Introduction: Intellectual History and the Return of Religion

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Religious history and intellectual history are two of the most dynamic fields of contemporary historical inquiry. Yet historians of ideas and historians of religion often plough separate furrows, paying little attention to each other’s work. This book calls for a more fruitful interaction between the two fields. It urges intellectual historians to explore the religious dimension of ideas and commends the methods of intellectual history to historians of religion. It also seeks to model good practice and encourage further research. The introduction locates our project in relation to contemporary historiography, and outlines the opportunities and pitfalls that lie before students of religious thought.

The Priorities of Intellectual History

Seeing Things Their Way is a title taken from Quentin Skinner, one of the leading figures in the “Cambridge School” of intellectual historians. Alongside J. G. A. Pocock and John Dunn, Skinner carved out his own methodology in opposition to dominant rival schools in the 1960s. On the one hand, there was the materialist reductionism of Marxist and Namierite historians, who saw politics in terms of a struggle for power between different classes or interests, and reduced ideas to “ideology.”
On the other hand, there were the rather ahistorical accounts of philosophers such as Leo Strauss and Arthur Lovejoy, who wrote the history of abstract “ideas,” and discussed leading political theorists with little reference to their contexts, placing them in conversation with other “great thinkers” across the centuries.

The Cambridge School aimed to plot a course between the materialists and the idealists. Drawing on the speech-act theory of J. L. Austin and John Searle, Skinner argued that we should identify the precise intellectual and political contexts of the texts we are studying, in order to ascertain what their authors meant and what they were doing. His advice to his fellow intellectual historians is neatly summarized in the following quotation.

[W]e need to make it one of our principal tasks to situate the texts we study within such intellectual contexts as enable us to make sense of what their authors were doing in writing them. My aspiration is not of course to enter into the thought-processes of long-dead thinkers; it is simply to use the ordinary techniques of historical enquiry to grasp their concepts, to follow their distinctions, to appreciate their beliefs and, so far as possible, to see things their way.3

The attraction of this method is that it offers “a more historically-minded approach to the history of ideas,” encouraging us to take our subjects seriously on their own terms.4 Instead of imposing modern (or postmodern) categories upon past agents, we attend carefully to the concepts and language(s) that were available to them. Instead of dismissing the beliefs of our subjects as “irrational,” “we must begin by trying to make the agents who accepted [those beliefs] appear as rational as possible,” however bizarre their beliefs may seem to us.5 Instead of setting out to write a normative history of ideas as philosophers or theologians might do, we will concentrate on trying to understand our subjects’ points of view.

Skinner’s approach has proved highly successful and influential in rejuvenating the history of political thought. Yet in one important respect, it perhaps fails to apply its own agenda consistently. As John Coffey observes in his chapter on Skinner, the Cambridge historian has developed
a distinctly secular vision of early modern political thought. Skinner is acutely sensitive to the classical sources of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century political ideas, but often overlooks the biblical citations and religious presuppositions in early modern texts. Although his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* (1978) undermined one aspect of Whig history by highlighting the medieval (and hence Catholic) roots of early modern ideas, it still equated the “modern” with the “secular,” and told a somewhat Whiggish story of how the first “modern” theories emerged. His subsequent work, for all its brilliance, displays little interest in the religious dimension of early modern political thought, and it is significant that he has focussed his energies on Machiavelli and Hobbes, two notoriously “irreligious” thinkers.

Many intellectual historians who came of age in the middle of the twentieth century were influenced by a sociological tradition which assumed—following Marx, Durkheim, and Weber—a sharp division between traditional and modern societies. One of the key features of modernization, according to such theorists, was the decline of religion, magic, and superstition, and the rise of reason, science, and skepticism. Modernization and secularization marched hand in hand. Historians who bought into this secularizing teleology were inclined to write history as a story of progress in which reason and science inexorably displaced faith and dogma. Two of the main tasks of intellectual historians were to trace the development of “the modern mind” and to identify the origins of (for example) “the modern idea of the state.” Such a present-centered approach tended to downgrade religious beliefs, for there seemed little point in studying ideas that were doomed to decline and of little relevance to the modern world. Modernization theory (and the classic secularization thesis that arose with it) enjoyed its heyday in the 1950s and 1960s, and its impact can still be detected.

