

INTRODUCTION: INVITATION TO A PEOPLE'S HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY

DENIS R. JANZ

The academic discipline known as church history takes upon itself the study of an impossibly large subject.¹ At one end stands, let's say, the rugged, illiterate agricultural day laborer in first-century Galilee who in some way identified himself with the earliest Jesus movement. At the other end, perhaps on a recent Sunday morning, is the well-heeled, educated American businesswoman stepping out of her SUV in front of a suburban church, two children and a husband in tow. These are the bookends, from proto-Christianity to post-Christianity. What happened in the interval? Change—the contrast is obvious, stark, almost grotesque. And continuity—these two people, plus roughly ten billion human beings in between, have thought it important to orient their lives in one way or another on the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This “in between” is what church historians care about.

Why? Obviously because they see this as being of major importance, not only for current “church people,” but for all of us. Calling themselves “Christians,” these ten billion individuals have, for better or worse, shaped the course of Western history more profoundly than any other group, religious or secular. In large measure, it is precisely this cultural inheritance that has made us who we are. And thus, we will never make sense of who we are, or of our current world-historical situation, or of humanity's prospects for the future, without knowing something about it. Church history, to paraphrase Paul Tillich, is in this sense the depth dimension of the present. Without it we are condemned to superficiality.

Focused on this massive set of data from ten billion people, church history as a discipline has existed now for at least two centuries. Until very recently, its agenda has been dominated by certain facets of Christianity's past, such as theology, dogma, institutions, and ecclesio-political relations. Each of these has in fact long since evolved into its own subdiscipline. Thus the history of theology has concentrated on the self-understandings of Christian intellectuals. Historians of dogma have examined the way in which church leaders came to formulate teachings that they then pronounced normative for all Christians. Experts on institutional history have researched the formation, growth, and functioning of leadership offices, bureaucratic structures, official decision-making processes, and so forth. And specialists in the history of church-state relations have worked to fathom the complexities of the institution's interface with its sociopolitical context, above all by studying leaders on both sides.

NEW DIRECTIONS

As comprehensive as this may sound, the fact is that this discipline has told the history of Christianity as the story of one small segment of those who have claimed the name "Christian." What has been studied almost exclusively until now is the religion of various elites, whether spiritual, intellectual, or power elites. Without a doubt, many of the saints, mystics and theologians, pastors, priests, bishops, and popes of the past are worth studying. But at most they altogether constitute perhaps 5 percent of all Christians over two millennia. What about the rest? Does not a balanced history of Christianity demand that attention be paid to them?

Besides the issue of imbalance, there is also the issue of historical injustice. Ever since the study of history was born as a professional academic discipline two centuries ago, it has been fixated on the "great" deeds of "great" men, and little else. What was almost always left out of the story, of course, was the vast majority of human beings: almost all women, obviously, but also those who were socially inferior, the economically distressed, the politically marginalized, the educationally deprived, or the culturally unrefined. For various elites to despise these

people was nothing new. Cicero, in first-century-BCE Rome, referred to them as the “urban filth and shit.” Thirteenth-century Dominicans, commissioned to preach to them, referred to them as the “stulta,” the stupid. In the sixteenth century, the Paris theological faculty agreed that when Jesus spoke of casting pearls before swine and dogs in Matthew 7:6, he was referring to the laity. In eighteenth-century London, Edmund Burke called them the “swinish multitude.” Throughout Western history, this loathing of “the meaner sort” was almost universal among the privileged. Since the nineteenth century, historians perpetuated this attitude, if not by outright vilification then at least by keeping these people invisible. Thus, to pay attention to them now is not only to correct an imbalance, but in some sense to redress an injustice, to rehumanize these masses, to reverse this legacy of contempt.

The new approach to church history tries to do this. It insists that “church” is not to be defined first and foremost as the hierarchical-institutional-bureaucratic corporation; rather, above all, it is the laity, the ordinary faithful, the people. Their religious lives, their pious practices, their self-understandings as Christians, and the way all of this grew and changed over the last two millennia— this is the subject matter. In other words, the new church history is a “people’s history.”

