, Murray took issue with evangelical historians who adhered to objective neutrality when writing history and his historiography is reflected by contributors to the *Banner of Truth* magazine. Atherstone helpfully surveyed the book-review contents of the publication over a twenty-year period highlighting the negative opinions of various reviewers on works of professional history.

A key statement of Murray’s approach to history is seen in his review-essay of *Evangelicalism*, a book of papers from a conference at the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals at Wheaton College.⁸⁵ Though admitting the importance of the subject-matter of the book, and the weight of authors who contributed to it – including John Walsh, Harry S. Stout, Ian Rennie, and David Wells – Murray wrote, ‘This reviewer regrets to say that, with one major exception, we read the contributors to this work with mounting disappointment and concern’.⁸⁶ His apprehension was expressed in various historical disagreements he had with the contributors. For instance, he chastised Noll’s remarks that there was evangelical growth after the American War for Independence. Murray disagreed saying that evangelical writers of that period complained ‘that the War lowered spiritual interests and standards, and far from it introducing a change

81 Iain H. Murray, *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987).

82 Andrew Atherstone, ‘Hagiography and History’, in *Truth at Any Cost: Papers Read at the 2012 Westminster Conference* (Stoke-on-Trent: Tentmaker Publications, 2013), 43.

83 Bebbington, ‘Evangelical Discovery’, 349.

84 Mark Noll, ‘How We Remember Revivals: The Virtues and Vices of Tribal History’, *Christianity Today* 39.5 (April 24, 1995), 31. This is a review of Iain H. Murray, *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994).

85 *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies of Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles and Beyond, 1700–1990*, edited by Mark Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George A. Rawlyk (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

86 Iain H. Murray, ‘Explaining Evangelical History’, *Banner of Truth* 370 (July 1994), 8.

for the better, when it was over (c. 1781), no general change was known until the beginning of the Second Great Awakening in 1798–1800.⁸⁷

His primary concern, however, was over the various historians' arguments that eighteenth-century evangelical 'successes' were not 'affected by the truth and by the power of the Holy Spirit, but how they and their successes were *conditioned* by the cultural framework in which they lived'.⁸⁸ Murray was not alone in such concern. Douglas A. Sweeney wrote in 1999 that though he recognised their effort to 'allay the fears of secular colleagues', 'it seems the Calvin School has decided to minimize the importance of the only thing that makes Christian scholarship singular at all'.⁸⁹ In even stronger terms, and reflecting the work of Walter Wink and Stanley Hauerwas, Richard C. Goode claimed that 'Marsden's honest and well-intended attempt to accommodate the Christian faith to the standards of the academy unavoidably detracts from the genius of the Christian message and serves the powers-that-be'.⁹⁰

Sharing these sentiments, and citing biblical precedent, Murray surmised: '[W]hat historians could do to the book of Acts if they determined to re-interpret its events without reference to God'.⁹¹ If Luke the gospel-writer adhered to the scholarly detachment encouraged by *Evangelicalism*, the book of Acts would be a different book altogether. The issue for Murray was not so much about historical method as it was about theological worldview. Evangelicals should not think that moderated belief – that is, history written so as not to give offense to non-Christians – could win a sympathetic hearing from an unregenerate world. He quoted from the editors' afterword to *Evangelicalism*, where they describe their philosophy of history. They openly admit that as modern evangelical historians they 'have accepted the standards of the professional guild as the framework for their writing. They have, at least for professional purposes, abandoned the providentialism that characterised most early histories of evangelicals'.⁹² Murray then commented:

87 Ibid., 10.

88 Ibid., 8, emphasis original.

89 Sweeney, 'Taking a Shot at Redemption', 43 and 45.

90 Richard C. Goode, 'The Radical Idea of Christian Scholarship: Plea for a Scandalous Historiography', in *Restoring the First-Century Church in the Twenty-First Century: Essays on the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, In Honor of Don Haymes*, edited by Warren Lewis and Hans Rollmann (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2005), 228. Cf. Walter Wink, *The Powers That Be: Theology for a New Millennium* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Stanley Hauerwas, *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), 133–52.

91 David Bebbington, *Patterns in History: A Christian Perspective on Historical Thought* (Vancouver: Regent College Publishing, 1990), 186. William Speck, in a review of C. T. McIntire's book on historiography, likewise said that the naturalist perspective was an 'abandonment of a discernable religious role': 'What Should be the Role of Christian Historians?' *Fides et Historia* 8.1 (Fall 1975), 76.

