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Norman Sykes
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CHAPTER I

CHURCH HISTORY, HISTORY
AND THEOLOGY

‘All learned men agree’, wrote the Spanish Dominican Melchior Cano, in *De Locis Theologicis* published posthumously in 1563, ‘that those theologians are altogether ignorant, in whose lucubrations history is silent. To myself indeed they seem to be no theologians, nor even of sufficient learning, to whom the events of the past are unknown. For history furnishes from its treasures many things to us, which, if we lack, both in theology and in almost every other discipline, we are frequently found insufficient and unlearned.’¹ So high an evaluation of history represented the tardy coming-of-age of a study which had hitherto enjoyed little regard. During the long millennium of the Middle Ages the scholastic theologians had deemed even ecclesiastical history of little relevance or service to their dogmatic systems. Moreover, with the advent of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, Protestant and Catholic alike considered Church history chiefly as ancillary to systematic theology. ‘Les auteurs protestantes du XVIème siècle n’ont envisagé l’histoire de l’Église que comme faisant partie de la théologie; ils ne l’ont guère connue comme con-

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stituant une science séparée et indépendante.’¹ In the German universities founded as a result of the ferment of reform, as well as in the older foundations won for Lutheranism, the curriculum centred in the study of the Bible and its original tongues. History entered into their purview mainly, as with Bossuet in the following century, as a *praeparatio evangelica* and in the form of *discours sur l’histoire universelle* (to borrow Bossuet’s title). At Heidelberg, for example, the professorship of history was combined with that of poetry from 1556 to 1561; whilst in the Calvinist universities at Geneva, Montpellier and Saumur likewise, the teaching of history was undertaken by philologists. Nîmes indeed was a pioneer in the establishment of a chair of history as a separate discipline, though here also universal history figured prominently in the curriculum; and not until the seventeenth century did the academic teaching of history gain recognition as an autonomous province. Moreover, although Melanchthon and his disciples had established in theory the distinction between Church history and secular history, the credit of developing ecclesiastical history as an independent study belonged largely to the universities of Strasbourg and Basle, thanks to the labours at the former of Caspar Hedio (1499–1552) and John Pappus (1549–1601) and at the latter of John Grynaeus (1540–1617). At Saumur also David Blondel (1590–1655) adorned his honorary professorship by the publication of his *De la Primauté en l’Église*, his *Apologia pro Sententia Hieronymi de*

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Presbyteris et Episcopis, and his *De Joanna Papissa*. At Geneva a chair of ecclesiastical history was created especially for Jean Alphonse Turretini in 1697, and in Scotland professorships of Church history were founded at Edinburgh in 1694, at St Andrews in 1707 and at Glasgow in 1718; whilst Aberdeen, like the English universities of Oxford and Cambridge, had to wait until the nineteenth century for a similar foundation. In the Roman Catholic universities of Fribourg and Mainz, professorships of history were established in 1572 and 1584 respectively; whilst the exclusion of history from the *Ratio Studiorum* of the Society of Jesus meant that in Ingolstadt, and other universities under their influence, the study of this subject enjoyed little attention.

Notwithstanding the slow development and belated recognition of Church history as an independent subject of academic study, the seventeenth century saw a growing interest in and emphasis on its importance as ancillary to the exploration of theological and ecclesiastical issues. 'If during the seventeenth century, history was able to penetrate the academy, it was surreptitiously, so to speak, and under cover of what is now called "positive theology"...By this means a door was opened to history and criticism...If, furthermore, it is remembered that after 1640 Catholics were compelled more and more to follow Protestants in matters of controversy into the field of antiquity, where the latter for the time being had chosen to fight, the