NEW METHODS

It is one thing to ask new questions about the past and quite another to develop ways to answer them. Difficult as this may be, it is unavoidable: a disciplinary reorientation necessarily entails developing new ways of approaching the subject matter. Disciplines are not generally born with full-blown, highly sophisticated, neatly laid out methodologies. Rather these develop slowly, sporadically, incrementally, by trial and critique, by a willingness to set aside well-worn research procedures and to take chances on new ones. The path to disciplinary maturity is by its very nature a messy and painful one. Those who chart the growth of the natural sciences can attest to this. The novel field of study before us is now experiencing precisely this. Methodologically speaking, it is beyond its infancy, but certainly not yet out of its adolescence.

The detritus of the past that has washed down to us and that we can study can be classified into two basic types: material and literary. Conventional historians have most often sought to understand the past through its literary remains. The problem here, of course, is that the extant written sources for at least the first 1,700 years of Christian history are almost always the products of elite culture. As such they give us access to the religious lives of nothing more than a tiny minority. The illiterate masses simply did not leave to posterity a clear account of their beliefs, values, and devotional practices, let alone their unspoken longings, fears, joys, and sorrows.

For this reason the new people's history increasingly turns its attention to material survivals of the past, to the interrogation of artifacts rather than literary texts. Not that these are transparent: like literary texts, they must be "read" with great caution, with the so-called "hermeneutic of suspicion." Thus, for instance, the discovery of toys that children of Christian families played with in the late ancient world gives us tantalizing hints about parental values and maybe even about how this neglected segment of the Christian people was socialized into the community. So, too, the archaeological uncovering of modest homes with tiny chapels and altars from this same period is suggestive. Women's jewelry from Christianity's Byzantine branch may well indicate distinctively feminine devotional practices. What is the significance of the communion rail, introduced into church architecture in fifth-century North Africa? Can one infer from this, as some now do, that parishioners madly rushed to the altar to receive communion when the time came? The exhumation of medieval bodies in peasant cemeteries has led to the discovery of ubiquitous "grave goods." Surely such data indicates something about the religious consciousness of the laity. But what is notable in each of these examples is that we are not operating here in the realm of proof or fact or certainty. Rather, until methods are refined and research is broadened, we remain in the realm of hints, indications, suggestions, and probabilities.

Important as material culture is for studying people's history, this venture can by no means abandon the literary remains of the past. For one thing, while it is true that the vast majority of lay Christians over the last two millennia have been illiterate, there are exceptions, and their writing must be attended to carefully. We also have graffiti from

semiliterate laypersons. And illiterate believers at times, for example, dictated letters and wills and epitaphs, or gave transcribed testimony in courts of law. Few and fragmentary though they may be, such sources allow us at least a glimpse into the popular Christianity of the past.

The writings of various elites within the church also retain some considerable importance for a people's history. Rather than turning a blind eye to these documents, what is needed is the development of new ways of reading them. Practitioners of the new church history refer to such approaches as the "tangential," "oblique," "regressive," or "mirror" reading of texts. The most promising writings to be considered are those that are in some way addressed to the laity. And the researcher's primary question in every case is not, "What is the author trying to say?" but rather, "What can we infer from the text about popular piety?"

NEW ISSUES: POWER, SEX, AND POLITICS

The new history of Christianity is built on the assumption that a meaningful and helpful distinction can be made between "elite" and "popular" (or whatever other labels one chooses to apply). Already in their formative stages, religious groups, like all social groups, differentiate themselves into leaders and followers. The process is similar, whether it took place yesterday as the neighborhood ten-year-old boys organized a baseball game, or in the first century in Galilee as the earliest Jesus movements took shape. And it seems to happen no matter how egalitarian the initial impetus to group formation was. Religious groups in their earliest stages often have an informal, spontaneous, charismatic leadership. If these groups survive, this is inevitably institutionalized, formalized, and professionalized at some point. When it is, it makes sense to distinguish between elite and popular within the group.

Reversing the bias of conventional church history, we now intentionally sideline the various leaderships and elites. And yet, paradoxically perhaps, as we do this we also focus on them again, albeit in a new way. For while popular piety is given center stage, it cannot be understood in a vacuum. From the basic distinction between popular religion on the one hand, and elite, clerical, official religion on the other, there immediately arises the crucial question of how these two

interact with one another. And thus, inevitably and unavoidably, the issue of power relations confronts us.