92 Noll, Bebbington, and Rawlyk, *Evangelicalism*, 411.

If the price to be paid by evangelicals in order to hold positions in secular universities, or to be published by non-evangelical publishers, is to cease to write Christian history primarily in terms of *redemption*, then it is too high. Recent decades have made clear that no evangelical can hold a theological post in a British university *and* be forthright in upholding an inspired Bible. Now we are getting the same lesson with respect to the teaching of history. The pressure to dilute biblical truths in order to gain wider influence is as old as human nature... Whatever apparent temporary gains there may be, surrender to pressure from the unregenerate mind has always led to the down-grade of true evangelical faith.⁹³

This providential approach to history is well-illustrated by Murray's biography of Edwards, written from a clearly evangelical, even Calvinist, perspective. In the introduction to the book Murray wrote, 'Whether or not a biographer of Jonathan Edwards reveals his personal standpoint at the outset makes little difference, for inevitably it will soon be apparent'.⁹⁴ He wrote of the 'anti-supernatural animus' that characterised many modern biographies of Edwards, especially those by Ola E. Winslow and Perry Miller.⁹⁵ Murray was plain that his own biography was a 'popular account of Edwards', and that a definitive study has yet to be published. Throughout the five-hundred pages Murray's own theological outlook is apparent. He not only sympathised with his subject, but with Edwards's theology. He was also open about the role of providence in the life of Edwards. Speaking of the change that a person underwent after experiencing the effects of revival, Murray said: 'This change came from God himself and yet God worked through his own Word'.⁹⁶ Such statements, though not replete, are not uncommon.

Murray's biography has been criticised for engaging in hagiography, painting an unrealistic portrait of Edwards as though the eighteenth-century pastor had no faults. As we saw in the introduction to this article, Trueman accused Murray of hagiography in the latter's biography of Lloyd-Jones. Of the Edwards biography, Stephen J. Stein, an editor of the Yale edition of Edwards's *Works* wrote, '[Murray] continually allows his affection for his subject to color his language. In some instances he sidesteps difficult, uncomplimentary dimensions of the story; he persists, for example, in calling Edwards's slave a "servant"'.⁹⁷ Allen C. Guelzo more explicitly said that 'Murray's *Edwards* is not so much a biography as it is a hagiography, calling to mind not Jonathan Edwards of Northampton but

93 Murray, 'Explaining Evangelical History,' 13–14, emphasis original.

94 Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, ix.

95 *Ibid.*, xxix. Cf. Ola Elizabeth Winslow, *Jonathan Edwards: 1703–1758* (New York: MacMillan, 1941); Perry Miller, *Jonathan Edwards* (New York: William Sloan & Associates, 1949).

96 Murray, *Jonathan Edwards*, 130.

97 Stephen J. Stein, 'Review of *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*', *Church History* 59.4 (December 1990), 565. Cf. *The Works of Jonathan Edwards, Volume 15: Notes on Scripture*, edited by Stephen J. Stein (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).

Martyn Lloyd-Jones of Westminster Chapel'.⁹⁸ This was fine for Murray who, in his aptly-titled book *Heroes*, wrote, 'True Christian biography should therefore concentrate on what is edifying and for the praise of Christ'.⁹⁹

Yet there are problems with hagiography, as outlined in three ways by Murray's critic, Carl Trueman. First, hagiography lacks historical accuracy and tends to ignore the desultory parts of a subject's character in order to preserve reputation. Thus it is untrustworthy history writing. Second, it runs the danger of seeing the world in Manichean terms of black and white, good versus bad, and fails to understand the complexities of the human condition. As Trueman says, 'Hagiography may inspire but too often it tells us less about what actually happened and more about the personal tastes of the author'.¹⁰⁰ The Bible does not fall into this trap, as it clearly portrays its 'heroes' with all of their foibles – one only has to think of David's sin with Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11). Third, hagiographies offer models for behaviour that no one can live up to, and prove to discourage rather than encourage. Rather, a person who struggles with sin is actually relatable to by an audience who suffers the same struggles. As Trueman said, 'I understand a man divided against himself'.¹⁰¹ Atherstone added a fourth problem to Trueman's list, that hagiography often shapes the subject's life to fit with the culture and lessons that the biographer wants to portray, instead of letting the figures of history speak for themselves from within their own culture.¹⁰² Thus the concerns of the subject in their own day are often missed.

