

# QUO VADIS CHURCH HISTORY? SOME THESES ON THE FUTURE OF CHURCH HISTORY AS AN ACADEMIC THEOLOGICAL DISCIPLINE<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

*In response to the invitation to reflect on the future of Church History as an academic theological discipline, this essay discusses five theses: (i) The vitality of Church History as an academic discipline is linked to its ability to contribute towards a responsible engagement with the Christian past in a culture of historical amnesia and harmful memory; (ii) a constructive dialogue with the social sciences can be helpful en route to a more responsible historical hermeneutic for Church History; (iii) as a theological discipline Church History ought to be attentive to “history from below”; (iv) it is necessary for Church History to continue reflecting on its mapping habits; (v) the focus on shared history, which attends to the way in which divisive histories are interwoven, holds much promise for South African church historiography.*

**Keywords:** Church History; Historiography, Memory, History From Below, Shared History

## Introduction

In order to avoid the intimidating task of reflecting on the future of Church History as an academic theological discipline, one could use as an opening gambit the remark that this discipline is not about the future but about the past, and that the past in itself is complex enough. Such a ploy would, however, not be all that convincing since many scholars will rightly challenge an objectivistic vision of history that is abstracted from the present and the future. As the church historian Justo González observes in a chapter on the “The Future of Church History” in his book *The Changing Shape of Church History*: “No matter how much historians might claim that they are studying the past objectively, the fact is that all historians must necessarily look at the past from their own perspectives... Furthermore, the perspective of a historian is not only a matter of the present moment, but also of the vision of the future from which history is studied and written.”<sup>2</sup>

González continues his discussion by noting how different historiographical projects were influenced by their vision of the future. For instance, when Eusebius wrote his *Church History*, his vision of the future was mostly one in which the new order inaugurated by Constantine would continue and expand. In contrast, when Augustine wrote his *City of God* more than a century later, he did not have the same belief in the progress of the empire as Eusebius did, since Rome had fallen. The envisioned futures which underlie Eusebius’ and

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<sup>1</sup> This article was read as a paper at a conference on the theme “Theology – Quo Vadis?” at the Faculty of Theology, Stellenbosch University (10 June 2009).

<sup>2</sup> González, JL, *The Changing Shape of Church History* (St Louis: Chalice Press, 2002), 145.

Augustine's important works resulted in different perspectives on the relationship between Christianity and the Roman Empire. González recalls other examples as well, yet the point is clear: "the 'future' from which church history is read and written has a profound impact on the content and interpretation of that history."<sup>3</sup>

We are rightfully reminded by church historians like González that our vision of the future impacts on our interpretation of (church) history. A church historical engagement with the past will therefore consciously or unconsciously be determined by our own social and theological location as well as by teleological concerns, including our implicit or explicit views on the *telos* of history. With this in mind, and with apology to Martin Luther's "95 theses" and Walter Benjamin's "Theses on History", this papers offer five theses that in my view require thorough and creative engagement in order for Church History to deepen its status as a healthy academic and theological discipline.<sup>4</sup>

### Five theses as a response to questions on the future of Church History

*The vitality of Church History as an academic discipline is linked to its ability to contribute towards a responsible engagement with the Christian past in a culture of historical amnesia and harmful memory*

In his famous essay "On the uses and disadvantages of history for life" (1874) Friedrich Nietzsche powerfully challenges the historicism of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, although he did not deny the historicity of life. He acknowledges that we need history, but argues that "we need it for reasons different from those for which the idler in the garden of knowledge needs it... We need it, that is to say, for the sake of life and action, not so as to turn comfortably away from life and action."<sup>5</sup> Moreover, Nietzsche saw his views as untimely, since it is his aim to challenge the impressive historical culture of his age, arguing "that we are all suffering from a consuming fever of history and ought at least to recognize that we are suffering from it."<sup>6</sup> Therefore he invites the reader to meditate on the proposition that "*the unhistorical and the historical are necessary in equal measure for the health of an individual, of a people, and of a culture.*"<sup>7</sup> While Nietzsche's critique of an overburdened notion of history in the intellectual climate of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Germany is understandable and offers a perennial challenge, we can ask whether this historical fever that Nietzsche refers

