Introduction

A Tradition Renewed?

The Challenge of a Generation

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The commanding position of the academy in contemporary life is as brute a fact as future historians will ever unearth. At present, millions of people, young and old, are inching their way through curricular labyrinths of all kinds, seeking the hope a high school diploma no longer affords. Tens of thousands of professors, in sync with the standards of their respective guilds, work to construct in these students an outlook and “skill set” that will advance a panoply of political, economic, and moral ends. And thousands of administrators, aided by vast support staffs, busy themselves directing traffic. The alumni spill out and scatter annually in massive numbers, equipped to do the nation’s—and the world’s—work.

In the main, it is work that has become secularized—another truism of our times. Accountants, teachers, engineers, nurses, programmers, lab technicians, attorneys: all proceed from the academy fluent in the language of the modern world, their religious beliefs properly closeted, their gaze steady on the job at hand. For the overwhelming majority, this is mere necessity, the dollar holding steady as the currency of the age. The cost of its transmission from employer to employee is usually a significant degree of self-conscious, duly cultivated secularity—not a
mandated absence of religious devotion so much as the required presence of procedural norms that make religious language problematic.

Given this, our linguistically straitened circumstance, is it now advisable, or even desirable, for historians of Christian persuasion to practice their craft in a manner that decisively reflects their vision of the world—one that, it should go without saying, may well be in substantial conflict with the ethos and program of the times? This book seeks to make a strong affirmative response to this complicated question.

Or, rather, it joins earlier affirmative responses, seeking both to buttress and challenge them. If, as Eugene Genovese has argued, a tradition consists in “the embodiment of ‘givens’ that must constantly be fought for, recovered in each generation, and adjusted to new conditions,” this book humbly but spiritedly joins a long tradition of writings in which Christian scholars have in diverging eras sought to probe and articulate the ways in which life on earth might be playing out beneath the eye and at the hand of the God of Christian faith.1 It is well to state at the outset, though, that in this volume we write less as reformers than as explorers, seeking the generational renewal Genovese describes. Through the discovery of new or neglected pathways we pursue a scholarly and vocational end that, in the past century, has been appealing and elusive at once.2

John Henry Newman, as the university in the mid-nineteenth century was emerging in its current form, captured with timely brilliance the impulse to secure and advance a distinctively Christian approach to the modern academic disciplines. Newman emphatically urged Christian scholars to counter the modern tide with institutional and disciplinary practices that remained both true to Christian faith and conversant with the rapidly changing intellectual ethos of the age. “Admit a God,” he reminded his auditors, “and you introduce among the subjects of your knowledge, a fact encompassing, closing in upon, absorbing, every other fact conceivable. How can we investigate any part of any order of knowledge, and stop short of that which enters into every order? All true principles run over with it, all phenomena converge to it; it is truly the First and the Last.”3 In the decades since, countless Christian scholars have granted Newman’s theological premise and embraced his institutional vision, while at the same time struggling to discern how to
go about this holy work in a manner consonant with both their creedal confession and their academic professions.

Over the past century many organizations have arisen to advance Newman’s project, ranging from whole colleges to small associations. The Conference on Faith and History (CFH) is perhaps a typical example of the latter, a scholarly society launched in 1968 by (mainly) American evangelical Protestants seeking a space for Christian reflection on the discipline of history as well as a place that would sponsor research and writing on religious history in general. In a modest way, it has helped to provide a center for much recent response among Christian historians (including many of the contributors to this volume) to the Newmanian challenge, especially through its journal *Fides et Historia*.

Given that the CFH’s organizational launch took place amidst what was the high tide of modernist, scientific influence on the historical profession, the early efforts of the conference, predictably, reflected the moment: the materialist and empirical strictures that governed historical method and narrative proved to be the starting point, and often the end point, for many if not most of the historians associated with the conference. George M. Marsden, then an historian at Calvin College, summarized the practice of many when, in a postscript to his landmark 1980 volume *Fundamentalism and American Culture, 1870–1925*, he both affirmed the superintendence of the Christian God of human history and disavowed any attempt to set forth an understanding of the particular ways such superintendence was taking place. Theologians may be charged with the task of discerning the ways of God, wrote Marsden, but this should not be confused with the historian’s task—even the believing historian’s task. Historians of faith are as unable to plot the ways of God with men as unbelievers, he contended; examining the past with mere earth-bound vision, all humans are limited to making judgments based on “observable cultural forces.”