One consequence of its influence is that intellectual historians have traditionally assigned a relatively low priority to the history of theology and religious ideas. A survey of the writing of early modern intellectual history from 1945 to 1995 has sections on the history of science, the history of political thought, the history of the book, the history of scholarship, and the new cultural history, but no equivalent section on the history of religious ideas. Donald Kelley has calculated that of eight
hundred submitted and tabulated papers for the Journal of the History of Ideas, 25 percent were devoted to philosophy, 18 percent to political thought, 16 percent to literature, 12 percent to science, and a mere 8 percent to religion. No doubt this is partly because 46 percent of those papers were on the (relatively) secularized nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and partly because historians of religious ideas often submit their work to journals of religious history or theology. But the fact that philosophy, political thought, literature, and science all ranked higher than religion reveals much about the priorities of twentieth-century intellectual historians. Even in the twenty-first century, the history of religious thought can still be marginalized. A recent guide to the discipline of intellectual history has essays on its relationship to the history of art, political thought, science, social and cultural history, and feminism, but none specifically devoted to religion. The introduction—by a distinguished historian of eighteenth-century Anglican thought—explains that “a separate chapter on theology” was not required because the book includes a chapter on medieval studies. As a rationale, this is problematic. For by omitting a broader thematic treatment of religious ideas, the book lends support to the lingering assumption that getting to grips with theology is essential for medievalists but optional for historians of other periods.

This book sets out to reorder the priorities of intellectual historians by demonstrating the importance and the fruitfulness of the study of religious ideas. Our point is not that religious ideas be granted special status as the primary category of intellectual history (though in the concluding essay to this volume, David Bebbington does make a case for their priority). Rather, we argue that religious thought be afforded the same respect, and be studied in the same manner, as scientific or political thought. We see no reason why the methodology that Skinner and others have applied to political ideas should not be applied to religious ideas too.

Yet we also want to stress that “religious ideas” are not simply a separate area of intellectual history, one that can be bracketed off and left to a specialist subgroup. Because religion often plays such an important role in the construction of meaning, it is anything but a hermetically sealed compartment—its influence tends to leak into other areas of intellectual life, coloring other realms of discourse. The study of religious
ideas does not stop with the study of “religious texts.” The *Short-Title Catalogue* of British books published between 1475 and 1640 identifies “religious books” as “the single most important component of the publishing trade, comprising around half the total output of the industry.” But as Patrick Collinson observes, identifying a category of “religious books” can be rather misleading: “For the modern world, the term ‘religion’ marks off a more or less discrete area of life, but this is anachronistic for the [early modern] period under review, in which the commodity which we might want to distinguish as ‘religion’ permeated much, if not all, of what is now secularized.” Thus lists of “religious” titles do not include almanacs, medical treatises, and cookbooks, even though “all [were] saturated with pious vocabulary.” For this reason, religious ideas should be on the radar of all historians, not merely dedicated specialists. If historians of political thought, for example, can explore the biblical and theological dimensions of political argument, they will produce more rounded expositions of their key texts. Only when religion is reinserted into our accounts will we be able to deliver a richer and more complete intellectual history.

THE RETURN OF RELIGION

In making this case, we are conscious of reinforcing a growing trend, for there are many signs of a resurgence of interest in religion among historians. As long ago as 1964 the *American Historical Review* published an article by Henry F. May which began: “For the study and understanding of American culture, the recovery of American religious history may well be the most important achievement of the last thirty years. A vast and crucial area of American experience has been rescued from neglect and misunderstanding.” May was writing in the wake of the great Harvard historian, Perry Miller, who did so much to rehabilitate the New England Puritans of the colonial period through a meticulous reconstruction of their religious beliefs.

Yet despite the Millers and the Mays, many historians in the 1960s were inclined to leave religion to ecclesiastical historians. When the *Times Literary Supplement* produced three issues on “new ways in history” in 1966, none of the essays (by such luminaries as Keith Thomas,
Eric Hobsbawm, and E. P. Thompson) had anything to say about religious history. This was a self-confidently secular age, and as the sea of faith receded, historians seemed likely to be less and less preoccupied with religion. Since Western man was in the final stages of a long-standing process of secularization, historians needed to explain religion in terms of some more fundamental and enduring aspect of human society. The eminent sociologist Peter Berger predicted in 1968 that “by the twenty-first century, religious believers are likely to be found only in small sects, huddled together to resist a worldwide secular culture.”