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>4</sup> In this article I mostly use the term "Church History" to refer to the discipline. This term, however, is not uncontested. Many scholars and institutions prefer the term "History of Christianity" in order to challenge certain theological assumptions associated with "Church History", presuppositions that they view as harmful to the discipline's academic integrity. The concerns of those who prefer the term "History of Christianity" need to be taken seriously, since they rightly challenge the way in which Church History has often isolated itself from the social sciences, and at times has offered sweeping theologized claims that do not respect the mystery of history. This includes large and overconfident claims concerning our ability to evaluate and judge history, as well as placing a salvation history grid over history in a hermeneutically suspect way. On the other hand, those critical of the term "History of Christianity" have felt, also with good justification, that this term can be used in a way that conveys an anti-theological bias that will also influence the practice of the discipline. If one uses the term "Church History" one also needs to be sensitive to the porous borders with other related disciplines and sub-disciplines such as "the history of doctrine", "historical theology", "Church polity", "the history of Christian thought" and "religious history". When surveying the bountiful material in this regard, it is soon clear that there is a terminological fluidity within the broad discipline that resists easy and neat categorization.

<sup>5</sup> Nietzsche, F, *Untimely Meditations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 59. Nietzsche's essay was original published under the title "Vom Nutzen und Nachtheil der Historie für das Leben" as the second part of his *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen* (Leipzig: Verlag van EE Fritsch, 1874).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

to has not been largely supplanted today by a historical amnesia. One could argue that there is a real need today to foster a stronger historical consciousness in a cultural matrix where historical forgetfulness seems to prevail. From a Christian perspective, one can thus plead for the importance and urgency of remembering the Christian past (to use the title of a book by Robert Wilken).<sup>8</sup>

But the challenge is not merely to remember the Christian past. As Paul Ricoeur has rightly said, we suffer from both too little and too much memory.<sup>9</sup> We seemingly live in a world where there is, on the one hand, historical amnesia and an unhealthy loss of memory, while, on the other hand, processes of commemoration are often abused in the service of harmful ideologically-driven projects of identity construction. In the process our lack of engagement as well as our misguided engagement with the past invites and incites polarization and violence. Hence the importance of reflecting on the question of *how* we remember and *how* we construct the past. In this process Church History as discipline can contribute to a passion for the past by challenging historical amnesia, as well as exemplifying a responsible engagement with the past that counters harmful memory.

Amidst a growing culture of historical amnesia, one of the tasks of Church History will continue to be the work of motivating students to consult the archive (understood in both the broader sense of collected knowledge of the past, as well as in the more specific sense of professional archives). This requires technical as well as hermeneutical skills. The training of students in this regard remains a priority and it is important that these skills be incorporated into, or remain part of, the Church History/History of Christianity curricula at seminaries and universities. Part of this type of training in Church History will certainly remain the skill to engage with primary sources. An approach to Church History that is critical of the over-optimistic methodological presuppositions regarding the noble dream of historical objectivity should not imply that we can find shortcuts around the meticulous and laborious engagement with documents and primary sources. In settings where people have access to archives, there is especially an opportunity to incite a passion for archival work by incorporating it in creative ways into the curriculum. In addition, it needs to be noted that “historians are increasingly turning to visual, oral, aural, virtual and kinaesthetic sources.”<sup>10</sup> Reflection is therefore also needed on how to appropriate so-called “alternative sources” into the church historical discourse.

In the process, however, it remains important to counter an epistemological and hermeneutical naïveté, as if an engagement with the primary sources automatically implies responsible church historical work. We need to remember that even “original sources” do not tell the complete story and even the best archives offer us a limited window onto the past. Access to archives and primary sources does not absolve us from the task of *interpreting* the sources and placing them within meaningful interpretive frameworks and narrative configurations.