With this declaration Marsden articulated the consensus of a generation. To be sure, Marsden and those who reflected his approach continued to claim the possibility of a strong connection between a Christian historian’s faith and her work as an historian. Historians of faith, Marsden suggested in a later volume, may usefully employ what he termed “background faith commitments” to guide their work.
Calvinists, on this view, might tend to take a dimmer view of human affairs and possibilities than, say, left-liberal secularists, which their researches and narratives should accordingly reflect. But when trying to explore or explain the past, be it the development of the Western university or the Third Reich, all historians, regardless of creed, are left with the same epistemological limitations: the ability to make judgments based only upon “observable cultural forces” and the need to translate whatever theological assumptions the historian might have into suitably secular modes of narrative and analysis.

Not surprisingly, given this framework, Marsden’s scholarship (reflective of his generational cohort at its best) has met little significant resistance within the world of academic history. His introductory or concluding sections of his books, where he has confessed his Christian vantage, may make some readers squirm, but his colleagues have tended to find his actual history writing compelling, fitting comfortably within the broad consensus of the profession, as his Bancroft Prize–winning biography of Jonathan Edwards attests.

But does this approach square with the radical program for Christian scholarship as advanced, in touchstone fashion, by Newman? Beginning in the 1990s a younger generation of Christian scholars began to call into question what one of them dubbed, in a plenary address at a biennial meeting of the CFH, the “Marsden settlement.” Another charged, matter-of-factly, that most Christian historians had “only rarely questioned the most basic rules of modern scholarship.” If it did not quite amount to a revolt, this kind of challenge reflected more than mere intergenerational restlessness. The long quest for a truly Christian practice of history was taking a new turn.

The general circumstance of Christian scholarship had been altered substantially by the late 1990s. The historian James Turner and sociologist Alan Wolfe each published essays that took stock of the enlarging evangelical presence within the academy in the previous two decades. Turner, a colleague of Marsden at the University of Notre Dame and a Roman Catholic, noted in a 1999 *Commonweal* essay the theological dimensions of what he described as “an intellectual renaissance within American evangelicalism,” one that had “gone far beyond theology to establish a visible evangelical presence in literary scholarship, psychology,
history, philosophy, and other fields.” For Turner, the intellectual roots of this renaissance extended deeply into the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and, above all, Dutch Calvinist traditions, which for him seemed to explain both its promise and its limitations: “the new evangelical intellectuals pray as evangelicals,” he observed, “but think as Calvinists, or Anglicans, or sometimes even Catholics.”

The CFH certainly reflected this enlarging influence and shifting composition of evangelical intellectual life. At the behest of scholars and mentors such as Marsden, and aided by the advent of new communication technologies such as e-mail and the internet, younger scholars emerging from varying quadrants of American evangelicalism had begun to find vital resources for their work and faith outside of their native traditions, and, consequently, had discovered intellectual companions from other Christian communions as well. In a presidential address at the 2000 biennial meeting, William Vance Trollinger, reflecting the new ethos, challenged the conference to more aggressively pursue participants from beyond the boundaries of evangelical Protestantism. The next meeting accordingly opened with an address by a young Catholic historian, Christopher Shannon—who used the opportunity to decry the existing consensus on the Christian practice of history and press for what he conceived of as a more radically Christian approach to history.