Like so many others in the 1960s, Berger failed to foresee the dramatic developments of the late twentieth century: the Iranian Revolution and the rise of political Islam, the emergence of the religious right in the United States, the explosive global growth of Pentecostalism, the role of John Paul II and the churches in the collapse of Eastern Bloc Communism, and the events of 9/11. These developments have proved fatal to the belief that religion was doomed to die a lingering death. In 1999, Berger himself edited a volume entitled The Desecularization of the World, in which he recanted his earlier opinion: “the assumption that we live in a secularized world is false: the world today, with some exceptions . . . is as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever.” Historians, whose work so often reflects contemporary preoccupations, increasingly recognized religious belief as a potent independent variable, an enduring factor in human affairs that needs to be understood in its own right. As a result, the drive to recover the religious dimension of the past has gathered momentum.

The resurgence of religion in the contemporary world was not the only factor leading to a revival of interest in the history of religious belief. Whilst historians of the 1960s had confidently predicted the rise of “cliometrics” and the triumph of social and economic history, the 1970s saw the emergence of the new cultural history. Under the influence of anthropologists like Clifford Geertz, historians became more alert to the role of religion in constructing meaning. Studies of ritual and the history of mentalities proliferated. As Keith Thomas has recently observed, social and cultural anthropology taught historians to conceive of their subject as a “kind of retrospective ethnography” and encouraged them to understand “the native point of view”:...
Instead of trying to classify and order human experience from the outside, as if historical actors were butterflies, and historians entomologists, much imaginative effort has gone into the re-creation of the way things appeared to people at the time. This shift from the etic to the emic, as the linguists would call it, involves an enhanced concern with the meaning of events for those who participated in them, and a new respect for what people in the past thought and felt. Back in the 1950s, it was common to disparage ideas as mere rationalizations of self-interest. Today, even the hardest-nosed historians seek to recapture the vocabulary, categories and subjective experience of the historical actors, rather than anachronistically viewing their behaviour through modern spectacles.\(^{16}\)

A prime example of this shift can be seen in the historiography of the French Wars of Religion. In the heyday of Marxian socioeconomic explanation, historians often discounted the religious factor, claiming that the “ideology” of the Huguenots and the Catholic League was a cloak for material or political interests, and that the causes of the conflict were fundamentally secular. But the work of cultural and intellectual historians like Natalie Davis and Denis Crouzet has transformed the historiography, “putting religion back into the wars of religion.”\(^{17}\)

The same trend can be seen in many other fields. In the history of political thought, the methodology of the Cambridge School has fostered a serious exploration of the religious elements in early modern political argument. The concern to avoid anachronism, and to situate thinkers within their own intellectual contexts, has led to studies of their religious environment and of the religious concepts available to them. By promoting a sharper sense of the sheer difference of the past, Skinner’s methodological prescriptions have encouraged a desecularization of the history of political thought. As early as 1969, John Dunn’s influential study of John Locke’s political thought challenged anachronistic secular interpretations of the philosopher by arguing that the *Two Treatises of Government* was “saturated with Christian assumptions.”\(^{18}\) John Pocock too has been noticeably alive to the significance of religious ideas, most recently in his multivolume work on Edward Gibbon.\(^{19}\) Some of Skinner’s own students have contributed to the recovery of the religious
dimension of early modern political thought. Richard Tuck has examined the “Christian atheism” and civil religion of Thomas Hobbes, and Mark Goldie has illuminated the connections between religious and political ideas in a series of groundbreaking essays.20 Scholars increasingly recognize that political ideas were often inextricably bound up with religious ones.