The church historical task, moreover, does not merely entail consulting the archive in a responsible and accountable way, but also funding the archive with more specialized work. The vast field of Church History offers a formidable challenge in this regard. As Bradley

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Wilken, RL, *Remembering the Christian Past* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, P, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004). Ricoeur remarks: “I continue to be troubled by the unsettling spectacle of memory here, and an excess of forgetting elsewhere” (xi).

<sup>10</sup> Barber, S and Peniston-Bird, CM, *History Beyond the Text: A Student’s Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources* (London: Routledge, 2009), 1. This book contains chapters on alternative sources such as fine art, the cartoon, the photograph, film and television, music, oral history, the internet, landscape, architecture and material culture.

and Muller have noted, "the broad field of church history is increasingly complex and highly fragmented."<sup>11</sup> No matter which periodization of Church History one uses, different areas of Church History require different technical and language skills. It thus goes without saying that no scholar can competently work in the whole field, hence the need for specialization. In South Africa one remains concerned about the fact that a lack of knowledge of, for instance, Latin, Greek, German and French is often a hindrance for those students interested in doing specialized scholarly work on periods such as Late Ancient, Byzantine, Medieval and Reformation Christianity. The discipline will benefit immensely if more students with these skills will do postgraduate work in Church History / History of Christianity. One can also note that students' skills in reading Dutch is deteriorating, leading to much of the important material related to South African Church historiography being inaccessible for many. But these difficulties ought not to discourage students who want to work in the field of Church History. Students' proficiency in South African languages offers the opportunity to work on topics inaccessible to many international scholars.

In reflecting on the future of Church History and the related disciplines within the South African contexts, one should note that the focus on South African religious, church and theological historiography remains a priority.<sup>12</sup> One needs to acknowledge the important contribution of the existing corpus of material, but much work still needs to be done. The important role that oral history can play in "funding the archive" has often been highlighted in the discourse on South African church historiography, and the methodological and practical work already done in this area is to be commended.<sup>13</sup>

The challenges for Church History to consult and fund the archive of the Christian past remain formidable, but it is worthwhile to take on these challenges in an environment of historical amnesia and harmful memory. Such an undertaking requires a responsible historical hermeneutic that is both sympathetic and critical in its approach. Margaret Miles puts it well in her book *The Word Made Flesh*: "A history of Christian thought must narrate the triumphal story in which a small local cult within Judaism became a world religion and empire. But it must also include the failures, abuses, and violence of the Christian past. In short, it must be both sympathetic and critical. It must be sympathetic in order to present the vivid beauty of Christian resources of ideas, artworks, and practices. And it must be critical because it is not only a history of the past, but also a history for the present."<sup>14</sup>

*A constructive dialogue with the social sciences can be helpful en route to a more responsible historical hermeneutic for Church History*

In an essay "From Church History to Religious History: Strengths and Weaknesses of South African Religious Historiography" (published in 1997), Phillippe Denis makes the following observation: "In South Africa, church history is an isolated discipline, almost completely cut off from the social sciences and from secular history in particular. Its

<sup>11</sup> Bradley, JE and Muller, RA, *Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 2.

<sup>12</sup> One does need to add that it will be a pity if the focus on South African church historiography is positioned over against the need for work in general church history. Given the current growth in the area of Early Church / Late Antiquity studies, one can especially bemoan the neglect of this area in South African church historical circles. This fact points to the need for a quantitative and qualitative enlargement of the circle of scholars working in the discipline.

<sup>13</sup> See, for instance, Denis, P (ed.), *Orality, Memory & the Past: Listening to Voices of Black Clergy under Colonialism and Apartheid* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2000). For a valuable collection on oral history, cf. Perks, R and Thomson, A, *The Oral History Reader* (second edition) (London, Routledge, 2008).

