


# On teaching Christian history in the postmodern world

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Is there truth in history? Historians are commonly expected to produce 'facts' and to be 'objective'. If they teach the history of Christianity, their audience sees in them the depositors of the 'truth' on the history of church. Showing the contradictions of the church's discourse in the past and highlighting the essentially transient nature of church doctrine are perceived as a threat. Yet, our knowledge of the Christian past is provisional and limited. It depends on the quality of the historical sources at our disposal. Consciously or not, it is always the result of a process of knowledge construction. The aim of this article is to explore the triple challenge – pedagogical, pastoral and intellectual – that researchers in history of Christianity face in the exercise of their profession. Historians trained in the tradition of historical criticism consider that an historical narrative can claim a certain degree of approximation of the truth if the documents on which it is based pass the test of authenticity, reliability and validity. Without necessarily denying that truth exists somehow and somewhere, postmodern historians – and this also applies to Christian history – insist that any form of historical knowledge is constructed and that all approaches to truth are situated in terms of period, geographical location, social environment, class, gender, age and race. The study of history of Christianity brings discomfort. But in the end, one gains from confronting the critical challenges of the discipline. Faith will come out stronger if it faces the reality of the human condition.

**Keywords:** History; Christianity; Truth; Postmodernity; Challenges.

## Introduction

This article is dedicated to long-time friend and colleague Christina Landman whose work stands at the intersection of church history, oral history, practical theology and feminist theology. Moved by the desire to articulate academic work and pastoral ministry, she never ceases to redefine the boundaries of these disciplines with the insight and the impetuosity of a pioneer.

In this article, I reflect on my three-decade-long experience as a lecturer in church-based theological institutions and various university departments. My own life story informs my approach to the topic. Like Christina, I have crossed many frontiers – as a European who chose to become South African, as a Catholic teaching in an ecumenical environment, as a member of a religious order who ended up parenting a group of children and, last but not least, as a believer who has more questions than answers in matters of faith.

One does not teach Christian history in Pietermaritzburg or Pretoria as one does in Louvain, Berlin or Washington DC. Nor does one envisage Christianity's historical role after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the demise of apartheid or September 11 as one would before these epoch-changing events. There is no history without a historian and the historian is a man or a woman of a certain place and a certain time. This applies to all historians, whether they study economy, politics, gender or religion. The past historians try to reconstruct is intimately linked to the present. We live in a postmodern world, a term to which I shall return later. Our manner of doing history is shaped by the world we live in.

The problem is that many find it difficult to understand this state of affairs. Historians are widely expected to tell the 'truth' about the past. Whether their audience is made of high school learners, university students, attendees at a public talk or readers of printed media, professional historians are seen as people who know the truth about what happened in the past. They are meant to be 'objective' and relate 'facts' rather than opinions.

There are high expectations in the public about history as an academic discipline. Yet, the truth, if we can use this word, historians bring about the past is provisional, partial and multifaceted.

**Note:** The collection entitled 'Christina Landman Festschrift', sub-edited by Wessel Bentley (University of South Africa) and Victor S. Molobi (University of South Africa).

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Given the manner in which historical knowledge is constructed, full objectivity is a goal impossible to achieve. It is with the anxiety of students and readers about the elusive nature of truth in history in mind that this essay has been written.

The problem is compounded when the subject matter of history is the Christian religion. Like academic historians, church historians teaching in seminaries or faculties of theology are expected to tell the 'truth' about the Christian past and to be 'objective'. Christianity is based on sacred texts and doctrinal, moral and liturgical traditions. Bringing doubt and uncertainty about these texts or these traditions seems to contradict the purpose of theological training, which is to prepare students to preach the doctrine of the Church and lead the community worship. How can a history of the church which is not based on 'facts' serve as a foundation for the faith?

## A triple challenge

Church historians face a triple challenge. The first is *pedagogical*. They need to find ways of responding to the expectation on the part of their students and their readers that they will learn the 'truth' about the history of the church and receive an 'objective' account of its past. Church historians should not give easy answers and compromise the integrity of their discipline. Instead, they must patiently guide students into the complexity of Christian history even when they find that complexity disconcerting and sometimes even alarming. Church historians should see themselves as awakeners. By inviting the students to look at the past of their churches with new eyes, they will help them to face the challenges of ministry with more confidence.