The return of religion can also be seen in the field of Enlightenment studies. As James Bradley’s essay in this volume demonstrates, historians have become increasingly dissatisfied with the assumption that the Enlightenment was (by definition) aggressively secularist. England’s “moderate Enlightenment” was not hostile to religious belief, and was partly shaped by Anglican clergy and Nonconformist divines. Bradley argues that much that counted as “enlightened” in eighteenth-century England was not particularly heterodox either. Latitudinarian clergy and leading literary figures were more orthodox than has traditionally been recognized, while Evangelicals, Roman Catholics, and high-church Anglicans were more “enlightened.” Studies of the Scottish Enlightenment and the American Enlightenment paint a broadly similar picture.21

In parts of continental Europe, there is a stronger case for seeing the Enlightenment (in Peter Gay’s phrase) as “the rise of modern paganism,”22 but even here recent scholarship has undermined old certainties, emphasising the varieties of Enlightenment. The French Enlightenment no longer dominates the stage in the way it once did, and we have become used to thinking of “the Enlightenment in national context.”23 As Dorinda Outram explains, “the Enlightenment produced a wide variety of responses to organised religion, ranging all the way from violent Voltairean hostility to religion, through to attempts to bolster orthodox belief by demonstrating its rationality and accordance with natural law.”24 Jonathan Israel has recently excavated a secular(ist) “Radical Enlightenment,” originating in the Netherlands with Benedict Spinoza and reaching its apogee with Denis Diderot and other participants in the French High Enlightenment. But Israel’s grand survey actually underlines the tenacity of religious belief in the Age of Reason, for his Radical Enlightenment is battling against two much larger movements—the Counter-Enlightenment and the Moderate Enlightenment. The moderate mainstream of Enlightenment thought is depicted as hopelessly
compromised, and a host of major Enlightenment figures—including Locke and Voltaire—are chided for being too friendly towards religion (whether Christian or Deist).\(^{25}\) The Enlightenment is not what it used to be.\(^{26}\)

The history of science has experienced a similar reversal. Late nineteenth-century histories of the purported conflict between science and religion have now been largely discredited, and replaced by far more subtle studies of the complex and often fertile interplay between theology and science.\(^{27}\) The “warfare model” still has considerable popular appeal, but it flies in the face of a generation of scholarship. Nowhere is the renewed interest in the relationship between science and religion more evident than in studies of Isaac Newton. The fact that one of the greatest early modern “scientists” penned over a million words on alchemy and around two and a half million on theology hardly fits with the picture of a running battle between heroic rationalists and obscurantist believers.\(^{28}\) Historians of the Scientific Revolution, irrespective of their own beliefs, have seen the need to get religion.

The same reassessment of the role of religion can be seen in the historiography of the nineteenth century. Secularization was occurring, but it was battling against powerful currents of religious revitalization.\(^{29}\) In his masterly survey of Britain in the mid-nineteenth century, Theodore Hoppen declares that “never was Britain more religious than in the Victorian age.”\(^{30}\) Historians of the period are increasingly convinced that they must reckon with the force of religious belief more seriously than has been their custom. Chris Bayly summarizes the emerging consensus in his compelling revisionist study of *The Birth of the Modern World*:

Historians of ideas have come to realize in the last generation how deeply religion influenced the supposedly secular ideologies and sciences of the nineteenth century. For instance, early nineteenth-century economics and demography in Protestant nations were influenced by the idea that periodic economic downfalls were a sign of God’s punishment, for which the peoples had to atone. Much liberal, and even socialist, thought continued to reflect deep-rooted ideas about justice and community which were of Christian origin.
When Hindus, Muslims and Buddhists adapted such ideas to their own circumstances, they also tinctured them with religious sensibilities. The social thought of non-Western elites was everywhere suffused with religious ideas about good governance and divine justice. So it was with science. Christian missionaries were pioneers of scientific collection and categorization, especially in Africa and the Pacific, as they sought to display God’s bounty to humankind through his creation. The Christian squabble with Darwin has obscured the modus vivendi to which religious people and scientists generally subscribed.31