<sup>14</sup> Miles, Margaret, *The Word Made Flesh: A History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), xiv.

academic status can be described as weak. This situation has historical roots. In South Africa, church history has always been regarded as part of theology and is usually being taught by theologians with little or no training in secular history and hardly any familiarity with the social sciences.”<sup>15</sup> Denis’s remark is representative of the critique of a number of church historians as well as scholars from other disciplines who have made a plea over the last few decades for a stronger interaction between Church History and the social sciences.<sup>16</sup>

The conversation with the social sciences on historiography is especially promising for the reflection on an adequate methodology for doing church and theological historiography. With this in mind, I want to highlight the New Testament scholar Bernard Lategan’s critique of Reformed church historiography in his important article “Nuwere ontwikkelinge op die gebied van die geskiedskrywing – ’n geleentheid vir herbesinning na 350 jaar van gereformeertheid”, published in the collection *350 Jaar Gereformerd / 350 Years Reformed*. Lategan refers to two noticeable characteristics of Reformed historiography in South Africa that reflect a hermeneutical shortcoming, namely its lack of context, as well as its mono-dimensional presentation.<sup>17</sup> Lategan moreover points to what he views as the surprising absence of any methodological and hermeneutical reflection on the historical task in most of the Reformed church historiographical projects. A further characteristic of this type of historiography is the seamless transition from source to description.<sup>18</sup> Description is thus equated with reality, displaying a lack of sensitivity to the fact that the historical material could also be arranged in other meaningful configurations. Lategan sets his critique of Reformed historiography within the context of the recent developments in historiography, with a specific focus on the emphasis of the so-called “linguistic turn” according to which the writing of history is not merely a reconstruction of the past, but a construction.

In my view, church historical discourse in South Africa can gain much by taking note of Lategan’s critique of Reformed church historiography in South Africa and his implicit plea for a greater engagement with some newer developments in the area of historiography.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Denis, P, “From Church History to Religious History: Strengths and Weaknesses of South African Religious Historiography”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 99, November 1997:84-93, 85.

<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Southey, ND, “History and Church History in South Africa: Some Reflections”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XIV, 1988:107-123; Southey, N, “History, Church History and Historical Theology in South Africa”, *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 68, September 1989:5-16; Pillay, GJ, “The relations between church history and general history: reflections on Adolf von Harnack’s view”, *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XX/ 2, 1992:156-168; Adonis, JC, “Kerkgeskiedskrywing in Suid-Afrika: ’n Kritiese evaluasie”, *NGTT* 43/ 1 & 2, 2002:7-21.

<sup>17</sup> Lategan, BC, “Nuwere ontwikkelinge op die gebied van die geskiedskrywing – ’n geleentheid vir herbesinning na 350 jaar van gereformeertheid”. Coertzen, P (ed.), *350 Jaar Gereformerd / 350 Years Reformed 1652-2002* (Bloemfontein: CLF, 2002), 270. For Lategan these two characteristics (the lack of context and the mono-dimensional approach) are closely linked. The lack of context prevents the multiplicity of meanings of specific events from becoming evident and because the potential for a multiplicity of meanings remains hidden, it unavoidably leads to a mono-dimensional understanding of the past. This hermeneutical shortcoming, Lategan argues, influences the Dutch Reformed Church’s ability or inability to function in a diversified ecclesiastical setup, in a pluralistic religious environment and in a multidimensional democratic dispensation (270).

<sup>18</sup> Lategan, “Nuwere ontwikkelinge”, 271. See also his related essay “History, Historiography, and Reformed Hermeneutics at Stellenbosch” in Alston, WM and Welker, M (eds.), *Reformed Theology: Identity and Ecumenicity II: Biblical Interpretation in the Reformed Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007). Lategan writes in conversation with the work of Droysen: “The essence of historical inquiry is not its critical dimension, but its interpretive ability. The goal of history is not to understand bygone days, but to understand what remains from those times and what is still present today” (169).

<sup>19</sup> For some helpful introductions on the crucial developments in 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century debates, with literature, see Breisach, E, *Historiography: Ancient, Medieval, and Modern* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition) (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1994); Clark, EA, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge: Harvard

Such an engagement can be very fruitful *en route* to a more responsible historical hermeneutic for engaging with church history. Lategan refers to the work of historians (or meta-historians) such as Kosseleck, Rüsen, Ankersmit and White. The ideas of scholars working in the field of historical theory need to be differentiated and approached critically, but they indeed hold promise to open exiting avenues for the way we view the (church) historical task today. A work that is in my view especially valuable in this regard is Paul Ricoeur's monumental book *Memory, History, Forgetting*. This work offers a convincing constructive proposal as well as an informative close reading of some of the most influential literature on historiography.<sup>20</sup>