For his part, Alan Wolfe focused his essay, published in the fall of 2000 in the Atlantic Monthly, on what he described as “a determined effort by evangelical-Christian institutions to create a life of the mind.” Renaissances require funding, historians know, and Wolfe noted the critical part that major foundations, including the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lilly Endowment, had played in sponsoring research, helping to launch publications, and fostering scholarly networks. But, in an appraisal surprisingly positive and sharply critical at once, he chastised evangelical scholars for their tendency to withdraw from the academic mainstream, charging that self-consciously Christian academics too often succumbed to an inclination to “marginalize themselves.” The achievement of numerous evangelical scholars (including historians Marsden, Mark A. Noll, and Nathan Hatch) in the broader academy notwithstanding, Wolfe was troubled by what he saw as an inclination
to revert to form—a narrow, provincial form. “To succeed in the university and therefore in America, evangelicals will have to put their defensiveness to one side,” Wolfe intoned, and respectfully but confidently join the fray.\textsuperscript{14}

But why, precisely, should they take that route? This was one of the main questions the younger generation was asking. Their deepening immersion into varying Christian intellectual traditions, as noted by Turner, was leading an increasing number of them not only to re-examine their own evangelical heritage but also to call into question the soundness of the modern university itself—which Wolfe persisted in holding up as the standard by which all scholars, evangelicals and otherwise, should be measured. Many of these Christian scholars, by rooting themselves and their work in creedally defined institutions, were not retreating from serious thought so much as seeking to achieve the very thing Turner, Wolfe, and others—including Noll in his impassioned 1994 polemic \textit{The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind}—had applauded and advocated: the formation of a more sturdy, rich, and distinctively Christian intellectual life, a project that Wolfe’s academy, whatever its virtues, had not made it a point to nurture.\textsuperscript{15}

One way to grasp the dimensions of the movement to which Wolfe and Turner were both responding is to see it in light of the vast phenomenon we still seem to be able to only call, dumbly, “postmodernity,” with its spectacular array of manifestations. From the post–Cold War triumph of global capitalism to the intensifying of cultural pluralism to the (near universal) collapse of belief in universal rationality to the revolutions in communications technology, postmodernity could not but create space for a vigorous rethinking of any variety of modern dogmatisms, whether political, institutional, epistemological, or ecclesiastical. The enormous literature devoted to understanding, explaining, and judging postmodernity that scholars of Christian persuasion from across the disciplines have produced is just one testament of the seismic dimensions of this historic shift on American intellectual life.\textsuperscript{16}

The contributors to this present volume write very much as participant-observers in this milieu and moment, and are drawn together through a variety of interweaving networks, the CFH being only one among many. The editors, for instance, after studying church history
together at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School (Deerfield, Illinois) in the early 1990s, each pursued Ph.D.s in American history in different graduate programs and went on to accept teaching positions in colleges belonging to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU). As graduate students in the 1990s we participated in conferences, both Christian and secular, exchanged ideas and experiences in (then novel) internet discussion groups, and with many other friends puzzled over the complex questions, illumined by the likes of Turner, Wolfe, Marsden, and Noll, surrounding our own vocational directions.

One experience during these years stands out as particularly emblematic and revealing. In the spring of 1997 two of us attended at Wheaton College in Illinois a conference titled “Reviving the Christian Mind.” A Pew-sponsored follow-up to Noll’s Scandal of the Evangelical Mind, the conference sought to render judgment on the current state of the “Christian Mind” project, gather disparate and often isolated scholars, and point toward new directions for the whole movement. Attendance far exceeded expectations. Reactions were mixed.

A retrospective peek at an internet discussion that took place immediately following the conference reveals the tensions, hopes, and fissures in the project, and the ways in which it was bounding well beyond existing lines of demarcation. The forum was a then-active listserv for Christian historians (but open to anyone interested), going by a name only a techie could love, “HISTEC-2,” run out of Baylor University. This particular discussion centered on what one conference participant, a Notre Dame graduate student studying with Marsden, called, in a telling phrase, the “Christians in the academy conundrum.”17 The phrase served as shorthand for a host of troubling questions: How were young evangelical scholars to proceed now that they were engaged in and committed—psychologically, financially, intellectually, and more—to academic vocations? What would count as success? How reliable were their guides? And how uncertain was the future they would face as “Christian scholars”?

