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# Christian, Providential, and Ecclesiastical: Graphing Christian Perspectives on History

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## CHRISTIAN, PROVIDENTIAL, OR ECCLESIASTICAL? CHARTING CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON HISTORY

Paul Otto

Since reading *Confessing History* and discussing many of the ideas presented there with students in seminar classes, I have found it helpful to distinguish the different positions of Christian historians on a multi-axis graph.<sup>1</sup> Whereas we, as Christian historians, often place ourselves at one end or the other of a particular spectrum, or perhaps even recognize that there are two axes to contend with, I submit that the landscape of Christian thinking on history is more complicated than a single spectrum allows. It is also necessary to recognize that there are several factors that go into differences among us because too often the discussions are polarized, putting the “George Marsden/Mark Noll school” of thinking on one side of the spectrum and the detractors, whoever they might be, on the other.

I have seen and spoken with Marsden/Noll detractors, however, who themselves seem to end up on either side of the position supposedly held by these sequential holders of the chair of religious history at Notre Dame University.<sup>2</sup> It could be that the Marsden school just happens to fall in the middle of the spectrum, or perhaps Noll and Marsden’s assessment of themselves and their detractors’ assessment of them is unclear, leading to an ambiguous relationship to other Christian historians. But I think more is going on.

The debate about the nature of “Christian history” plays into this. For some, Christian history is church history, that is, the history of Christianity. For others, Christian history is a particular, Christian approach to historical study, whatever the topic. And there are those for whom Christian history is the exercise of observing God’s providential leading through time. Many other possibilities could also be listed. But despite these diverse opinions, there is a tendency within our ranks toward dualisms in our discussion of these matters—teaching at Christian colleges versus state universities, doing church history versus secular history, teaching versus scholarship, writing monographs versus producing broad histories. These are problematic for at least two reasons. First, they tend to overlap in people’s minds, leading to some confusion in analyzing different Christian approaches. And second, they tend to create distinctions that might not actually exist.

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<sup>1</sup> John Fea, Jay Green, and Eric Miller, eds., *Confessing History: Explorations in Christian Faith and The Historian’s Vocation* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010).

<sup>2</sup> Francis A. McAnaney Chair.

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As I consider the various approaches and positions that Christians who engage in the historical task have taken, I have come to believe that our debates lie not on a single, linear spectrum, between, say, “faith-influenced history” and “fact-oriented history,” nor even on a plane whereby we might place historians in various quadrants defined by an x-axis and a y-axis. No, I think the richness of our debate grows out of a complexity of positions that can only be characterized by a three dimensional graph that lays out three different spectra or continua. Such a multi-dimensional approach may help us better understand one another as Christian historians, better communicate with one another on the relationship of our faith to our historical inquiries, and better introduce students to the complexity of history and the great challenges in trying to understand it as Christians.

To do so, this essay will touch on some of the Christian historical debates of recent decades, address some of the dualisms noted above, and, along the way, specifically introduce three axes of debate among Christian scholars as somewhat crudely and perhaps ineffectually introduced by the title of this essay.

#### DEBATING THE GREAT AWAKENING

Since the Marsden-Noll “camp” may be a little difficult to define if we dig too deeply or look too closely, allow me to use the term loosely for now—some of the nuances and differences may come out during the essay. But for many, this historical approach has been associated with Calvin College, its history faculty, and other like-minded historians of Reformed persuasion. Among others, this group has also included Harry S. Stout who did his undergraduate work at Calvin College and studied with Robert Swieringa at Kent State University. In 1991 Harry Stout published *The Divine Dramatist*, a biography of George Whitefield that offered a revision of not only our understanding of Whitefield, but of the Great Awakening, arguing that Whitefield applied his theatrical training to the preaching of the gospel, used contemporary methods to reach the masses, and became the first inter-colonial public figure.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, Stout argued that the roots of many twentieth-century evangelical practices could be found in Whitefield innovations. Critics of his work quickly emerged. David White reviewed the volume in *The Banner of Truth* asserting at the beginning of his review that “faithful preaching involves a mysterious mix of human gift and divine unction” and that Whitefield’s preaching “was the means appointed [by Providence] to produce the Great Awakening.” In contrast to this view of Whitefield, Stout’s book “appears to be obsessed with finding the slightest flaw in the character of a spiritual giant” and “assumes that sociological factors wholly shaped the man.”<sup>4</sup> Despite these differences upon how Whitefield should be presented—and they are profound—Stout and the *Banner of Truth* editorship (Iain Murray took Stout to task several issues later for his essay “George Whitefield in Three Countries”<sup>5</sup>)

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<sup>3</sup> *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> *Banner of Truth* (March 1994): 29.