An approach to Church History that isolates the discipline from conversations with the social sciences might easily fall prey to an uncritical methodology. We need to remind ourselves that historical understanding is a hermeneutical process and that hermeneutics is not merely a relevant discipline for Biblical Studies, but that it also lies at the heart of Church History and related subjects such as the history of doctrine. The plea for ongoing hermeneutical sensitivity in Church History does not mean that the discipline is reduced to methodological questions. It does mean, though, that a continuous focus on adequate methodology, also in conversation with the social sciences, is of paramount importance for the intellectual integrity of the discipline – eschewing this task will cut the discipline off from sources that might offer possible revitalization.

*As a theological discipline Church History ought to be attentive to 'history from below'*

In his reflection *After Ten Years* (written for his friends from prison) the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls for the importance of the "the view from below". He writes: "We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled – in short, from the perspective of those who suffer."<sup>21</sup> This emphasis on the importance of "a view from below" has found concretization in much of the scholarly (church) historical work done over the last few decades.

An interesting project in this regard is the seven-volume series "A People's History of Christianity" (with Denis Janz as General editor).<sup>22</sup> As the Editorial Foreword makes clear, this series seeks to break new church historical ground by looking at Christianity's past from the vantage point of people's history. This approach does not view the church first and foremost as a hierarchical-institutional-bureaucratic corporation, but rather focuses on the religious lives and pious practices of the laity and the ordinary faithful. This undertaking to write a people's history, also referred to as a history from below, or grassroots history, or popular history, is not a new theme in academic historical studies. Its roots are traced back

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University Press, 2004); Iggers, GG, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1999, with new epilogue 2005, expanded version of his earlier German text). Cf. also Bentley, M (ed.), *Companion to Historiography* (New York: Routledge, 2007) and Budd, A (ed.), *The Modern Historiography Reader: Western Sources* (London: Routledge, 2009). For a reflection from a more explicit theological perspective, see Tilley, TW, *History, Theology & Faith: Dissolving the Modern Problematic* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books 1970).

<sup>20</sup> For an engagement with Ricoeur's *Memory, History, Forgetting*, see my essay "Reconfiguring Ecclesial Identity: In Conversation with Paul Ricoeur", *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae* XXXIII/ 1, 2007:273-293.

<sup>21</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 17.

<sup>22</sup> The seven volumes in this series, all published by Fortress Press (Minneapolis), are: Horsley, R (ed.), *Christian Origins*; Burrus, V (ed.), *Late Ancient Christianity*; Krueger, D (ed.), *Byzantine Christianity*; Bornstein, DE (ed.), *Medieval Christianity*; Matheson, P (ed.), *Reformation Christianity*; Porterfield, A (ed.), *Modern Christianity to 1900*; Bednarowski, MF (ed.), *Twentieth Century Global Christianity*.

more than a century “in conscious opposition to the elitism of conventional (some call it Rankean) historical investigation, fixated as it was on the ‘great’ deeds of ‘great’ men, and little else.”<sup>23</sup> This approach to history is interested in those aspects which have been left out of the story, which were “the vast majority of human beings: almost all women, obviously, but then too all those who could be counted among the socially inferior, the economically distressed, the politically marginalized, the educationally deprived, or the culturally unrefined.”<sup>24</sup>

The project to write “a people’s history” of Christianity points to the fact that in church historical discourse there was also the tendency to privilege the spiritual, intellectual or powerful elites. While it is certainly important to study mystics, theologians, pastors, priests, bishops and popes, one must also remember that no more than five percent of Christians over two millennia are included in these groups. Therefore the question whether a more balanced history of Christianity, as well as a sense of historical justice, does not require a greater engagement with the “the voiceless, the ordinary faithful who wrote no theological treatises, whose statues adorn no basilica, who negotiated no concordats, whose very names are largely lost to historical memory?”<sup>25</sup> One can further ask: “What can we know about their religious consciousness, their devotional practice, their understanding of faith, their values, beliefs, feelings, habits, attitudes, their deepest fears, hopes, loves, hatreds, and so forth? And what about the troublemakers, the excluded, the heretics, those defined by conventional history as the losers? Can a face be put on any of them?”<sup>26</sup>