They also face a *pastoral* challenge. They must understand, support and encourage the students whose faith is challenged by questions raised in class. They must explain that rather than being a threat to their faith, critical thinking helps, in the long run, the act of faith itself and makes it more relevant in the dialogue with non-believers. It would be a misconception, after all, to imagine that the language of faith can be frozen in timeless formulations. 'The Gospel', French theologian Christoph Theobald (2008) argues:

is not a message that one could record once for all and replay thereafter at will. It only exists when announced by somebody here and now and heard by other people in the context of a meaningful relationship. Its universality necessarily goes through the singularity of the person who hears it. (p. 1040)

The third challenge is *intellectual*. In order to say the faith – in other words to do theology – effectively and truthfully, we have to accept that what we know of Jesus and the historical development of the church depends on the quality of the historical sources at our disposal and that this knowledge is always the result of a process of reconstruction. To base the faith on a weak historical foundation would be a delusion. There is no such thing as a definitive Christian history. History is always in the making.

Christianity, we should remember, is an historical religion. The faith is rooted in a particular set of narratives – the tribulations of the people of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth's life and the early beginnings of the Christian churches – which claim to be historical. Moses is said to have guided his people out of Egypt on the way to the Promised Land. The Apostles' Creed affirms that Jesus 'suffered under Pontius Pilate' (de Gruchy 2012:6). If these events were pure myths, Christians would believe in vain. At the same time, these stories cannot and should not be taken literally. To make sense of them, the reader must use adequate hermeneutical tools. We have to be aware of the emotional, cultural and intellectual lenses through which we see the history of the church. As Karl Barth (1961) pointed out:

even accounts which by the standards of modern scholarship have to be accounted saga or legend and not history – because they cannot be grasped historically – may still speak of a happening which, though it cannot be grasped historically, is still actual and objective in time and space. (p. 336)

Historicity is not only an issue for biblical teachings. The claims made by the various churches in matters of theology or ecclesiology are also based on historical statements. Catholics, for example, maintain that, from the beginning, the bishop of Rome has exercised authority over the other bishops. Protestants read history differently. They see the pope's claim to oversee the local churches as a later addition. When popes and councils make doctrinal statements, they pretend to do nothing other than clarify what the universal church has always believed. By doing so, they make an historical statement for which they rarely provide convincing evidence. The Catholic Church's refusal to ordain women, for instance, is based on the assumption – challenged by feminist historians – that women never exercised the ministry, not even in the early church. Pope Paul VI's controversial decision to declare artificial contraception illicit was based on historical precedents. It was because his predecessors had taken a stance against it that he did not feel he had the right to authorise it. But the proponents of a more liberal position on birth control also used history to bolster their claim, though in a different direction. Similar examples could be found in the Protestant churches.

## Modern history and the dream of objectivity

To assess how the knowledge of the past affects believers' relationship to truth, we must first examine how historians envisage truth in history. On this question there have been significant variations in the last few decades. We cannot go here into long historiographical developments. For the purpose of this essay, suffice it to say that *modern history*, the manner in which historians have envisaged their discipline since its establishment as a science in early 19th century Germany, has started to be challenged in the last third of the 20th century by a new form of history, which is commonly referred to as *postmodern history*. Anticipated by critical reflections on historical methodology in the course of the 20th century, postmodern history became influential in

the academia in the 1980s and 1990s, especially after the publication of Peter Novick's essay *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Jenkins 1997; Novick 1988; Nuttall & Wright 2000; Wright 2000).

Modern historians believe that a narrative of the past can claim a certain degree of approximation of the truth if the documents on which it is based pass the test of authenticity and reliability. Since the 19th century, the task of the historian is said to find out 'how things really happened' (*wie es eigentlich geschehen ist*), to use German historian Leopold von Ranke's famous phrase (Von Ranke 1824:Foreword). In order to establish the truth about the past, historians submit historical documents to two forms of criticism: external and internal. External criticism aims at authenticating documents and verifying their accurateness. This is particularly important for older periods when forgeries were common. Internal criticism aims at establishing the meaning and the believability of the document. For this, one has to determine who wrote the text, in what context and for what purpose. Biases have to be examined and, when they are available, other sources have to be consulted to corroborate the evidence. If a number of independent sources contain the same message, the credibility of the message is strongly increased (Salevouris 2015:174–176; Shafer 1969:100).