The twentieth century, of course, may be a different matter—at least for Europe and North America. In the United States, for example, the early twentieth century witnessed a dramatic secularization of public life and higher education.32 By the 1970s, religious titles accounted for just over 5 percent of books published in the United States, a far cry from the days when they dominated the market.33 In Western Europe, secularization went further still. Alister Chapman’s essay in this volume explores the challenges this presents to the historian of twentieth-century religious ideas, who is likely to feel far more marginalized than her early modern or medieval counterparts. He argues that the “dominant master narrative” of secularization leads historians to overlook “the ongoing importance of religion in the United Kingdom,” from “the confessional dimension of Northern Irish politics, to the inspiration provided by Christian belief for politicians such as Clement Attlee and Tony Blair.” Although “organized religion is less influential in Britain today than it was a century ago,” “diminished importance does not mean no importance; marginality does not equal irrelevance.”34

There are strong reasons to think that the influence of religious belief may be waxing rather than waning in the twenty-first century. Even in secularized Europe, the rise of Islam has forced religious beliefs back onto the intellectual agenda. The philosopher John Gray, a secular thinker himself, argues that the brief era when religious ideas were eclipsed is drawing to a close:

The return of religion as a pivotal factor in politics and war is one of the defining features of the age, and it is time Paine, Marx and other
secular prophets were gently shelved in the stacks. The writings of these Enlightenment savants have stirred events for a very brief period in history, now clearly coming to an end. . . . [T]he books that have most formed the past, and which are sure also to shape the future, are the central texts of the world religions.  

Gray underestimates the resilience of secular Enlightenment thought, a resilience highlighted by the rise of “the new atheists.” But there is good reason to think that the history of religious ideas is likely to acquire an increasingly high profile within the academy. Indeed, there are already clear signs that intellectual historians are waking up to the realization that religious belief is a powerful (and persistent) feature of human societies, and that studying the history of religious ideas is of greater importance than was once assumed to be the case. In 2005, the International Society of Intellectual Historians held a conference entitled “Rethinking Secularization.” The days when the history of religious ideas could be quietly downgraded are drawing to a close.

THE PROBLEM OF REDUCTIONISM

If the prospects for the history of religious ideas look good, there are still some pitfalls in the road ahead. Historians of religious ideas face a dilemma similar to that first confronted by Skinner and his colleagues. Like the Cambridge School, we need to find a middle way between two forms of reductionism: materialist and idealist.

The challenge of materialist reductionism is well known. Following in the footsteps of Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and Durkheim, many historians have assumed that one can (and should) explain religious belief in terms of something more permanent and fundamental—economic interests, repressed sexuality, the need for communal integration. A famous example is provided by E. P. Thompson's classic work, The Making of the English Working Class, which subjected Methodist religion to an aggressive Marxist-Freudian critique. If confidence in such reductionist theories has declined, some historians are still inclined to explain religious beliefs as a mask for more fundamental social, economic, or political interests, or as a reflection of psychological needs. Such approaches
are deeply problematic because they allow historians to ignore what their subjects actually say. People in the past are portrayed in ways that they would have found seriously deficient or even unrecognizable. Confident in the assumption that he understands his subjects better than they do themselves, the historian feels no need to do the hard work of learning their language, grasping their concepts, and describing their worldview—their religion, after all, is epiphenomenal. As Durkheim once put it: “[Religion] does not know itself. It neither knows what it is made of, nor what need it satisfies.”

The challenge presented by reductionist accounts of religious belief is explored in Brad Gregory’s study in this volume of the sixteenth-century Mennonite Jacob de Roore. Gregory takes aim at historians who rely on the “grand, explanatory theories of religion” developed by the founding fathers of modern social theory. According to these thinkers (and later reductionists) “precisely the point of studying religion is to show that it is not what its protagonists claim that it is.” Religion may well be worthy of close attention, but it must be explained in secular, nonreligious terms. Gregory argues that reductionist theories cannot adequately account for the beliefs or behavior of someone like Jacob de Roore, who was executed for refusing to recant his Mennonite convictions. Rather than resorting to problematic social, psychological, or anthropological theories of religion, our objective as historians should be “to understand and present something of Jacob de Roore’s ideas in such a manner that he would recognize them as his own.” Gregory recognizes the enormous cultural distance that separates the historian from people like de Roore but maintains the worthiness of this goal. The challenges we face do not justify recourse to reductionist theories.