III. The naturalist perspective

The second perspective, what can be called the 'naturalist view', – or more technically 'methodological naturalism'¹⁰³ – avoids appealing to the supernatural for explanations of historical causes. Rather, it looks to social and cultural factors to determine the meaning of past events. As Bowden explained, historians of this standpoint 'adhered to uniform procedures and standard conceptions of causal

98 Allen C. Guelzo, 'Review of *Jonathan Edwards: A New Biography*', *Fides et Historia* 21.2 (June 1989), 81. The word hagiography is also used of Murray by George M. Marsden, 'The Quest for the Historical Edwards: The Challenge of Biography', in *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad: Historical Memories, Cultural Moments, Global Horizons*, edited by David William King and Douglas A. Sweeney (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 3.

99 Iain H. Murray, *Heroes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), xi.

100 Carl R. Trueman, 'Writing on Athanasius: A General Note on Hagiography', *Reformation21* (June 2, 2011), <http://www.reformation21.org/blog/2011/06/writing-on-athanasius-a-genera.php> (accessed December 5, 2013).

101 Trueman, 'Writing on Athanasius'.

102 Atherstone, 'Hagiography and History', 54.

103 Cf. Timothy Larsen, 'Evangelicals, the Academy, and the Discipline of History', in *Beyond Integration? Inter/Disciplinary Possibilities for the Future of Christian Higher Education*, edited by Todd C. Ream, Jerry Pattengale, and David L. Riggs (Abilene: Abilene Christian University Press, 2012), 110.

relationships'.¹⁰⁴ If providence is primarily a study about the work of God over the course of time, history 'is a discipline that seeks to explain the character and behaviour of humans as they lived through time'.¹⁰⁵ The twentieth century saw the use of social sciences as a growing trend in the broader academic world, and, as Bebbington said, 'Some of the best work on religion in the modern world was achieved by applying sociological methods'.¹⁰⁶ Such methods include the use of statistics, economic theories, or understudied demographics like the Primitive Methodists, who had a significant impact on trade unions. Evangelical historians also began to study women's issues, race, and the rise and fall of nations.¹⁰⁷

Christian historians of both the providential and objective perspectives believe that God sovereignly controls history. The contested issue is not about the fact of providence, but whether it is appropriate to interpret it *as historians*. The naturalist historian answers no, it is not. Providence can be distinguished in two types: general and particular. Evangelical historians of both sides believe in both types. The debate is not about general providence, as its acknowledgement does not require comment. Rather, it is about particular providence – can it be said that God did such-and-such at a specific time? Bebbington put it starkly: 'Belief in particular providences seems incompatible with the conviction that there is a general providence'.¹⁰⁸ If the whole process of human history is directed by providence, why is there a need for particular providence? Added to that, Bebbington argued, is the problem of interpretation: 'How can we discern what is happening?' God's ways are complex and mysterious and 'claims to understand God's dealings with men seem bold or even ridiculous'.¹⁰⁹ Can God be at work in opposing events? Bebbington cited the example of the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588. While Elizabethan England celebrated it as a sign of God's providence, the Catholic Spaniards also believed that God had directed them to invade the heretical English. Which side was right?

With the issue of whether historians should discern divine intervention is that of academic acceptance. The recourse to natural explanations for past events is, in large part, because the academy does not allow for 'God-talk', especially in the discipline of history. As Bebbington explained: 'If [the historian] makes plain his religious commitment in his writing, will he not be excluding it from general notice and certainly from academic attention? The canons of ordinary historical scholarship have not permitted references to God for nearly 200 years.'¹¹⁰ This poses a problem for the Christian historian who wants his or her work to be accepted beyond the walls of the church or seminary. Evangelical historiography

104 Bowden, 'Ends and Means', 74.

105 John Fea, *Why Study History? Reflecting on the Importance of the Past* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013), 68.

106 Bebbington, 'Evangelical Discovery', 354.

107 *Ibid.*, 355–61.

108 Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 66.