The historical method is a product of the Enlightenment. It is based on the belief in the capacity of reason and in the ineluctability of progress. Historians who subscribe to this worldview make two important assumptions. The first is that historians can achieve objectivity if they abstract themselves from their own location, time and beliefs. History writing has to be ahistorical and unsituated. The historian's role must be 'that of a neutral or disinterested judge; it must never degenerate into that of an advocate or, even worse, propagandist' (Novick 1987:1, quoted in Kelly 2011:25).

The second assumption is that there is a sharp distinction between history, which is based on facts, and fiction, which does not correspond to reality. Modern historians subscribe to Thomas Aquinas' definition of truth as *adaequatio rei et intellectus*, correspondence of the mind and reality (Aertsen 1984:5–6). The knowledge of the past is independent of the past itself. There is a separation between the knower and the known.

As the uneasiness the Catholic Church and many Protestant churches displayed towards biblical criticism in the past and the hostility fundamentalist theologians and preachers manifest towards it today indicate, modern history poses a challenge to religious orthodoxy. Unlike postmodern history, it does not question the churches' claim to hold the truth. All it does is to question the validity and authenticity of the documents on which the churches base their beliefs. If these documents are false, incomplete or wrongly dated, these beliefs are declared unfounded and they lose all legitimacy. Modern history questions, for example, the veracity of most

of what Jesus is said to have declared in the New Testament and it questions the image given of the early church in Paul's letters and in the Acts of the Apostles.

## The situatedness of the historian

In the late 20th century, postmodern history openly challenged the understanding of history accepted since the 19th century. Yet, questions about historians' claim to objectivity and the alleged distance between the historian and his work had been asked before. One of the first to raise these issues was Lucien Febvre (1982), one of the founders of the *Annales* School in France. He made the following comment in 1942:

History is the daughter of time. [...] Every period mentally constructs its own universe. It constructs it not only out of all the materials at its disposal, all the facts (true or false) that it has inherited or acquired, but out of its own gifts, its particular cleverness, its qualities, its talents, and its interests – everything that distinguishes it from preceding periods. Similarly, every period mentally constructs its own image of the historical past, its Rome and its Athens, its Middle Ages and its Renaissance. How? Out of the material at its disposal. (p. 2)

In a collection of essays on the nature of history, British historian Edward Hallett Carr (1987) wrote along the same lines in 1961:

The facts of history never come to us 'pure', since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder. It follows that when we take up a work of history, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it. [...] Study the historian before you begin to study the facts. (p. 22)

Late 20th century postmodern historians developed this argument into a full-fledged theory. History books, they claimed, should not pretend to tell 'the truth' about the past. All historical narratives are situated socially, culturally and in terms of gender. Truth is the outcome of a process of knowledge construction. Each author, each witness develops his or her own understanding of the historical truth. There is no such thing as a 'view from nowhere' (Kelly 2011:109).

Another aspect of this view of history is that the distinction modern historians establish between history and fiction is relativised. In a certain way, postmodern historians say, all history, as rigorous and critical as it can be, is fiction because it relies on the historical imagination, the social and cultural positioning and the literary talents of the historian who developed it into a narrative. For postmodern historians, complete objectivity is humanly unattainable. At best, a modest level of objectivity can be declared as a goal.

Loath as they are to assert any form of truth and declare anything certain, postmodern authors are critical of any form of metanarrative – broad, overarching worldview – be it liberal, Marxist or Christian. They consider teleological discourses – understandings of history as leading to particular ends – with suspicion because, in their view, they foster the

political or cultural agendas of those who produce them. Particularly influential in this respect was the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980) who put in evidence the association of knowledge, truth and power. Knowledge of the truth, for him, is the key to power:

There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the reproduction of truth through power, and we cannot exercise power except through the reproduction of power. (p. 93)

As Valentin-Yves Mudimbe pointed out in *The Invention of Africa* (1988), the western discourse on Africa results from an association between truth and power in the sense Foucault understood it. The European notions of 'reason' and 'civilisation' contributed to the construction of the African as a 'savage'. In a similar way, Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole argued that in a world dominated by the American way of life, agents such as the media and the market engage in the construction of a Americanised image of Africa (Katongole 2005:90).