In a similar fashion, Anna Sapir Abulafia’s study of medieval Christian-Jewish disputational material argues against “imposing a modern secular paradigm on medieval religious thinking.” She takes issue with Gavin Langmuir’s influential work on anti-Semitism, which identifies certain elements of medieval thought as “nonrational” or “irrational.” In her view, Langmuir’s approach “robs twelfth-century theological activity of one of its main hallmarks, that of *ratio* or reason.” What contemporaries regarded as highly rational explorations of the virgin birth or the incarnation “would have to be classified as the sup-
pression of rational doubt by nonrational conclusions.” Abulafia, by contrast, wants to take the arguments of medieval scholars seriously according to “their own terms of reference,” rather than pronouncing on their rational status from the perspective of modern secularism. She shares Quentin Skinner’s belief that historians of ideas should try as far as possible “to vindicate the rationality of our ancestors,” even when their ideas seem alien or bizarre.

Howard Hotson’s major essay explains how Protestant millenarianism undermined theological anti-Semitism of the kind discussed by Abulafia. Additionally, Hotson critiques secular reductionism. As he points out, historians have often worked with a decidedly nontheological definition of millenarianism, one that would not have been recognized by their subjects. Norman Cohn’s Pursuit of the Millennium was particularly influential in defining millenarianism in sociological terms as the creed of “rootless and desperate men” who anticipated an apocalyptic revolution and were characterized by genocidal fervor and anti-Semitism. As Hotson points out, a more precise theological definition of millenarianism leads to a radically different view. If millenarianism is strictly defined (in theological terms) as the expectation of an extended future period of greatly enhanced felicity for the church on earth, its great age is not the medieval but the early modern era, and it is strongly associated not with anti-Semitism but with philo-Semitism. The dominant sociological model has obscured these realities and distorted our understanding of the history of millenarianism in quite fundamental ways.

If the phenomenon of materialist reductionism is well known, the danger of idealist reductionism may be less familiar. The idealists typically ignore all material considerations, reducing their problem to abstract intellectual terms and (in practice) generally assessing their subjects from an anachronistic perspective. In the field of religious ideas, most of the idealists are not old-fashioned “historians of ideas” like Lovejoy or Strauss, nor are they the “internalists” who once dominated the history of science: they are the even more old-fashioned confessional theologians and church historians. In the past, scholars working within jealously guarded confessional traditions have often failed to engage fully with previous religious beliefs, not because they do not take
theology seriously but because they take their own theology so seriously that they judge all other theologies in the light of it.

This form of reductionism can usefully be divided into two camps. In the one group are those historians of theology who fail to engage historically even with the fountainheads of their own tradition because they view them from the perspective of more recent theology. The flaws of this approach as it has been applied to the Reformed tradition are ably exposed in the essays in this volume by Richard Muller and Willem van Asselt. As they point out, historians of theological ideas have often imposed the categories of modern theology onto early modern theologians, especially in viewing Calvin and others through a grid devised by Karl Barth. Muller critiques this “wildly anachronistic” approach to the history of theology, which involves “the consistent importation of twentieth-century theological jargon to the task of analysis.” Moreover, he observes that historians of the Reformed tradition who have interpreted Calvin in Barthian terms (rather than sixteenth-century terms) have gone on to condemn later “Calvinists” for departing from his doctrine. As van Asselt shows, that approach has been challenged in recent years by a far more historically minded methodology, one that is much more subtle and complex in its treatment of scholasticism and humanism, continuity and change. The new scholarship examines the Reformed scholastics on their own terms and explains them by reference to their own theological context, rather than chiding them for failing to parrot Calvin. The older scholarship was more theological (and prescriptive) than historical (or descriptive). Whilst it took theological content seriously, it tended to assimilate early modern theology to modern categories, and was as keen to censure as to explain. The result was a severely reductionist paradigm (“Calvin versus the Calvinists”) that failed to do justice to complex phenomena.