109 *Ibid.*

110 *Ibid.*, 186.

has a number of exemplary advocates of the naturalist view – what has been called ‘the new evangelical historiography’¹¹¹ – who are active in, and respected by the academy. Such historians include Marsden, Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and Harry Stout in the United States,¹¹² as well as Bebbington in Britain, and the late George Rawlyk in Canada. Though they are self-professing evangelicals, they teach at major research universities, and publish with academic presses. Their historical method is well summed up in the afterword to the book *Evangelicalism* already quoted above. The contributors expressed themselves as ‘a cadre of professional historians’ who had ‘accepted the standards of the professional guild as the framework of their writing. They have, at least for professional purposes, abandoned the providentialism that characterized most earlier histories.’¹¹³

George Marsden is, in the words of James A. Patterson, ‘the pioneering dean of evangelical historiography’.¹¹⁴ In the afterword to *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, Marsden explained the task of the Christian historian. He asked whether Christianity should be viewed through the lens of ‘cultural development’ (the naturalist view) or through the lens of scripture (the supernaturalist view). He sided with the former, though he did not see that as compromising his Christian conviction. Appealing to the Incarnation of the Son of God, where Christ’s humanity was not compromised by his divinity, ‘so the reality of God’s other work in history, going well beyond what we might explain as natural phenomena, is not compromised by the fact that it is culturally defined’.¹¹⁵ Marsden argued that his work is a ‘study of things visible’ and thus uses ‘the modern mode of explanation’ and ‘natural historical causation’. This would not militate against believing that God is active in history. Rather, for Marsden, it is the *theologian’s* task to determine such things, not the historian’s. ‘The Christian historian takes an opposite, although complimentary, approach’. The historian is to concentrate on observable cultural forces and provide material that the theologian can use ‘to help distinguish God’s genuine work’.¹¹⁶ The historian knows that God works in history, but ‘outside of biblical revelation’ does not know ‘his precise purposes in permitting particular historical developments’.¹¹⁷ In *The Outrageous Idea of*

111 Leonard I. Sweet, ‘Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: The New Evangelical Historiography’, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56.3 (Autumn 1988), 397–416.

112 Cf. Maxie Burch, *The Evangelical Historians: The Historiography of George Marsden, Nathan Hatch and Mark Noll* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1996).

113 Noll, Bebbington and Rawlyk, *Evangelicalism*, 411–12.

114 James A. Patterson, ‘The Study of History’, in *Faith and Learning: A Handbook for Christian Higher Education*, edited by David S. Dockery (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 231.

115 George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006, new edition), 259.

116 Marsden, *Fundamentalism*, 260.

117 George M. Marsden, ‘A Christian Perspective for the Teaching of History’, in George M. Marsden and Frank Roberts, eds., *A Christian View of History?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 38.

Christian Scholarship he wrote, 'As scholars we are forced to deal with only those aspects of the picture for which human abilities are competent'.¹¹⁸

Marsden reflects a view of discerning the purposes of God that was articulated by the Reformer Martin Luther (1483–1546), who distinguished between *Deus absconditus* and *Deus revelatus*. In fact, according to Luther, the hidden will of God lies beyond the scope not only of the historian, but of the theologian as well. In *Bondage of the Will* Luther discussed the hidden will of God as something that 'is not to be inquired into, but to be reverently adored, as by far the most awesome secret of the Divine Majesty. He has kept it to Himself and forbidden us to know it; and it is much more worthy of reverence than an infinite number of Corycian caverns!'¹¹⁹ Luther put it more bluntly in the earlier *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518): 'That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the invisible things of God as though they were clearly perceptible in those things which have actually happened [Rom. 1:20]'.¹²⁰ The German Reformer echoed God's words to the prophet in Isaiah 55:8–9:

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,'
declares the Lord.

As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts (NIV).

Instead of contrasting the historian with the theologian, then, Timothy Larsen's distinction is better. He argued that to speak to the hidden things of God (to use Luther's terminology) 'is to confuse the work of an academic historian with the ministry of the prophet'.¹²¹ The outworking of particular providence can only be known if God reveals them, as he does in scripture. Thus the prophet, or those who were divinely inspired by scripture, has the right to interpret providence. At best, historians' attempts to understand God's ways in the world are provisional. As John Fea, chair of the history department at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania, said, it is 'difficult to know what God was doing on a more macro or universal level in human history'.¹²² Therefore Christian historians should approach the past attuned to God's 'transcendent mystery' coupled with a 'healthy dose of humility'.¹²³

As Iain Murray's providential history is well-illustrated by his biography of Edwards, so too is Marsden's objective history exemplified by his *Jonathan Ed-*

118 George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 95.

119 Martin Luther, *The Bondage of the Will*, ed., J. I. Packer and O. R. Johnston (Grand Rapids: Fleming H. Revell, 1957), 169.