## Changing truths in the history of the Church

At first view, postmodern history has more devastating consequences for the Christian faith than modern history which only questions the validity and believability of the documents on which the churches base their faith. If all historical narratives are socially and culturally situated, as postmodern historians assert, the Christian churches' claim to proclaim a universal truth about human history appears futile. Religious truth, like any other truth, is socially constructed. With postmodern history, it is the status of truth in the church that is in question.

There is no shortage of doctrinal statements declared binding by the church at one point in history which ecclesiastical authorities contradicted decades or centuries later. Here are a few examples mostly drawn from Catholic history, although similar ones could be found in the records of other Christian churches.

Slavery is probably the most famous example of a changing ecclesiastical truth. For most of their history, the Christian churches have accepted the institution of slavery as a law of nature. They tried to moralise its practice by defining the circumstances – just war, fair condemnation, sale and slavery by birth – under which it was deemed legitimate, but until the modern age they never questioned its existence. In the 16th and 17th centuries, popes, bishops and religious orders owned black slaves. It was not until 1839 that a pope, Gregory XVI formally condemned all forms of slavery and the slave trade (Davis 1988).

The turnaround the Catholic Church did on the matter of the temporal powers of the popes is no less striking. Pressed by the rise of secular powers in Western Europe, the popes of the 13th and 14th centuries developed the doctrine of the

temporal power of the pope. They claimed for themselves the right to depose any king or emperor who threatened the Catholic faith. As late as 1864, Pope Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors* declared anathema anyone declaring that the abolition of the temporal power of the pope would contribute to the prosperity of the Church. A century or so later, the Second Vatican Council took an opposite view by affirming, in the *Declaration on Religious Freedom*, that nobody should be forced to embrace Christianity (Congar 1970b).

Another example is the doctrine of papal infallibility. In the medieval period and at the Council of Trent, there was no agreement among theologians on the extent of papal power in church and society and as a result the conciliar decrees remained mute on the issue. Papal infallibility was considered a disputed question (O'Malley 2013). It was only declared a matter of faith in 1870 at the First Vatican Council in a context of intense political and ideological polarisation.

## Postmodern and Christian?

Anticipated by Nietzsche who rejected the concept of autonomous reason governing the world (Habermas 1987:83–105), postmodernism is a philosophical and literary movement born after the Second World War which questions the Enlightenment's absolute faith in the power of reason and the myth of a never-ending progress driven by the West. As we have seen, postmodernism affects the manner of conceptualising history. It also impacts religious faith by promoting radical forms of pluralism and deconstructing the doctrinal discourse of instituted religion.

Does the postmodern critique remove all foundation to the act of faith? Not necessarily. Rather than confronting postmodernism, some authors chose to engage with it by identifying points of convergence and divergence and by discussing the relevance of its worldview for the Christian faith. In *Truth Considered and Applied: Examining Postmodernism, History and Christian Faith* (2011) Stuart Kelly, an evangelical philosopher, points out that postmodern philosophers and historians do not always deny that truth exists. They criticise the illusion of believing that human reason gives us easy access to truth. But in their majority, they are not relativist. They agree, for example, that the facticity of the Holocaust is undeniable (Evangelical Philosophical Society 2012:6). As Kevin Vanhoozer, a theologian who also engaged with the postmodern movement, put it, 'postmoderns do not reject reason per se but merely the totalizing and universal reason posited by Descartes' (2003:15). What postmodern authors – and among them historians – object to is an excessive confidence in the power of reason. Most of them are prepared to accept that a truth about human existence, history and the world exists. According to his friend and biographer Paul Veyne, Foucault himself was not a relativist. If he refused to refer to a total truth, he based his existence on temporary and provisional truths (Veyne 2010:86–87).