<sup>5</sup> In *Evangelicalism: Comparative Studies on Popular Protestantism in North America, The British Isles, and Beyond, 1700–1990*, eds. Mark S. Noll, David W. Bebbington, and George Rawlyk (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 58–72.

seem to share a common way of dividing their approaches to history. In his response to these two reviews, Stout wrote: "I did not dwell on devotional or hagiographic themes because Christians were not my primary intended audience. I wanted to reach the professional academy and university students ... Professional historians are not interested in ... faith claims but they are interested in social, cultural, and intellectual significance. So those are the terms in which the biography was framed." In rebuttal, Murray agreed with this approach, writing "we understand your point and think that sympathy and understanding is due to Christians who are seeking to work effectively in academic institutions."<sup>6</sup> So both recognize God's providential hand in history, and both believe there are professional limitations placed on scholars. Where they disagree is the degree to which Christian historians, whatever the context, should give witness to Providence or, at least, Whitefield's own spiritual life and beliefs. Stout believes a "secular" interpretation of a Christian leader is right and proper, whereas *The Banner of Truth* believes that such interpretations do not do justice to the subject.

#### APPROACHING HISTORY WITH A TWO-KINGDOM VIEW

This debate on the Great Awakening placed Stout, along with Noll, Marsden, and Nathan Hatch, who has collaborated with Noll and Marsden, at odds with some church historians for their failure to apply their faith to their historical subjects. But just a few years later, this same school of thinkers came under fire from another quarter. And this time they were accused of appealing too heavily to their faith in matters of historical scholarship. Shortly after the publication of *The Divine Dramatist*, Mark Noll published *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* and George Marsden published *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* making similar claims.<sup>7</sup> Noll wrote of thinking "like a Christian—to think within a specifically Christian framework—across the whole spectrum of modern learning," while Marsden described how "background beliefs will have a vast influence on which pattern we see [referring to a gestalt image] when we look at 'the facts.'"<sup>8</sup>

In response, church historian D. G. Hart took Noll, Marsden, and others to task for their claims about the primacy of faith in Christian scholarship. He found such approaches were untenable "if evangelical academics are to overcome what Noll calls the 'scandal of the evangelical mind,'" and suggested instead that "the Lutheran notion of the paradoxical relation between the affairs of man and the ways of God may prove to offer a better approach for evangelical scholars than the Reformed notion of taking every thought captive for Christ."<sup>9</sup> Arguing against the apparent faith-based approach of Noll and Marsden, Hart implicitly appeals to a purely empirical-based approach to research and writes: "Christians gain insights into and

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<sup>6</sup> This exchange was reprinted as Harry S. Stout and Iain Murray, "Evangelicals and the Writing of History," in the *Evangelical Studies Bulletin* 12 (Spring 1995): 6–9.

<sup>7</sup> Eerdmans, 1994, and Oxford University Press, 1997, respectively.

<sup>8</sup> Noll, *Scandal*, 7; Marsden, *Outrageous Idea*, 62.

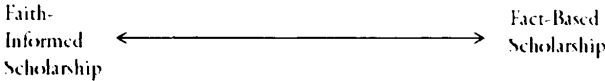
<sup>9</sup> D.G. Hart, "Christian Scholars, Secular Universities, and the Problem with the Antithesis," *Christian Scholars Review* 30 (Summer 2001): 385.

wisdom about the world from scholars who study topics like Abraham Lincoln even if those scholars refuse to acknowledge God’s sovereignty over all realms of life.”<sup>10</sup>