120 Martin Luther, 'Heidelberg Disputation', in Timothy F. Lull, ed., *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1989), 16.

121 Larsen, 'Evangelicals', 110.

122 Fea, *Why Study History?*, 81.

123 *Ibid.*

wards: *A Life*, published by Yale University Press on the tercentenary of Edwards's birth.¹²⁴ In the introduction to the book Marsden wrote, 'I have tried to tell the story of Edwards and his family with relatively few interpretive intrusions. I hope that I have done this in a way that is, as much as possible, objective in the sense of fair-minded and true to the evidence.'¹²⁵ This follows his earlier stated concern about Christian history in general: 'If Christian motives are obtrusive, or if a hidden Christian agenda is uncovered, Christian and non-Christian historians alike usually agree that it is bad history.'¹²⁶

As objective as Marsden's biography of Edwards is, Murray wrote a favourable review of it in *Banner of Truth*. He recognised it as the definitive life of Edwards that he had hoped for in the introduction to his own biography of Edwards, and he also recognised Marsden's 'fundamental sympathy' with his subject. Murray observed that Marsden 'moves from sympathy to advocacy' and could even call him an 'apologist for the Christian faith as well as a biographer.'¹²⁷

What then are the limits of naturalist historiography for evangelicals? In 2011 Mark Noll wrote an essay examining and critiquing the philosophy of history outlined by F. H. Bradley. Bradley argued against the possibility of divine intervention, including the incarnation and resurrection of Christ.¹²⁸ He offered a balance to those historians – he mentioned Bruce Kuklick and Van Harvey in particular¹²⁹ – who want to take historical objectivity to such a degree as to exclude supernaturalism *tout court*. Noll began by critiquing Bradley along three lines. First, he argued that Bradley conflated the rules of critical history with those of natural science, though the two are not identical; second, where there is commonality between critical history and natural science, Bradley failed to note the limits of the latter; third, Bradley's critical history was not critical at the right places, especially in his failure to recognise the complexity of doing history and the validity of metaphysical concerns, including his own metaphysical assumptions.¹³⁰ Noll then offered an alternative critical history that took into account the possibility of divine intervention in the world. It is here that Noll reflected the limits to which evangelical naturalist historiography is willing to go without needing to abandon faith commitments.

124 George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards: A Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

125 *Ibid.*, 5.

126 George M. Marsden, 'Common Sense and the Spiritual Vision of History', in *History and Historical Understanding*, edited by C. T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 56.

127 Iain H. Murray, 'Jonathan Edwards: A Life', *Banner of Truth* 481 (October 2003), 16.

128 Mark A. Noll, 'Coming to terms as a Christian historian with F. H. Bradley', *Fides et Historia* 43.2 (Summer–Fall 2011): 18–29.

129 Noll cited Bruce Kuklick, 'Reflections on Religion, Historical Progress, and Professional Historians', in *British Abolitionism and the Question of Moral Progress in History*, edited by Donald A. Yerxa (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2012) and Van Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

130 Noll, 'Coming to terms', 23–27.

Interestingly, Noll appealed to the traditional Christian doctrines of creation, providence, and incarnation, 'Christian superstructures' that offer a reason for beginning intellectual inquiry with the supernatural acts of God, and a general picture of reality in which God is both outside of time and inside the world.¹³¹ He distinguished between God's transcendence and immanence – when the former is in view, 'supernatural categories are appropriate', yet with the latter, 'natural categories are appropriate'.¹³² This reflects Fea's chapter on 'Christian resources for the study of the past', where he explained the importance of humanity's creation in the image of God, the reality of human sin, and the incarnation as an approach to the past.¹³³ It also reflected Marsden's discussion of 'the positive contributions of theological context', such as creation, the incarnation, the Holy Spirit, and the human condition.¹³⁴ All of this demonstrates that methodological naturalism does not require an absolute rejection of supernatural perspectives in the study of the past.