A rather different form of theological reductionism is evident, for instance, in much Lutheran historiography. Between the wars, Lutheran scholarship removed the Kantian lenses which had distorted previous accounts of Luther in much the same way that Barthian preconceptions still distort Calvin. The result was a “Lutheran renaissance” that (after some fateful deviations under National Socialism) has applied the most scrupulous historical study to every aspect of Luther him-
self, including the most problematic ones. But this singular revival of appreciation for Luther has threatened to replace one form of anachronism with an equal and opposite one. The attention lavished upon Luther has distracted generations of German historians of theology from broader aspects of their subject while strongly inclining them to judge all subsequent theological developments within German Protestantism from the privileged standpoint of this one individual: to deplore all meaningful developments within the Lutheran tradition as debasements of the great Reformer’s message, and to recoil from the more radical views that proliferated outside confessional Lutheranism with the same repugnance that Luther reserved for the “Schwärmer” of his own day. Here too, however, there are signs of change. Luther’s lieutenant, Philipp Melanchthon—long reviled as a virtual traitor to the cause of true Lutheranism—has experienced a remarkable renaissance of his own in recent years. The religious revival in the decades around 1700 known as “Pietism” has likewise attracted a fresh wave of systematic and sympathetic study from within the Lutheran theological community. In German historical faculties as well, the “confessionalization thesis” has directed unprecedented attention to the roles of religion in society and politics in the post-Reformation period. Yet in many respects the theological reductionists have done more damage to a balanced appreciation of the religious thought of this period than their materialist opponents. The richest survey of nonconfessional religious thought in post-Reformation Germany, in any case, has been written, not by a west German historian of theology, but by an east German historian of philosophy—one of the few Marxist professors to survive the collapse of the Berlin Wall with his academic reputation intact.

Against these varieties of materialist and idealist reductionism, this volume advocates and exemplifies a middle way. It insists that religious ideas are not more or less intrinsically intelligible than political or philosophical ideas; that religious ideas are at least as important in understanding the general course of history and the texture of past societies as political or philosophical ideas; and that religious ideas (like political, philosophical, or scientific ideas) need to be understood first and foremost in their own terms—not in terms of some competing set of religious ideas, nor in terms of some anachronistic standpoint.
In short, we share Skinner’s conviction that the historian’s principal obligation is to do everything possible to see things their way—to understand past agents on their own terms in their own contexts, rather than framing the ideas of the past in familiar modern (or postmodern) categories. Instead of determining what is “rational” or “nonrational” about the discourse of medieval theologians, we should examine their own concepts of reason. Rather than defining “millenarianism” sociologically, we should work with early modern theological definitions. We should depend less on Marx and Freud (or Barth) and rely more on the contemporary sources and authorities available to our subjects. As Muller and van Asselt advise, we should make far more use of contemporary dictionaries in order to understand the conceptual world of early modern philosophers and theologians. In short, intellectual historians should try to be less “present-minded” and work harder to master the languages and vocabulary of the past.

Neither Skinner nor any of the contributors here are suggesting that it is ever possible to get inside another person’s head and think precisely as he or she did, but this does not absolve historians from the hard work of seeking to understand others on their own terms. As it relates to religion and intellectual history, seeking to see things their way demands attention to the religious dimensions of people’s thought and a refusal to explain away what is religious by reference to what is supposedly more fundamental. And these demands can only be pursued through laborious attention both to the texts themselves and to the variety of intellectual, social, and political contexts in which they were written.

To some, of course, this may savor of naïveté. Much recent methodological work on intellectual history has challenged the very endeavor of attempting to see things their way. Inspired by the work of thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes, skepticism about the reader’s ability to recover authorial intention is now commonplace and has been vigorously articulated by historians such as Dominick LaCapra and David Harlan. But if the challenges of radical epistemological skepticism have had an appropriately chastening effect, they have failed to convince most practising historians. As Brad Gregory observes in the following chapter, “To claim that the ideas of past people cannot in principle be understood is, to understate the matter, a less than promising
guideline for historical research.” Gregory argues that although by definition “we cannot experience life and think the thoughts of our subjects exactly as they did,” we can, given adequate sources and the proper scholarly willingness, acquire an understanding of their beliefs.