To state the obvious, leaders at every point try to lead. Working on the assumption that they know what is best for the rest, they try to influence, sometimes to dominate, even to control. In Christianity, they instruct on what should be believed; they try to form consciences, inculcating values and moral standards; they work to shape attitudes; they advocate for a particular lifestyle; they admonish, exhort, enjoin, warn, dissuade, implore, cajole, reprove, and harangue. All this is done in countless ways, but most directly perhaps in sermons, catechesis, confession, counseling, and so forth.

And to what effect?

Here, no simple answer is possible. It may be that at certain points in the history of Christianity, ordinary Christians accepted official church teaching, moral instruction, and the like, almost in its entirety. No significant gulf separated clergy and laity when it came to these matters. In this case, official religion and popular religion nearly coincided. This was in fact the tacit assumption of earlier generations of church historians. Today, as the study of popular religion progresses, there appear to be fewer and fewer persuasive examples of this scenario.

Far more often in the history of Christianity, we find evidence that everyday Christians said no and resisted: in these cases, popular and official religion obviously diverged, though to varying extents in different contexts. This “no” spoken by popular religion to elite religion could take the relatively mild form of indifference. Thus, in fourteenth-century Western Europe, for instance—as the church hierarchy emphasized that missing Sunday mass was a mortal sin and threatened punishment temporal and eternal, physical, and spiritual—attendance hovered around 50 percent (if we are to believe reports of village priests).

But the laity’s “no” could also take the form of stubborn resistance. For instance, village priests in thirteenth-century France complained that no amount of haranguing could convince their illiterate peasant parishioners that fornication was a mortal sin. At its most extreme, saying no could even take the form of physical violence. Take, for example, the Peasants’ Revolt in England in 1381. Hoards of peasants rampaged through the countryside. When they arrived in towns, they sought out the local bishops and beheaded them—a rather vehement

repudiation of official religion. Whatever the level of resistance, popular religion does not always buy what elite religion is trying to sell.

Perhaps most commonly in Christian history, the people have said a simultaneous yes and no to their leaders. Absolute refusal to follow is rare: its result is schism, and new group formation in which virulent anti-clericalism inevitably gives way sooner or later to a new clericalism. Blind following is even more uncommon: the image of mindless masses eagerly embracing pronouncements and proscriptions from on high bears virtually no semblance to reality.

We can illustrate aspects of this question of power relations by focusing for a moment on the history of Christian attitudes toward human sexuality. Today, on this score, we have more questions than answers. For instance, why did the church hierarchy struggle so mightily for so many centuries to control this aspect of the lives of the laity? In the case of marital sexuality, why did the clergy go to such great lengths to regulate when, how, how often, and so forth? Did Christianity, as some now suggest, really develop into a sex-hating religion by the end of the Middle Ages, or was this only the clergy? Did the progressive demonizing of sexuality in the Middle Ages have anything to do with the growing enforcement of the celibacy rule for priests? To what extent did average Christians adhere to the magisterium's rules, such as the absolute prohibition of sex during Lent? Was the insistence on detailed confession of sexual "sins" to celibate priests really about sex, or was it about power? Many of these questions may be largely unanswerable today with the present state of scholarship. These questions are notable for two reasons. First, they are the kinds of questions that drive current research and discussion. Second, in every case they focus our attention on the nexus between the popular and the elite. In a people's history, the problem of power relations is inescapable.

It should immediately be added that these elementary reflections on power barely scratch the surface. Experts would immediately ask, for instance, whether such a binary schema is really adequate to the complexity of the issue, or whether the assumption of a one-way influence can account for the data. Practitioners of the new discipline who have begun to focus on this know that we are entering here into an issue of massive complexity. How power within religious groups is negotiated, conferred, wielded, and so forth, or how the location of

power migrates within a group—these are the fascinating questions that people's historians of Christianity have barely begun to formulate, let alone answer.

Wherever there is a power differential between members of a group, there is also, of course, politics. In this sense, church politics becomes the subject matter of the new kind of Christian history. We care about official statements emanating from the World Council of Churches, for instance, but only insofar as they make a difference in the lives of ordinary believers. We pay attention to who was made pope in 2006, but only if we suspect this has impacted the religiosity of the Catholic laity. When church leaders made decisions in the past, we ask in every case whose interests were served by those decisions. Thus the new church history is political in the sense that the church politics of the past is thematized.