Authors like Kelly and Vanhoozer do not go as far as saying that postmodernism can accommodate Christianity.



They only note that, contrary to what postmodern authors affirm, metanarratives such as Christianity are not necessarily oppressive (Kelly 2011). But if we push the argument, we can say that postmodernism, or at least some elements of it, may create a space where Christian faith can develop. By stressing the intrinsic limitation of human reason and recognising the historian's radical situatedness, postmodern authors point at new ways of searching for the Unknown, the one whom the followers of Jesus call God. This is the position adopted by Theobald. According to Theobald (2008), Christians have everything to gain from a posture of 'learning' (*apprentissage*) in the modern and postmodern world:

God would then receive, for those who venture to mention his name, a singular meaning, and indeed a name that is unheard of: a meaning which develops, within and thanks to history, at the junction of the divine silence, the presence of holiness in the world and an irrepressible desire for happiness that is common to all. Would have 'God' given us everything, including Himself, his own holiness, so that we might – thanks to his silence – access in ourselves and through ourselves the source of his beatitude? (p. 715)

Christians in the modern and postmodern world, Theobald suggests, do not own the truth about God. They search for it. They see value in his apparent silence. Rather than being afraid of history, they recognise in the ever-changing character of our historical condition a chance to discover, by contrast, the reality of the One who is beyond everything.

## Insiders versus outsiders

A related question, on which a fair amount of literature has been produced (Lyle 2004; MacIntyre 1964; McCutcheon 1999), is whether one needs to be a believer to study religion or, for what concerns this paper, Christianity. In other words, do insiders have a more accurate knowledge of the history of Christianity than people with no faith experience? Do historians of Christianity have to be Christian and should they worry about the faith of their students? The triple challenge described in the opening section of this article – pedagogical, pastoral and intellectual – postulates a response to this question.

For different reasons, modern and postmodern historians do not promote a discourse 'from inside'. The former restrict the historian's brief to a reconstitution of the past on the basis of the best possible sources. They consider as irrelevant the question of whether an historian writing about the Christian churches is Christian. The latter consider all metanarratives, including those referring to a revealed truth, with suspicion. They warn against undue belief in established truths. This is directed against Christian historians who read the history of the world through the lens of their religious beliefs.

The adherents of the insider point of view claim that the study of the Christian past is a branch of theology. The term they use to describe their discipline – church history – is revealing. This wording has been in use since the 19th century when the fourfold theological curriculum framework was

introduced in German universities and, from there, in faculties of theology all over the world. Church history is one of the four branches of theology alongside biblical studies, systematic theology and practical theology (Farley 1983). History of Christianity, a term mostly used in departments of religious studies of public universities, has a different connotation. It implies that the history of the Christian churches is part of history. According to this standpoint, the study of Christian institutions, teachings and attitudes is as much part of history as economic history, military history or history of gender.

The insider approach postulates the existence of a religious truth, as shown by this declaration of Karl Barth (2002):

Church history, i.e., the history of the church's coming to terms with the theme given her in Scripture, cannot primarily be understood as the history of the human opinions, resolutions and actions which have emerged in the course of her coming to terms with her theme. [...] Church history must rather be understood as the history of the government of the Church by the Word of God, the history of exegesis of Scripture accomplished by Scripture, i.e., by Jesus Christ Himself in the church. (p. 82)

Hubert Jedin, the author of an authoritative history of the Council of Trent, made a similar statement in the introduction to a 10-volume *Handbook of Church History* published in the wake of the Second Vatican Council. 'The history of the Church', he wrote, 'can only be understood, in its totality, as a history of salvation and its ultimate meaning can only be grasped through the eyes of faith' (Jedin 1965:5, quoted in Poirier 1991:404). In an article written during the same period, he claimed that the 'history of the Church' distinguishes itself from the 'history of Christianity' by taking as its object 'an historical institution whose identity is given through faith, in its changing forms throughout the centuries, while being historically demonstrable' (Jedin 1967:283–284, quoted in Poirier 1991:404).