Before looking into how an objective historian can utilise the tools provided by faith, one more twentieth-century dispute over history writing is in order. In 1991 Harry S. Stout of Yale University published a study of George Whitefield called *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*. Reactions to the book fit into the overall debate that we have been tracing, and illustrate it with crystal clarity. Stout is a deservedly respected scholar of colonial and revolutionary America, and *Divine Dramatist* is a noteworthy addition to Whitefield studies and has become a standard interpretation. In an essay for *Books & Culture* Stout explained his self-perception as an historian, and his historical methodology.¹³⁵ Before publishing the book he saw himself as existing comfortably within the two worlds of 'professional' and 'Christian' historian. He wrote 'in disinterested terms' about American Puritan theology, leaving it up to the reader if he or she wanted to share such beliefs. He explained his method in some detail and it is worth quoting at length:

As a scholar writing intellectual history, my vantage point was that of 'objectivity', subject to the canons of 'scientific evidence' shared by most professional historians. Observing the rules of objectivity does not imply that historians have no faith, nor does it imply neutrality to all subjects. It refers rather to a methodology and a tone. The methodology stresses rigorous recovery of all relevant facts, no matter where they lead. 'Truth', in proximate terms, is the goal of most professional historians. Such truth makes no claims to complete objectivity or divine inspiration. It rests on the level of secondary causes that all reasonable scholars would see and

131 *Ibid.*, 28.

132 *Ibid.*

133 Fea, *Why Study History?*, 84–108.

134 Marsden, *Outrageous Idea*, 83–100. See also Larsen, 'Evangelicals', 113–15.

135 Harry S. Stout, 'Biography as Battleground', *Books & Culture* (July/August 1996), <http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/1996/julaug/6b4009.html> (accessed December 19, 2013).

understand. Of course, there would be differences among historians, but differing opinions would always be rooted in 'facts' that described the past 'as it really happened'.¹³⁶

The historian was to be interested in secondary causes, not providence, and should pursue those causes 'regardless of what it does to the image or reputation of his sources'. This was the approach that he brought to *Divine Dramatist*. He wanted to portray Whitefield as 'a respectable – and respected – part of the academy's legacy as well as the church's'. He wanted to 'bridge the gap' between what Christians saw in Whitefield, and what the historical profession saw. 'Recognizing that Whitefield's historical significance was not in intellectual or theological history, I couched the biography in social and cultural history'.¹³⁷ The book argued that Whitefield was 'Anglo-America's first modern celebrity', and 'culture hero' who lived his life almost exclusively for public performance'.¹³⁸ Thus when seeking to determine Whitefield's success as a revivalist, Stout was taken 'to the most unexpected and ironic source: the eighteenth-century English stage'.¹³⁹ As a result of his research, Stout concluded that Whitefield was a great 'actor-preacher' who 'adopted the assumptions of the actor'.¹⁴⁰

Stout's interpretation of Whitefield caused much consternation, particularly among providentialist historians like Arnold Dallimore and his friends at the Banner of Truth.¹⁴¹

IV. *Tertium quid*: An alternative proposal

Are the 'providentialist' and 'objective' views of Christian history the only two options? Can there be a mediating position that allows Christian historians to remain faithful both to their vocational and spiritual callings? Or can the two be blended into a broader, audience-sensitive option that utilises the best elements of both? To answer such questions we must remember what Martin I. Klauber observed: 'there is no single "Christian" approach to studying history'.¹⁴² While

136 Ibid.

137 Ibid.

138 Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism*, Library of Religious Biography (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), xiii, xiv and xv.

139 Ibid., xviii.

140 Ibid., xix.

141 For details of the debate over Whitefield historiography, with particular attention to Stout and Dallimore, see Ian Hugh Clary, 'Pastor-Historian: Arnold Dallimore and the Writing of Whitefield', *The Reformed Theological Review* 73.2 (August 2014): 117–32. See also David White, 'Review of *The Divine Dramatist*', *Banner of Truth* 366 (March 1994), 29; Iain Murray, 'Explaining Evangelical History', *Banner of Truth* 370 (July 1994), 8–13; Harry Stout, 'Reviewers Reviewed', *Banner of Truth* 378 (March 1995), 7–10.

142 Martin I. Klauber, 'Conclusion: Historical Method in the Christian Tradition' in *Historians of the Christian Tradition: Their Methodology and Influence on Western Thought*, edited by Michael Bauman and Martin I. Klauber (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1998), 624.

we have been discussing the two options in this essay, we cannot be reductionistic about them. Throughout our survey we have seen that so-called ‘naturalist historians’ do recognise the providence of God over human affairs, and that they are willing, at times, to use the tools of evangelical faith in their scholarship. Mark Noll’s response to Bruce Kuklick and F. H. Bradley is an example. Advocates of the second model advocate writing providential history under certain conditions. These involve, primarily, the issue of audience.