One of the powerful aspects of a “people’s history” or a “history from below” is that it amplifies voices that have often been muted or forgotten. We remember selectively and we represent the past in a way that excludes. In this process certain voices are given the preferential position, while other voices are not heard. And often it is precisely the stories of the victors, the strong, that become part of the so-called “official history.” The voices that are omitted, on the other hand, are those of the dissidents and the victims. A focus on “history from below” also offers access to the sources to challenge and deconstruct that which is sometimes described as “official history.” Such “official histories,” which can take on all kind of forms, are often accepted uncritically and their role in creating and maintaining injustice is not always unmasked.

Writing from an American perspective, Diana Butler Bass refers to one such a version of “official history”, which she describes as the “usual story” of “‘Big C’ Christianity, the ‘C’s’ being Christ, Constantine, Christendom, Calvin and Christian America”. The tale runs thus:

Jesus came to the earth to save us, but he founded the church instead. The church suffered under Roman persecution until the emperor Constantine made Christianity legal. With its new status, the Christian religion spread throughout Europe, where popes and kings formed a society called Christendom, which was run by the Catholic Church and was constantly threatened by Muslims, witches and heretics. There were wars and inquisitions. When people had had enough, they rebelled and became Protestants, their main leader being John Calvin, who was a great theologian but a killjoy. Eventually Calvin’s heirs, the Puritans, left Europe to set up a Christian society in the New World. The United States of America then became the most Christian nation in the world, a beacon of faith and democracy.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Janz, DR (general editor), “Foreword” in Matheson, P (ed.), *Reformation Christianity* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007), xiii.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

<sup>27</sup> Bass, DB, *A People’s History of Christianity: The Other Side of the Story* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 4-5.

Bass admits that this account is a bastardization of an old story line, but we don't need much imagination to realize that similar constructions of church history are often part of the popular imagination, also finding their way into curricula and student papers. However, we need to be vigilant concerning these "official" constructions, since they are by no means innocent and have a powerful impact on the church and society. Careful and responsible (church) historical work, which pays attention to a wide variety of sources and excluded voices, can provide a forceful challenge to these constructions – and these new constructions must again be subjected to further scrutiny. In the process we need to take account of the fact that we cannot bracket our (church) historical work from ethical concerns.<sup>28</sup>

In the light of the above-mentioned remarks, it seems important to affirm the basic premise of a move towards a "history from below" or a "people's history." It must be said, however, that such projects, like the seven-volume "People's History of Christianity" series and similar undertakings, must also guard against a form of revisionism that display an anti-intellectual and anti-theological bias. Although one can argue that theologians form just a small percentage of Christians, it is nevertheless true that their impact often far exceeds their numbers. The "history of the people" must not be juxtaposed uncritically with a "history of theology."

*Church History must continue to reflect on its mapping habits*

In his book *The Changing Shape of Church History* Justo González argues that a radical change has taken place in the cartography of Church History. The old map in which North Atlantic-Europe and the United States forms the centre is no longer operational. He comments: "From the point of view of resources, the centers are still the United States, Canada, and Western Europe. From the point of view of vitality, missionary and evangelistic zeal, and even theological creativity, the centers have been shifting south for some time."<sup>29</sup> González continues to note that there is no single centre in the south as well, since exciting new theological insights are coming from Peru, South Africa and the Philippines, and that phenomenal growth is taking place in Chile, Brazil, Uganda and Korea. This new polycentric reality has consequences for Christianity: "As Christianity has become a truly universal religion, with deep roots in every culture, it is also becoming more and more contextualized, and therefore, out of its many centers come different readings of the entire history of the church. The result is frightening and exhilarating"<sup>30</sup>

Indeed Church History ought to reflect on its mapping habits; it needs to register "the failing map of Modernity" and take note of the changing face of World Christianity. A greater sensitivity to the polycentric reality of the church, González argues, makes it evident that it is not possible for any scholar, or even group of scholars, to function as a type of authoritative church historical panopticon, overseeing the whole of church history.