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advance made by history, concealed under the name of “positive theology”, towards the middle of the seventeenth century will be easily understood.’¹ A great cloud of witnesses can be called in support of this conclusion. Antoine Godeau, bishop of Vence, in the preface to his *Histoire de l’Église*, published in 1653, declared: ‘I do not intend here to argue the commonplace of the usefulness of history. Many learned authors have exhausted this subject, and I have nothing new to add. . . . The proof of it we see in many modern writers and especially in many scholastics, who through imperfect knowledge of the history of doctrine have made mistakes which give ground to their adversaries to accuse them of ignorance or even of bad faith. . . . Thus ecclesiastical history is absolutely essential to writers who treat of doctrine in order to avoid blunders. . . . On the one hand the indispensable law of history, which is to tell the truth, is obligatory on the historian, and his duty is to pay heed to nothing which is to the prejudice of truth. . . . Church history has need of this kind of enlightened and sincere criticism, and it must be confessed that without it we should be still in profound ignorance of many very useful things.’² In parallel vein Alexander Natalis, the French Dominican, in the preface to his *Selecta Historiae Ecclesiasticae Capita*, avowed that he reckoned a man who, though versed in scholastic questions, was only distantly acquainted with the Bible, Church history, the councils and doctrine of the Fathers, as but half a theologian; whilst he pronounced

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virtually useless to the Church one ignorant and unversed in these studies.¹ To Bernard Lamy indeed 'theology is simply the history of what God has revealed to men, or of what the Church has believed at all times; and for this reason church history is its principal part'.² To Du Pin likewise it was the glory of his century to have driven from the theological schools the barbarism hitherto prevailing, and to have substituted for scholastic subtleties a theology founded on Scripture and Tradition.³ But perhaps the crowning testimony was that of Jean Mabillon, whose chapter 'De l'étude de l'histoire sacrée et profane', in his *Traité des Études Monastiques*, ascribed the highest value and importance to this discipline. 'This study is of much greater value than the majority of mankind supposes, and the strongest reasons exist for applying oneself to it, especially to the study of ecclesiastical history. For it is certain that without this study it is impossible to have a complete understanding of the Fathers, or of theology; and by it may be learned not only morality by examples but also the dogmas of our religion.' After citing the statements of Cano and Godeau, he adduced further contemporary testimony. 'In fine, I have understood from one of the most famous authors of this century, who from his birth had been nourished in heresy, that nothing had contributed more to disabuse him of his error than the reading of church history.'⁴

In essaying to discharge the responsibility incumbent upon a lecturer on this foundation, I propose

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to consider in detail some vital issues arising from this revival of interest in Church history during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; but first it seems necessary to examine the relationship of ecclesiastical history to other branches of that discipline and also to theology, and to ask whether certain criticisms of its nature and theme, offered by historians of other schools, affect its claim to be accepted as a truly historical exercise.

From one aspect, indeed, as Gwatkin repeatedly insisted, ecclesiastical history may be regarded as simply the spiritual side of universal history, and as such its intimate relationship with other aspects—political, constitutional and economic—is evident. From this standpoint it cannot be profitably studied without constant reference to each of these aspects, for the history of the Church is closely bound up in every age with that of the society within which *sub specie hujus saeculi* it lives and moves and has its being. Examples of this interdependence can be cited from many epochs. Thus Dr S. L. Greenslade's study of *Schism in the Early Church* has emphasised the non-theological factors affecting the doctrinal controversies of the early centuries, and Dr W. H. C. Frend's *The Donatist Church* has illustrated this with particular relation to the Donatist Schism; Dr Ulrich Stutz's survey of *Die Eigenkirche als Element des mittelalterlichgermanischen Kirchenrechtes* threw a flood of light on the protracted process by which the Proprietary Church was integrated with the law and constitution of the medieval western Church; the

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history of the Reformation must be set against the contemporary background of social and economic conditions, as the perennial question of *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* testifies, and as Mr Christopher Hill's *Economic Problems of the Church from Whitgift to the Long Parliament* has demonstrated in regard to England; the influence of the ecclesiastical measures of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Empire on the Gallican Church has engaged the attention of a generation of historians from Aulard to Latreille; whilst few episodes of Church history have been more fascinatingly portrayed than the struggle of the papacy with a totalitarian regime in Professor D. A. Binchy's *Church and State in Fascist Italy*, particularly in the decade between the Lateran Treaties of 1929 and the death of Pius XI in 1939. Little complaint can be justly made indeed against contemporary ecclesiastical historians of neglect of other aspects of history, affecting the development not only of institutions, but also of doctrines of the Church. Rather Church historians might wish that secular historians and men of affairs would be at pains to inform themselves more perfectly concerning the history of Christianity and the Church. Thus in H. A. L. Fisher's *History of Europe*, his account of Christianity, making a bashful and somewhat incongruous appearance in the chapter headed 'Greece and Macedon', begins with the statement that 'we know little of the life of Jesus'; whilst the apostolic churches are described as 'democratic, universalist and egalitarian' (despite the contrary