It is precisely because of its explanatory power that the contextualist approach to intellectual history deserves serious consideration. By encouraging us to recover the original contexts of our subjects, it enables us to provide convincing historical accounts of their authorial intentions. This approach has proved its value in both the history of political thought and the history of science, and our proposal is that it be consistently applied to another field of human thought. As the essays in this collection show, the new intellectual history can open exciting new perspectives on religious history. Contrary to what its critics allege, it does more than contribute to our knowledge of elite discourse. Brad Gregory’s essay on Jacob de Roore reminds us that given adequate sources it is possible to reconstruct the beliefs of relatively modest figures in considerable detail, just as Carlo Ginzburg recovered the unique mental world of the Italian miller Menochio.47 Richard Muller reminds us that the historian of Reformed theology might draw on the writings of John Bunyan, “a largely untrained, popular writer.” Moreover, as this collection illustrates, there is no reason why intellectual historians should restrict themselves to the study of weighty tomes. In the essays that follow, reference is made to sermons, disputations, pamphlets, letters, petitions, committee minutes, devotional writings, and other sources. The tools of intellectual history can be applied to a wide range of texts and a great variety of thinkers.

For some historical purposes, this richly contextualized intellectual history of religious ideas may be an end in itself. In other cases, it will also provide the foundation of a sounder social history of religion and religious ideas (or even provide raw material for philosophers and historical theologians). Whilst most of the essays in this collection focus on the philosophers and intellectual context of ideas, we also recognize the value of exploring the social context. Muller observes that some traditional historians of ideas seemed to assume that “as thoughts emanate from the decontextualized minds of great thinkers, they take on a life of their own and inhabit a realm that subsists independently like a Platonic
realm of ideas, dipping down at significant moments to ‘influence’ actors in the human drama.” He believes that intellectual historians should learn from the critique of social history as they study “the statements of living, breathing, eating, drinking, buying, selling, religiously expressive, thinking people in a past era.” Van Asselt also calls for “fruitful dialogue . . . between students of the history of theology and practitioners of social history.” While Howard Hotson insists on the priority of “seeing things their way” by “understanding early modern religious thinkers on their own terms,” he rejects the claim that “social-scientific perspectives have no place whatever in a holistic account of millenarianism.” The historian of eschatological ideas should begin with theological definitions, but she does not need to end there.

Two of the essays in this volume place particular emphasis on the need to look beyond the purely intellectual context. James Bradley’s study of the anti-subscriptionist movement among eighteenth-century Nonconformists challenges the received wisdom that opposition to signing orthodox creeds was largely driven by heterodox ideas. Instead, he emphasizes the “social location and the self-interest of minority groups,” showing that many orthodox ministers opposed subscription because it was yet another imposition on them from secular authorities who (in their eyes) were usurping the role of Christ. Ideas, on this view, “became embedded in congregational practice,” and it was “the idea-laden practice” that fed into the anti-subscriptionist campaign.

Mark Noll’s history of theology in the United States, America’s God, provides another example of an “externalist” history of ideas that attends carefully to intellectual, social, and political contexts.48 In his contribution to this volume, Noll theorizes his approach to the history of ideas, drawing on the work of Skinner and Pocock. He sees theologians—such as the New Englander Nathaniel W. Taylor—“tailoring” or promoting their projects by employing “languages” or “vocabularies enjoying power in the culture at large,” such as the language of republicanism and common sense realism. In this way, Noll argues, theology gets “incarnated” in particular times and places. To understand it we need to familiarize ourselves with the relevant contexts, and write “an intellectual and social history of theology” (our italics). Just as Skinner and Pocock positioned themselves between Marxist materialists and political phi-
losophers in search of “perennial ideas,” so Noll finds a via media between secular reductionists and historical theologians.

Readers will have to make their own judgements about the viability and value of this middle way. But we believe that a contextualist approach to intellectual history has much to offer the student of religion, and that the study of religious belief has a serious claim on the attention of intellectual historians.

NOTES

The authors would like to thank Brad Gregory and Howard Hotson for their help on this introduction. Hotson’s help was particularly invaluable for the section on recent Lutheran historiography.


4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 40.


28. Many of Newton's religious and alchemical writings are now available online through the Newton Project, www.newtonproject.sussex.ac.uk.


34. For an ambitious attempt to reincorporate the religious factor into an account of modern European political history from 1789 to the present, see Michael Burleigh's two-volume work: *Earthly Powers: Religion and Politics in Europe from the French Revolution to the Great War* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), and *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda* (London: HarperCollins, 2006).


36. See http://www.history.upenn.edu/isih/Davis.html.