This observation indeed points to the need for collaborative projects. Over the last few decades several such collaborative studies have appeared which aimed to be sensitive to the polycentric reality of Christianity.<sup>31</sup> A number of collaborative studies on African and

<sup>28</sup> For an interesting collection that engages the ethical dimension of the historical enterprise, see Carr, DC, Flynn, TR and Makkreel, RA, *The Ethics of History* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Gonzalez, *The Changing Shape of Church History*, 14

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>31</sup> See, for instance, Hastings, A (ed.), *A Word History of Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999). Peter Hinchliff, author of *The Church in South Africa* (London: SPCK, 1968), played an important role in initiating this project.



South African Christianity have also made important contributions to the field.<sup>32</sup> There definitely remains a need for collaborative work on South African church and religious historiography, especially for projects that incorporate new historiographical perspectives into their approach. Church historical discourse in the future will need to take the changing cartography of Church History/History of Christianity seriously. Collaborative projects will hopefully continue to play an important role in this regard, albeit that overview studies by single authors are also required.

A further remark on the changing cartography of Christianity and its impact on church historiography is warranted. The notion of a polycentric map does not detract from the fact that we can only see the world from our own perspective, although the insights of others can surely broaden our vision. This implies that students of church history and scholars in the field must take their own particularity and placing seriously. An ecumenical approach or “World Christianity” approach is therefore not to be posited over against confessional commitments, denominational histories, or a focus on local practices and congregational life. Moreover, I think church historians, like biblical scholars, systematic and practical theologians, ought to be more honest and forthright about the influence of their social location and confessional (or a-confessional or anti-confessional) stance on their theological views and presuppositions. A confessional stance and an ecumenical commitment are not mutually exclusive.<sup>33</sup>

*The focus on shared history, which attends to the way in which divisive histories are interwoven, holds much promise for South African church historiography*

“(T)he self returns to itself after numerous hermeneutic detours through the language of others, to find itself enlarged and enriched by the journey.”<sup>34</sup> With these words Richard Kearney summarizes well the methodology of the philosopher Paul Ricoeur. It is indeed Ricoeur’s conviction that otherness enlarges and enriches identity, a conviction that is coupled with his reminder that we are also an other for another, as for instance expressed in the title of his book *Oneself as Another*.<sup>35</sup> These ideas, which have found numerous expressions in the work of a wide variety of scholars over the last few decades, also hold promise, in my view, for the methodology of doing church history in South Africa today. It suggests that we can understand our own complex histories better in conversation with others and through an openness to their histories. Moreover, this entails the realization that our respective histories are often interwoven and thus we are “othered” in the others’ histories.

I take the history of the Dutch Reformed Church and the Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa as an example. In many respects the history of these churches is a history

<sup>32</sup> See in this regard, Kalu, OU (ed.), *African Christianity: An African Story* (Pretoria: University of Pretoria, 2005), with a important Introduction by Kalu on “The Shape and Flow of African Church Historiography”. See also R Elphick & R Davenport (eds.), *Christianity in South Africa: A Political, Social & Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), as well as Hofmeyr, JW & Pillay, GJ (eds.), *Perspectives on Church History* (Pretoria: HAUM Tertiary, 1991) and Hofmeyr, JW & Pillay GJ (eds.), *A History of Christianity in South Africa Vol. 1* (Pretoria: HAUM Tertiary).

<sup>33</sup> See for instance the comment by H. Berkhof and OJ de Jong in their *Geschiedenis der Kerk* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1975): “Dit werk heeft er nooit een geheim van gemaakt dat het op reformatorische wijze het Evangelie wil verstaan. Het maakt er ook geen geheim van dat het de roeping tot eenheid wil dienen. Kerkgeschiedskrijving is oecumenisch. Anders is zij geen geschiedskrijving van Christus’ kerk” (8).