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evidence of the Pauline Epistles concerning the authority exercised by the Apostles); the conciliar epoch is characterised in Gibbonian phrase as a debate on 'the nature of the Second Person of the Trinity, which few were fitted to discuss and none were able to understand'; and the astonishing statement is made that 'the parish... was the gift of Roman churchmen to Saxon England'. Again, few passages of more delicate irony can be found than that in which Professor Binchy describes the mystification of Mussolini when Cardinal Gasparri, receiving him on 11 February 1929 at the Lateran Palace for the signature of the Treaty and Concordat, 'began by making his visitor welcome in "the Holy Father's own parochial house"'. Mussolini bowed, obviously mystified: how was he to know that the Lateran is the pope's episcopal church? "Especially", the cardinal continued, "as today is the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, Protectress of the Apostolic See." Mussolini bowed again. "And also the anniversary of the Pope's coronation." The Duce, feeling himself at last on firm ground, smiled broadly. "Yes," he said, "I knew that."

Ecclesiastical history may, furthermore, claim an identity of purpose and method with other aspects of human history, not only in respect of a common subject-matter, but also in regard to the treatment and criticism of its sources. In the latter respect it knows both how to abound and how to be in want. It is a commonplace that the extant literary sources for the early centuries of the history of the Church

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CHURCH HISTORY, HISTORY AND THEOLOGY are exiguous; and that between the Acts of the Apostles in the first century and the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius in the fourth century, the Church historian has to be content with such scanty gleanings as episcopal succession lists and similar chronological data. The paucity of information for the sub-apostolic age is particularly vexing, since it embraced the period of the evolution of the incipient Church-Order of the New Testament into the monarchical episcopate of Ignatius, whilst the later epoch witnessed the development of the authority of the see of Rome; and it was round the claims of episcopacy and papacy that much of the sixteenth-century Reformation controversy was to turn. Eusebius indeed proclaimed himself 'the first to enter on the undertaking, as travellers on some desolate and untrodden way', in which 'nowhere can we find even the bare footsteps of men who have preceded us in the same path, unless it be those slight indications by which in divers ways they have left to us partial accounts of the times through which they have passed, raising their voices as a man holds up a torch from afar, calling to us from on high as from a distant watch-tower'.¹

This paucity of information, however, is not peculiar to the ecclesiastical historian. 'If we go back to early times', wrote Sir Charles Firth of the secular historian, 'the imperfect nature of evidence is forced upon us at every moment. It is often a question of the interpretation of a single sentence or the trustworthiness of a single document. Even in

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dealing with better-known periods, such as the seventeenth century, the same difficulty arises. Often the really conclusive document is missing; we know that something happened; but the piece of evidence which would explain why it happened is non-existent; and the precise significance of the fact becomes a matter for inference or conjecture.... Everywhere therefore the historian is made conscious of the limitations of his own knowledge about the past and the limitations of men's possible knowledge. He feels he moves in a little circle of light, seeing as far as his little candle throws its beams; and beyond that comes darkness.¹ In Church history, as elsewhere, with the chronological advance into the high Middle Ages and thence into modern times, the candle of the student is set upon a bushel and the circle of its radiance so extended that it gives light to all in the house.

The crux of the matter lies, however, not in the number of sources available, but in the standards of criticism governing their interpretation. Does the ecclesiastical historian adhere to the same austere methods and principles of critical scholarship as are observed in other fields of historical discipline? Or is there just ground for the repeated accusations levelled by Professor E. T. Merrill against 'an ecclesiastical temper of mind', which deflects the Church historian from the straight path of scholarly rectitude? The fourfold repetition of this charge, in an essay of twenty-seven pages 'On Materials and