A blended perspective of utilizing both ends of the spectrum at particular times, was well summarised by historian Andrew Atherstone at the 2012 Westminster Conference in London. He argued for the legitimacy of both historiographical perspectives. According to Atherstone, ‘Evangelicals need to embrace both styles of history writing, the “confessional” and the “professional”’.¹⁴³ Both are justifiable evangelical pursuits, and each has a different function for different audiences; he advised that historians must not drive a wedge between the two as if they were polar opposites.¹⁴⁴ Providential historians who write for the church can still publish work that is historically accurate and serves as a contribution to a particular area of study; they can put forth a body of work that withstands the scrutiny of the historians’ guild. Likewise, professional historians can write well for a popular audience, bringing their historical learning to bear, and written in a way that will encourage Christians. As Atherstone said, the church needs providential history that is intentionally written to encourage the church. Naturalist history is also necessary to speak to a wider audience. Murray called Marsden an apologist for the faith in his biography of Edwards. Likewise, Atherstone wrote, ‘Evangelicals serving in an academic context have an apologetic responsibility. Their faith may be less explicit in their historical method but is still likely to shape their work in a number of ways’. These include how they choose their topic, what kind of research questions they will address, and allowing Christian themes to come to the fore.¹⁴⁵ This fits well within the larger program of intellectual history as set out by the Cambridge political historian Quentin Skinner, and taken up by a number of professional Christian historians in the book *Seeing Things Their Way*.¹⁴⁶ Evangelical historians can emphasise the faith commitments of their subject, and do so in such a way as to not compromise academic standards.

Bebbington made a similar point when he reminded us that historians are not writing for themselves ‘but for an audience’.¹⁴⁷ The historian’s argument should be established so as to convince the audience of its validity. ‘If a Christian

143 Atherstone, ‘Hagiography and History’, 58.

144 *Ibid.*, 43.

145 *Ibid.*, 58–59.

146 *Seeing Things Their Way: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion*, edited by Alister Chapman, John Coffey and Brad S. Gregory (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009). Cf. Quentin Skinner, ‘Introduction: Seeing Things Their Way’, in *Visions of Politics: Regarding Method, Volume 1* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 1–7.

147 Bebbington, *Patterns in History*, 186.

historian is writing for the religious community, there is no problem about the acceptability of providential history'.¹⁴⁸ Bebbington spoke of the 'rhetorical nature of historiography', that (depending on whom the intended reader of a book is) providential writing can be more explicit.¹⁴⁹ There is no gulf between supernatural and natural historiography, for even if a work of history has no explicit Christian allusions, the Christian worldview of the writer shapes its composition so that the published work will be consistent with their presuppositions: 'the Christian content will be implicit rather than explicit'.¹⁵⁰ As Atherstone argued, and Murray alluded to, even professional history can have an apologetic task, namely to reveal 'as credible the belief that God stands behind and acts within historical process'.¹⁵¹ A good example of how to appropriate these two perspectives on a Christian philosophy of historiography comes from David Larsen of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He argued in his book on the history of preachers that to get 'an effective blend' of history one needs to read both the 'hagiographers' and the 'realists'.¹⁵²

The two approaches both also have precedent set for them in the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. We have already noted the way Murray uses Luke as an example of a providentialist historian, often as a means of demonstrating the professional historian's compromise with the world.¹⁵³ However, a counter-example could be given to illustrate the biblical legitimacy of the naturalist perspective. Though chastised for failing to mention the specific providence of God in particular historical events, the professional Christian historian can look to the author of the book of Esther from the Hebrew Bible as a guide. As Karen H. Jobes explained, Esther 'contains neither the divine name *Yahweh* nor *'elohim*, the Hebrew noun meaning *God*'.¹⁵⁴ This posed problems for both Jewish and Christian interpreters who struggled over the book's canonicity. No commentary on Esther was produced in the Christian church's first seven centuries. Yet, as David G. Firth indicated in the subtitle of his commentary on Esther, God

148 Ibid., 186–87.

149 Ibid., 187.

150 Ibid.

151 Ibid., 188.

152 David L. Larsen, *The Company of the Preachers: A History of the Biblical Preaching from the Old Testament to the Modern Era* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 371–72.