PROBLEMS IN THE CLASSROOM

I highlight these two debates because I think they demonstrate well the difficulty in using a single spectrum or continuum to distinguish the two positions. How can the Marsden camp be pilloried on the one hand for failing in their Christian scholarship by attuning themselves too closely to mainstream standards, but be used as examples by D.G. Hart as scholars too heavily committed to faith-guided scholarship? This difficulty has also appeared several times in classroom discussions when my students and I engaged with Christopher Shannon’s essay, ‘After Monographs: A Critique of Christian Scholarship as Professional Practice,’ where he asserts that the scholarly standards of the historical profession place unacceptable limitations on Christian historians who seek to interpret the past from a perspective of their faith.<sup>11</sup> With respect to George Marsden he writes that “the intellectual position in which he locates Christian scholarship ... is the privileged position of autonomy. ... The history that proceeds from it will be secular history.”<sup>12</sup>

Each time I’ve had the opportunity to discuss this essay in class with students I have drawn a line on the white board and placed at one end a description of “faith-informed conclusions” and on the other end “fact-informed conclusions.”



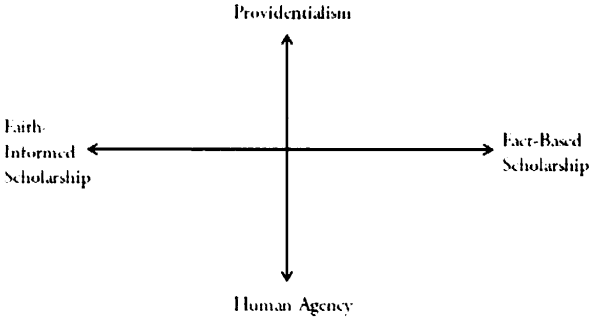
Shannon makes clear in his essay that he is challenging the Marsden school, so I ask my students where Marsden fits and where Shannon fits. To be fair, they haven’t read Marsden, although they’ve had some exposure to and explanation of this “school” of thought. In response to my question, quite a debate ensues. Many see Shannon as clearly fitting on one side—the “faith” side because of his emphasis on Christian historians freely appealing to Providence in their classrooms—but they have difficulty with Marsden. On the one hand, they recognize that, as portrayed by Shannon, Marsden is unlikely to talk explicitly about Providence and God’s hand in history. But on the other hand, Shannon himself introduces Marsden in connection with his “outrageous idea of Christian scholarship,” implying that he doesn’t quite belong on the “fact-informed conclusions” side.

INADEQUACIES OF A SINGLE SPECTRUM

It is at this point where I assert to my students that our debates have tried to make things too simple by equating a Christian view of history with a notion of providentialism. Marsden argues for Christian scholarship, but does not write

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 401.  
<sup>11</sup> In *Confessing History*, 168–86.  
<sup>12</sup> Shannon, “After Monographs,” 176–77.

providential history. Thus he and Stout and others are easily targeted by Iain Murray, Christopher Shannon, and others for failing the test of Christian historical interpretation by omitting such explicit references to divine causation. Yet D.G. Hart finds the admonitions of the Marsden-Noll cabal to Christian scholars to do authentically Christian scholarship too much to stomach. Clearly more is going on than a single spectrum can capture. What we are actually engaging in is two separate lines of debate and need to add a second axis. To the faith versus facts axis should be added a Y-axis that places providentialism on one end and human agency on the other.



Such a scheme immediately opens up new possibilities for categorization. With respect to the *Banner of Truth* position and Shannon’s critique of the Marsden-Noll school, there is no difficulty in placing those Christian historians who argue for a more explicit identification of God’s hand in history on the top half of the plane and those who are reluctant to make such explicit claims on the bottom half. This also addresses the confusion when Christian historians claim that their faith must make a difference in their writing while their scholarly output highlights human agency rather than providential interpretations. A scholar such as Marsden can claim that his faith does make a difference in how he interprets the past, yet he will draw conclusions that don’t live up to the expectations of Murray and Shannon.