A former Noll student and current professor of religion at the University of Manitoba voiced the disappointment of many with the conference. It had featured, he thought, “too many ‘consensus’ papers from middle-aged, mainstream scholarly successes,” and “not enough
marginal, provocative papers.”¹⁸ Does “More Money + More Specialized Research = Revived Christian Mind,” wondered a graduate student from the University of Iowa. This he took to be a central message of the conference, despite the fact that, in his opinion, the “general intellectual decline” in all sectors of contemporary American society—not just in evangelicalism—had actually “been accompanied by the rise of the modern research university and an exponentially increasing volume of specialized scholarship.” And if the problem with the lack of a rich and sturdy intellectual life among American evangelicals reflected the poverty of their particular religious traditions, as Noll had charged, where at the conference was serious attention given to the church?¹⁹

The usual center-periphery tensions were acute in these overlapping academic and ecclesiastical circles. Was being peripheral to the secular academy itself a noble and worthy end? Or was moving from periphery to the center the ideal, as the celebratory aura around the conference’s stars implied? And what about the periphery-center problem within the world of self-consciously Christian scholarship? To what extent did it endanger the whole project? In the judgment of one salty veteran of the scene, an “elitism that matches that in the secular world” was “developing more and more in evangelical scholarship.” “The big dogs are so busy trying to escape what they perceive as marginalization that they in turn marginalize a lot of thoughtful and able people in evangelical circles who did not have the good fortune (and that is exactly what it is) to land a top flight academic position. I am not persuaded,” he concluded, that “this problem particularly bothers evangelical academic leaders.”²⁰

Above all, a longing for something more, something beyond the mainstream status quo, whether the Christian or the secular version, seemed to fuel the reflections. A recent University of Chicago Ph.D. and professor at a small midwestern Reformed college admitted that he found it “difficult to accept the ease with [which] some colleagues at Christian colleges seem to regard the status, respectability, power and glory . . . that comes with ‘making it’” in the academic mainstream. He found himself instead “struggling to figure out if the ‘foolishness’ of the Gospel . . . offers any insights into what a Christian intellectual might
look like.” His students, he recognized, were in the main aliens to the world of prestige and success. How was he to proceed? “Can I be a teaching servant, empty myself of my own pride and ambition and combine scholarship and teaching under the shadow of the Cross?” he asked. “I don’t want to redeem scholarship for evangelicalism, or to compete with Stanford, or gain respect from my secular peers. I think I’m doing the work of the Kingdom, in a small and unremarkable way, here in a marginal place.”

One young, untenured historian who chose not to attend the conference explained why, capturing poignantly a variety of disaffection shared by many. The “loneliness,” the “mild alienation” he felt as a Christian at his own mainstream liberal arts college, he wrote, “is matched only by the loneliness I have come to feel at such conferences.” Speaking to “those of us who think that Noll/Marsden/Hatch/et al. may define the center, but certainly not the circumference of Christian scholarship,” he went on to share an alternate vision of a Christian scholarly community, touching on questions ranging from historical method to the ideal shape of a scholarly conference. Moving past—far past—the established conventions seemed to him not only good, but necessary.

This book, emerging from experiences such as these (and reflected upon autobiographically in many of the essays that follow), is charged, sometimes dramatically, other times subtly, with the hope, the frustration, the fear, and the yearning that have so freighted this movement and this moment. It is fair to say that the questions that lurk behind most of the essays boil down to these: Is something beyond the current consensus, as represented, for instance, in the work of George Marsden, possible? Is the mainstream historical profession truly the locus of the deepest wisdom and brightest hope for the practice of history? Have our lives as professional historians—and as middle-class professionals—become so straitjacketed that resistance to the status quo is futile? And what within the present moment holds most promise for the advance of a deeply Christian practice of history, whether through writing or teaching? The responses that follow are as varied, heated, and earnest as the times and places from which they emerge. We can only hope Newman is smiling upon them.
IDENTITY, THEORY, COMMUNITIES

Three essays follow these opening reflections that speak with poignancy to that preeminently postmodern category and concern, identity. Crucially, for our purposes, each essay centers on deeply personal reckonings with the standards, practices, and ideals of the historical profession, and with the broad historical circumstance of American intellectual life itself. Mark R. Schwehn, Provost of Valparaiso University and a leading voice in the ongoing conversation on religion and higher learning, narrates his own emergence in the 1960s as an historian struggling to achieve a more full embrace of the Christian faith within an academy that was then highly, even narrowly, secular. His mature conclusions about the relationship between his faith and the practice of history rest within the current practices of the profession, and so represent something of a touchstone for this collection: a perspective other contributors will affirm and reject to varying degrees. “The context of justification, the proper social location for the appraisal of my work as an historian,” contends Schwehn, “is the profession itself, not the church, not the church-related university, and not a band of believers who claim epistemic privilege on the basis of religious affiliation.”