153 See for instance his critique of David Ceri Jones in *Banner of Truth* 555 (December 2009), Cf. David Ceri Jones, "A Glorious Morn?" Methodism and the Rise of Evangelicalism in Wales, 1735–62', in *British Evangelical Identities Past and Present*, edited by Mark Smith, Studies in Evangelical Thought and History (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2008), 97–113.

154 Karen H. Jobes, *Esther*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 19. Though not a historical book per se, the *Song of Songs* is also relevant as it does not contain any direct mention of the names of God. Cf. George M. Schwab, 'Song of Songs 1', in *The Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, edited by Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 738.

is 'present but unseen'.¹⁵⁵ While it does not make explicit mention of God, 'the scarcity of overt theological statements in the book suggests that the author wanted his readership to deduce his message, at least in part, through his literary presentation'.¹⁵⁶ Forrest S. Weiland argued that the author likely omitted 'God's visible activity' though 'strongly implied His presence'.¹⁵⁷ The allusions to divine providence are evident 'through the author's pervasive use of irony, the placement of scenes, the many coincidences, and the reversal of events'.¹⁵⁸ Also, Esther 4:3, 14; 9:1, 22 are seen by a number of scholars as indirect references to God's activity. However, Weiland may be overstating his case when he said, 'In this presentation God Himself emerges as the centerpiece of the story'.¹⁵⁹

If the author of Esther can write a history with only a veiled reference to YHWH, why should naturalist Christian historians be castigated for not mentioning the direct intervention of God in their historical narratives? Not only should Esther be seen as a biblical justification for professional historians writing for the academy, but it can also provide helpful tools for historians who do wish subtly to insert their theological convictions in their work. Just as the author to Esther directs his or her story along certain ironic lines leaving readers with the distinct implication that YHWH was working behind the scenes, so too can Christian historians write in such a way as to imply the presence of divine intervention, along those lines articulated by Atherstone.

V. Conclusion

So, is there a Christian way to do history? As this essay has shown, evangelicals have debated this question since they began to self-reflect in newly gathered academic societies. While there have been a variety of different responses, they generally fall into the two categories surveyed above. The supernaturalist argues positively for the use of providence in historical method, whereas the naturalist uses it implicitly as part of an overall social and cultural approach. Though each can have their pitfalls, neither fall to the theological problem (for the Christian at least) of denying the role of God over and in history.

This essay, while surveying the various ways Christian historians have answered this question, has also pushed the discussion forward, advocating for a median between Bowden's two extremes on the historiographical spectrum. This middle perspective stresses the need for historians to be aware of their audience and write accordingly. It is appropriate for an historian to write providential history, being careful not to fall into some of the snares of hagiography or

155 David G. Firth, *The Message of Esther*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Nottingham: InterVarsity Press, 2010), title page.

156 Forrest S. Weiland, 'Literary Clues to God's Providence in the Book of Esther', *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160 (January–March 2003), 34.

157 *Ibid.*, 38.

158 *Ibid.*, 43.

159 *Ibid.*, 42.

anachronism, if it is intended for the church. It is also justifiable for an evangelical historian to write professional history for the academy, following the standards of secular scholarship, so long as they ultimately do not concede their own Christian belief in the process. This third option has been expressed by others, as we have seen, like Atherstone and Bebbington.

This essay took up the exegetical challenge posed by providential historians like Iain Murray, who argued that biblical narratives like those in the Acts of the apostles would be denigrated by academic historiography. By looking to the Old Testament book of Esther as a model for professional historians, we find exegetical warrant for the naturalist approach. Just as the author of this biblical book did not appeal to or make mention of God, though his presence is everywhere implied, so too can the evangelical historian write objective history without compromising Christian belief. Though this synthesis is not novel, and the debate is still carried on with fervour by both sides, it is hoped that we have given some sense of the history of the historiographical question, and provided further biblical rationale for the two approaches – evangelical historians can honour both God and their vocations in the way they write about the past, and serve his church.

Abstract

The debate over Christian history has at times been acrimonious with those advocating the 'supernaturalist' approach accusing professional historians of compromise, and the 'naturalist' historians accusing the providential historians of sub-academic standards. Is there an approach that can appropriate the best of both without pointing accusatory fingers? This essay traces this debate in detail and offers a third way to approach history as a Christian that is grounded in Scripture and takes into account the audience an historian writes for.

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