<sup>34</sup> Kearney, R, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 2.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Ricoeur, P, *Oneself as Another* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). This work was originally published in French as *Soi-même comme un autre*.

of division. Much has already been written on this. But it is also a shared history, a history of interwoven memories. In our efforts to enter into discussion with the past of these churches in a responsible manner, it might be that the challenge and task now are precisely to revisit our histories anew in discussion with one another. Not isolation, but interaction, then becomes the hermeneutical key to unlock the past.

Settings, such as ecumenical faculties, where there is a diversity of ecclesial traditions, might be fruitful places to explore further the possibilities of joint memory work and historiography. This does not mean that denominations and faith traditions should take their own histories less seriously. Rather, a healthy ecumenical focus actually requires that you take your own particular identity even more seriously. However, an understanding of the interwovenness of our memories and histories requires, in fact, that we resist the temptation to think in isolation about what we regard as *our* past and *our* history. Therefore hospitality is also a virtue that is valuable in our attempt to deal with the past in a responsible manner.

The plea for a methodology of shared historiography also needs to be sensitive to the fragile nature of such an undertaking. We need to be aware about how what we view as founding moments, turning points or events worthy of celebration may represent a low point, indeed a wound or a scar, in the memory of another. As Paul Ricoeur has remarked: "What we celebrate under the heading of founding events are, essentially, violent acts legitimated after the fact by a precarious state of right ... The same events are thus found to signify glory for some, humiliation for others."<sup>36</sup> This reality reminds us that church historical discourse in South Africa requires a responsible historical hermeneutic.<sup>37</sup>

## Conclusion

In the beginning of this essay I mentioned the fact that our engagement with the past cannot be abstracted from our present commitments and future expectations. We also need to remind ourselves that the Christian "future" is not to be abstracted from a faithful and creative historical engagement with the past. This engagement holds the promise of providing sources of creative renewal and reform. As the much-respected Methodist and ecumenical scholar Geoffrey Wainwright writes in an essay entitled "Back to the future":

... (S)everal of the most important movements of the twentieth century history of the church and of theology have, as a matter of fact, looked towards the past in order to gain their bearings in the present and get guidance for the ongoing journey. My modest proposed thesis is that we shall have to continue in that direction – looking back with and through those movements into the full depth of God's history with the church.<sup>38</sup>

This article is intended to affirm Wainwright's observation. One also needs to note that the movement "back to the future" (or even "back for the future") does not imply that we excuse the terrible abuses of the past, or repress the vivid beauty of Christian ideas and practices. Rather, it points to the importance of a responsible historical hermeneutic that is sensitive to the way in which the Christian past is "boiling with life" (to use Margaret Miles's phrase).<sup>39</sup> Therefore Church History needs to be aware of the fact that, given the

<sup>36</sup> Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*. See also his remark: "It is very important to remember that what is considered a founding event in our collective memory may be a wound in the memory of the other" (Kearney and Dooley, *Questioning Ethics*, 9).

<sup>37</sup> For an attempt to provide some contours for such a hermeneutic, see my essay "Herinnering, tradisie, teologie: op weg na 'n verantwoordelike historiese hermeneutiek". *NGTT* 50/ 1 & 2, 2009:280-288.

<sup>38</sup> See Volf, M, Krieg, C, Kucharz, T (eds.), *The Future of Theology: Essays in Honor of Jürgen Moltmann* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 89.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh*, xv.

richness of life, it can never fully capture even the smallest slice of life from the past.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, Church history, as a theological discipline, needs to be haunted by the strange claim that the Word became flesh in history.

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<sup>40</sup> Franz Kafka reminds us of this fact in his short story “The next Village”: “My grandfather used to say: ‘Life is astoundingly short’. To me, looking back over it, life seems so foreshortened that I scarcely understand, for instance, how a young man can decide to ride over to the next village without being afraid that – not to mention accidents – even the span of a normal happy life may fall far short of the time needed for such a journey.” See Kafka, F, *The Complete Stories* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 404. For a reflection on Walter Benjamin’s reading of Kafka’s tale, see Stéphane Mosès, *The Angel of History: Rosenzweig, Benjamin, Scholem* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 82-83.