One should note that neither Barth nor Jedin disregarded the value of scientific history. Both subscribed to the paradigm of modern history. But they postulated, as an act of faith, that the results of the church historian's work would confirm, even paradoxically, the truth proclaimed by the church. In their perspective, no statement made by an historian is valid unless the religious believer could accept it as correct (McCutcheon 1999:18).

The outsider approach consists in saying that the work of a historian of Christianity should be the same irrespective of whether he or she belongs to the church. Jedin's views provoked a vigorous debate among Catholic historians at the time (Poirier 1991:403–407). Renowned historians of Christianity such as Giuseppe Alberigo, Jean Delumeau, Marc Venard, Bernd Moeller and John O'Malley distanced themselves from Jedin's insider perspective. 'I must reiterate my conviction', Alberigo wrote, 'that the history of the Church is and should stay a historical discipline, which has its own object [...] and its own method' (Alberigo 1970:74). 'Church History', O'Malley commented, 'is vitiated if it has

to be correlated with “salvation history”, with “theological value judgments”, with the course of divine providence, and with confessional ecclesiologies’ (O’Malley 1985:226–227).

Carr, who, unlike Alberigo or O’Malley, never dealt with the history of Christianity, expressed a similar point of view:

Writers like Berdyaev, Niebuhr, and Maritain purport to maintain the autonomous status of history, but insist that the end or goal of history lies outside history. Personally, I find it hard to reconcile the integrity of history with belief in some superhistorical force on which its meaning and significance depend – whether that force be the God of a Chosen People, a Christian God, the Hidden Hand of the deist, or Hegel’s World Spirit. For the purposes of these lectures, I shall assume that the historian must solve his problems without recourse to any such *deus ex machina*, that history is a game played, so to speak, without a joker in the pack. (Carr 1987:75)

In the study of Christian history, insiders have an advantage because they understand the subject matter – faith, liturgy, church organisation – from within. However, outsiders also have something relevant to say on religion. They can see relations of power which believers find difficult to take into consideration. They pay attention to aspects of Christian rituals or practices which insiders would not notice.

In any event, the frontier between the insider and the outsider points of views – also called, in linguistic and anthropological parlance, emic and etic perspectives – is not as sharp as it seems. One is an insider from a certain point of view and an outsider from another point of view (Mchunu 2007). Significantly, all the authors who criticised Jedin’s views were Christian. They positioned themselves as outsiders in the exercise of their profession but had no difficulty in identifying as insiders as far as Christian belonging was concerned.

The insider-outsider debate predated the advent of postmodernism. In some way, it prepared it. Scholars who regard Christian history as part of history rather than theology are more likely to exercise caution when discussing the truth of statements on the history of the Christian churches. They benefit from considering in earnest the questions raised by postmodern historians. Modesty in the research of the truth is always a virtue. As Yves Congar (1970a), a theologian who cannot be described as postmodern but who spent his life reading historical documents, once said:

Knowledge of history makes possible a healthy relativism, which is quite different from scepticism. Relativism is, on the contrary, a way of being and seeing oneself more truly, and by perceiving the relativity of that which is really relative, it is a way of attributing absoluteness only to what is really absolute. Thanks to history we take proper stock of things, we avoid the mistake of taking for ‘traditions’ that which is only recent and which has altered more than once in the course of time. (p. 88)

Lecturers in History of Christianity should see as an essential part of their mission the transmission of the ‘healthy relativism’ Congar was referring to. It is not a matter of being cynical about the church’s claim to know the truth but rather of

putting this claim into perspective and reminding students that faith always is a journey.

## Conclusion

‘The truth will set you free’, says the apostle (Jn 8:32). That an ultimate truth, accessible through faith, exists is not the question. The issue is how we access this truth knowing that any form of historical knowledge is socially and culturally situated and therefore relative. We should be aware of the fact that all claims to absolute truth involve an exercise of power and should therefore be considered with caution. Truth in history is always provisional. Basing one’s faith on the idea that, through the historical method or otherwise, we know the past with absolute certainty is like building a castle on the sand.

The reality is that we do not know (yet) the truth of history. Yet, imperfect as it is, history can help believers to grasp the breadth and width of the human journey towards God. We have everything to gain from a modest and self-critical approach to history and truth. Knowing little and searching for more is the call of the human condition.

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