But it is also political in another sense, one that should be openly acknowledged. Church history in the old style was never objective, value-free, or apolitical. Sides were always chosen. Standing with the "official" Christianity of leadership elites, traditional historiography portrayed popular piety for the most part as emotional, irrational, and superficial—a hopeless bog of sub-Christian superstition, indifference, and stubbornness. Surely "the church" was justified in its massive efforts throughout history to inform, influence, mold, shape, dominate, domesticate, and control this. And surely we church historians are justified in ignoring it.

The new historiography also chooses sides. It starts with the assumption that the elites may have been wrong, that popular piety in fact may have a validity of its own, that it may be an authentic manifestation of this religion centered on Jesus of Nazareth, that it may be worthy of our attention after all. In this sense, people's history is slanted, biased, disrespectful—even subversive perhaps.

NEW RESULTS?

What, finally, is to be gained by this new venture? What outcome can we anticipate? Practitioners of the discipline must, in all humility, admit that at this early stage, it is far too early to say. Perhaps in a gen-

eration or in a century, lines of development that we can now barely glimpse will appear obvious to our successors.

One thing that can already be said, however, is that the new portrait of Christianity's past will be vastly more expansive and detailed than the current one. The chapter on the fifth century, for instance, will not be able to ignore Augustine's reflections on the mediation of grace, but neither will it dare to omit those Christians who tied fox-claw amulets onto their bodies for healing. Take accounts of the thirteenth century, for example. Perhaps the intellectual achievement of Thomas Aquinas will still be featured prominently. But what about the vast majority of Christians in his day who had never heard of him? What about the Italian peasants who, we are told, admired Thomas greatly, not for his intellect or his sanctity, but for his remarkable girth and stature? And should not at least some space be given to the thirteenth-century peasant village in the Auvergne, where the cult of St. Guinefort, the holy Greyhound, flourished? So too, balanced treatments of the sixteenth century, while they couldn't ignore Luther and Calvin, would have to inquire into religious life in peasant villages, where the Gospel of John was still read to the wheat fields to ensure a good harvest. And perhaps space should be allotted to the English farmer who had faithfully attended his parish church for thirty years, but who, when asked by his vicar, still could not say the Lord's Prayer, nor, for that matter, how many persons comprise the Trinity? (And what about the disillusionment of the vicar, to whose sermons he had listened for thirty years?) All this and much more will be part of the new picture. If today we have mainly close-ups, what we can anticipate is that the camera will pan out to show us a panorama, and it will do this somehow without losing the fascinating micro-historical detail.

But far more is involved here than merely the accumulation of additional data. Historians are not simply collectors of facts about the past, or chronologists, or antiquarians. The mass of data must be interpreted. The search for meaning and direction in human history, for the contours of a narrative—surely this is what makes it significant. Put differently, the historian's goal is understanding. Mountains of fresh data about the past are worthless unless they lead to a new, more integrated, more adequate, more "true" comprehension of the

past, one that then informs and deepens our self-understanding in the present.

The shape of that new plot, if you will, is not yet apparent. But there are already signs that the old one is loosening its grip on the discipline. Take, for example, the growing discontentment among church historians with the traditional periodization. The conventional division of Christian history into New Testament, Patristic, Medieval, Reformation, Modern may have been appropriate for the history of theology, and it may still provide us with handy divisions for the sake of course requirements, but is it helpful for understanding the history of Christianity, especially now when we can no longer ignore “the people”? If, for instance, lay piety is made the central theme of the narrative, does it really make sense to posit some borderline between medieval and Reformation? The frequency of such questions today indicates that we are in transition. The old configuration is crumbling, and the new has not yet appeared.

What you have before you in these volumes is a varied assortment of some of the best current work, all of it at the cutting edge of the new orientation I have described. Chronologically, this collection moves from the earliest Jesus movements to post-modern Christianity. And geographically, it ranges from first-century Palestine to twenty-first-century Latin America and beyond. And yet it is only a sampling. It showcases a discipline in its early development, and invites all who are interested and who glimpse its promise to come aboard.