Una M. Cadegan, while with Schwehn advocating peaceable and productive relations with the historical profession, explores its blindspots and not-so-predictable prejudices through the telling of her own entrance into the academy as a Roman Catholic. “Whether you believe in the Incarnation affects how you read evidence,” she concludes, while remaining uncertain about where this frank historiographical and biographical reality should lead Christian historians. For Beth Barton Schweiger, the fact of the Incarnation leads to a fundamental redefining of knowledge itself, so that charity, rather than power, guides the historian’s pursuit—a posture she finds at odds with the profession’s tendency to nurture, along with much that is good and necessary, a vocational identity that diminishes the sympathy and self-sacrifice that love requires. “If ‘knowledge as power’ is to be replaced by a pastoral imagination, it will be necessary to learn some new habits,” she suggests. “Truthfulness is made possible by truthful people. How can historians become people who can rightly see the dead?”

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If “identity” has provided fertile ground for many distinctively postmodern forms of reflection, “theory” has certainly produced a similar yield, and is, in fact, responsible for fostering much historical research and writing on matters of identity. The second part of the book forces a confrontation with a pivotal question, one the profession’s ideological and philosophic strictures make risky to ask: How should an explicitly religious identity affect and shape the historian’s understanding of theory and method? Addressed somewhat obliquely in the preceding section, this question anchors these six essays.

With his observation that “the swooning of the modernist academic paradigm” has opened up increased rhetorical space for “moral reflection” in the practice of history, Thomas Albert Howard speaks for many in this volume. Nudging historians away from what he sees as the “overweening moral indignation” of much recent historical writing, he makes a case for a more thoughtful and measured form of intellectual engagement. “As historians, we all find ourselves epistemologists now,” he contends, “but the ties with philosophy should be thickened.” His inquiry into the relationship between the intellectual virtue of prudence and the doing of history provides an illuminating example of how recent turns in the discipline of ethics might enlarge the historian’s vocational reach.

William Katerberg’s sizing up of the past three decades of theoretical debate on such fundamental matters as objectivity, neutrality, knowledge, and truth leads him to recommend that historians reconceive their vocation in a way decidedly consonant with Howard’s vision. Rather than maintaining the (now) traditional guise of the objective scholar, he suggests, historians—and, more to the point, the historical profession—should embrace and reward what he calls “useful scholarship”: history researched, written, and taught in service of “living traditions.” “If a century of historical scholarship and four decades of theoretical debate reveal anything,” he writes, “it is that the search for objective scientific knowledge has not provided a stable foundation on which truth claims, moral decisions, and political projects can be based.” Such a foundation the historical profession might yet provide—if it can bring itself to jettison the very dead weight of modernist notions of objectivity and professionalism.
Michael Kugler’s contention is that, in the end, even the alleged source of such hopes for objectivity, the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, was not nearly so in thrall to this noble dream as is commonly held. Examining the work of eighteenth-century historians, he finds that they welcomed the literary, even fictive elements many of today’s theorists understand as elemental in the doing of history, and that these seminal thinkers saw history as ineluctably in service of particular moral and political programs; “history as ethical reflection,” Kugler notes, “was critical to the Enlightenment’s ‘science of human nature.’” Christian historians, by following these earlier historians, may speak more effectively to the particular communities of discourse functioning within the Christian tradition, and beyond.