But if faith-based conclusions don’t equal or lead to interpretations of providentialism, what do they mean? Marsden’s claim has been made in various writings over the years, sometimes in the area of history and sometimes with respect to scholarly inquiry in general. But there are scholars who argue for even more fundamental implications of faith for scholarship without recourse to providentialism. Christian philosopher Roy A. Clouser argues for such an epistemology in *The Myth of Religious Neutrality: An Essay on the Hidden Role of Religious Belief in Theories*.<sup>13</sup> Defining religion or religious belief as “any belief in something or other ... [that does] not depend ... on anything else,” Clouser claims that “religious belief is the most influential of all beliefs, and the most powerful force in the world. ... Moreover, it exercises this influence upon all people independently of their conscious acceptance or rejection of the religious traditions with which they are acquainted.”<sup>14</sup> Regardless of whether or not readers of this essay agree with Clouser’s approach, there is no denying that some Christian scholars embrace his position or approximate it, including many Christian historians. And these stand in contrast to historians such as D.G. Hart

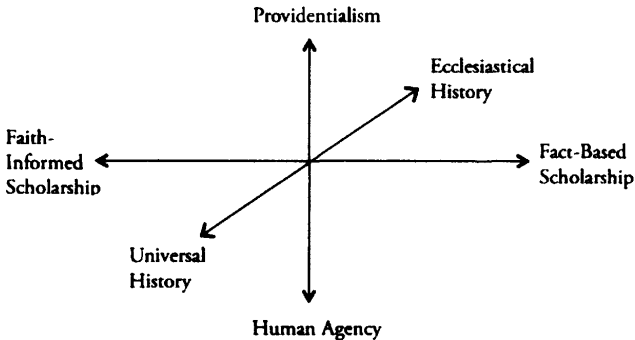
<sup>13</sup> Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 21–22, 1.

who argue for the fundamentally empirical nature of historical and other scholarly inquiry.

ADDING A THIRD SPECTRUM

While these two axes help us understand how Christian historians think about history, I believe another axis is necessary. We've added breadth to our discussion, moving from a line to a plane, but I propose giving depth to our understanding by adding a z-axis to our graph and creating a three-dimensional space in which to explore our differences as Christian historians. If we have often confused "fact-based" history with a history emphasizing "human agency" and have tended to conflate "providential history" with "faith-based" history, we've also muddied the waters we play in by aligning "secular" history with facts and humans and "church" history with Providence and faith. This is, indeed, a natural thing to do. However when members of the Conference on Faith and History discuss Christian history, do they actually mean church or ecclesiastical history? At my own faith-based institution, our church history course is colloquially known as Christian history, easily conflating the history of the church with the history done by Christian historians. I hope by now readers can see that not only don't these necessarily line up, but they are clearly a separate line of debate. One only need to be reminded that there are plenty of non-Christian historians, and these presumably don't embrace either a notion of Providence or of faith-based knowledge/interpretation, who study and teach church history. And plenty of Christian historians like myself do not focus upon the history of the church as our main field of inquiry. So the choice to study church history as opposed to all other history is not the same as a choice between emphasizing Providence versus human agency (although these clearly may overlap), nor is it the same as a choice between faith-informed or fact-based learning. Furthermore, labeling the two extremes on this axis as church history and secular history creates an unnecessary and unfair dualism. So I've adopted the phrase "universal history" to capture the idea of a history that is inclusive of all historical fields and subfields.<sup>15</sup>



<sup>15</sup> Although as my students who have studied in non-Christian as well as Christian contexts can attest to, some non-Christian historians do, indeed, omit any discussion of the church or Christianity as part of

## RESOLVING DILEMMAS

I would argue that understanding these three axes might help us better understand one another's efforts at doing what we understand to be Christian history and help us to avoid drawing unnecessary distinctions between teaching and research, Christian and secular institutions, and so forth. To be sure, in making this case, my own understanding of what it means to be a Christian historian comes to the fore, and that position need not be embraced by my audience. But I hope that by graphing, in three dimensions, the various positions reflected in debates among Christian historians, I am contributing to better understanding and appreciation of one another. Such a scheme is intended to map where each of us stands, not chart a particular course of where we should go. If we can find one another in this universe of Christian history, we can better send messages to one another that are likely to find their way to their recipient.

Let's also consider the debate about God's hand in history. If we have only a single axis—faith versus facts, providentialists will place themselves on the left of this spectrum and others on the right, much like the *Banner of Truth* and Harry Stout debate. Or, in embracing a single Providence versus human agency spectrum, they will place themselves on the top of such an axis and all others on the bottom. Embracing these two axes together allows for historians who share a belief that God acts in history (and thus their faith commitment presupposes their historical inquiry), but who nonetheless disagree on the viability of or degree to which Christian historians should explicitly identify God's hand in the course of historical development. For example, as a Calvinist, I am utterly committed to the completeness of God's providential work, not only in the redemption of individual people, but in the creation and sustaining of the whole cosmos. And yet in my historical writing *and* my teaching, I never assign to God particular agency for any one event or development. Is this because I'm a "fact-based" historian? Indeed, no, since my emphasis on human agency doesn't stem from an empiricist-based understanding of knowledge and reality, but from a belief that God created the world with the intention of human agency. My anthropology, if you will, is rooted in the idea that humans are God's image bearers and that image bearing means that humans have a God-given task to develop the creation, to cultivate in the world, to produce cultural artifacts, to develop social systems—in short, to make history. In ways I can't fully comprehend and understand, I believe that human activity is the extension of providential leading—two sides of the same coin. It is entirely in keeping with my *Christian perspective* on history, then, to emphasize human agency in history without denying God's providential "control" of all things.

Or, consider this possibility: church historians need not fall either on the top half of the y-axis nor on the left half of the x-axis. Some believing historians of the church do not necessarily claim that their faith guides their historical understanding, but instead argue that they employ the same empirical methods as non-believing historians. They may also not claim (or add) any providential influence on historical events. Hart seems a fair example of this. His claims in his essay noted above are

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the broader scope of Western civilization or United States history, so there is some warrant for a "church" versus "secular" spectrum.



that Christian historians use the same methodology as any other professionally trained historian. His biography of J. Gresham Machen, founder of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, appeals to no special providential cause and effect. In fact, he goes to great pains in this biography to explore and emphasize the nuances and complexities of the historical context in which Machen operated.

Or, perhaps more provocatively, it is also interesting to consider the case of those who embrace providentialism. While it might seem that such a presupposition demands that they operate from the faith-fueled knowledge side of the x-axis, this isn't necessarily the case. Some scholars who argue for this position consider their understanding of Providence as an add-on to their work as professional historians. Such scholars often make distinctions between writing monographs and other kinds of historical writing presentation—such as Shannon—or between historical scholarship and the teaching of history (for example, Lendol Calder).<sup>16</sup> In many of these cases, such scholars probably embrace (implicitly or explicitly) Hart's two-kingdom view believing that their scholarship resides in the realm of nature or that all truth is God's truth, and their Christian wisdom comes from the realm of grace.

## CONCLUSION

Although I can clearly and firmly plot my position in one octant of my three-axes graph, my goal with this essay is not to argue against the historians who fall elsewhere in this space we call Christian history. Instead, I hope that my discussion helps illuminate the debates among us and invites us to better understanding of one another and the task that we daily undertake as Christian historians, whether in the classroom or out, in Christian colleges or in secular universities, even as professional historians or non-professionals. But I also hope that by laying out various approaches to Christian history as I have, we may have a better idea of what our options are as Christian historians. Perhaps many of us have found ourselves in scholarly, pedagogical, or intellectual cul-de-sacs with a street cleaner or garbage truck apparently blocking our only way out, or like Mr. Driver and his kids in Dirk Jellema's charming essay on faith and history of forty years ago, we've been told by a West Virginia mountain man that there's no way to get to Pittsburgh from here.<sup>17</sup> In my understanding of our debates, it could be that we have far more options to consider as Christian historians than the way we've framed our debates has allowed us to see before now. As rich as Christian theology is, as complex as history is, and as debatable and, at times, incomprehensible, as diverse philosophical positions are, there is much (three-dimensional) space for mutual respect, efforts at ongoing collegial discussion, and new avenues of thinking, researching, and teaching among those of us committed in faith to Christ Jesus and called to understand the historical dimension of God's world.

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<sup>16</sup> "For Teachers to Live, Professors Must Die: A Sermon on the Mount," in *Confessing History*, 233–61.

<sup>17</sup> "Why Study History? Mused Clio," in *A Christian View of History?* eds. George Marsden and Frank Roberts (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1975).