It is to this tradition and its various communions and communities that the next two essayists devote their attention. Bradley J. Gundlach explores how the “moral insights” of even self-consciously secular thinkers can be theologically measured and historiographically appropriated by Christian historians in their work. Indeed, he regards such assimilation as not simply a good but also a gift, one of providential proportions—“a proper kind of providentialist history” upon which all Christian communities should rely for their ongoing health and vitality. For his part, Christopher Shannon, in panoramic fashion, provides the most radical call in this volume for Christian historians to reject the prevailing modes and means of doing history for the sake of the faith. “The problem with so much of the debate” among Christian historians, suggests Shannon, “is less that it has failed to offer a distinctly Christian historical practice, but that it assumes current secular historical practice to be, despite an undue secular bias, just fine, thank you very much.” He thus takes perhaps the farthest point possible from Schwehn’s position on the matter. Christians who participate in the forms of scholarship sanctioned by the academy are actually taking part in what he decries as “the legitimation of the modern secular world,” with its all-consuming end of “maximizing the freedom of the individual.” He provides the beginnings of an alternate vision, in which the understanding yielded only by belief shapes decisively our historical practices. The section concludes with James B. LaGrand’s sharp critique of such views. With a posture far
closer to Schwehn’s, LaGrand calls readers to consider the perils of what he provocatively calls “preaching through history,” urging continued respectful affiliation with the mainstream historical profession.

The concrete, particular historical practices that so concern Christopher Shannon provide the central theme and focus for the final part, “Communities.” If identity and theory have been dominant concerns of contemporary historians, a new or perhaps simply different awareness of “community” has framed and shaded these preoccupations, as such influential books as Alasdair MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*, Robert Bellah’s *Habits of the Heart*, and Michael Sandel’s *Democracy’s Discontent* bear witness. In a world fragmenting under the aegis of global capitalism, yet also bound together by the same set of forces, people of all ethnicities, classes, and faiths have struggled to understand what “community” is and how it might be attained in these fracturing times.23

John Fea and Lendol Calder, in the opening chapters of this part, shed light on the little noticed fact that professional historians mainly do their work as members of particular communities, communities of learning. Through a story about his teaching of “HIS 324: Civil War America” at CCCU-member Messiah College, Fea shows how the wrenching, consequential turns the country took in the mid-nineteenth century made for sparkling classroom discussion and debate on matters of moral and political importance. Moreover, the “interpretive challenge” of foregrounding “faith commitments” in the classroom actually, Fea believes, enhanced the experience, rather than diminished it; the “reflective religious faith” of the students propelled the class in surprising, unanticipated ways.

It is precisely this sort of experience that Calder seeks to elevate and enliven through his essay, bearing the identity-threatening title “For Teachers to Live, Professors Must Die.” Driven by love, history professors must come to see their classrooms as the site of encounter with other human beings, rather than a sphere for demonstrating professional expertise. Through a gripping historical narrative that functions as something of a parable, Calder suggests just what is at stake in the persisting failure of the professorate to grasp the human, historical dimensions of the lives they are supposed to “teach.” His warning is simple
and stark: “The first obligation of college teachers—before knowledge, before passion, before obedience to a particular vocation—is not to be stupid about love’s requirements.”

Jay Green takes a more analytic look at the ways in which historians might improve their use of analogies in their roles as members of political communities. Because, as he puts it, “the most common way modern people relate to the past is by appeals to historical analogy,” Green points toward a more studied, self-conscious way of conceiving of analogies, one that removes the “conceptual barriers between genuine historical awareness and moral inquiry about present realities” that sloppy analogical thinking creates. He thus presents yet another perspective on how understanding history as a form of moral inquiry can enlarge the historian’s vocational presence.

The final two essays of part 3 seek to reconnect Christian historians more faithfully to their own two inalienable communities: the church and the profession itself. Robert Tracy McKenzie notes that in the burgeoning literature emerging from the past three decades of faith-and-history discussions, there has been, oddly, little written on how historians might serve the church rather than simply (or mainly) the academy. Urging historians to resist the “years of acculturation in an elitist academic establishment that produces historians increasingly aloof from the society they claim to serve,” he proposes concrete ways that historians can participate as historians in their particular congregations. Douglas Sweeney closes the section by taking us back into the academy itself, a world, he writes, that is “full of fragile egos, insecurities, uncertainties, and fears, to say nothing of most of the ordinary forms of human suffering.” With a deft theological exposition of the doctrines of calling and priesthood, Sweeney encourages believing historians to draw near to their colleagues as friends. Our calling, he writes, is to “practice scholarship as ministry, a form of priestly service intended to bless the larger world.”

Wilfred M. McClay draws our conversation to a graceful close with a sharp, careful reading of three twentieth-century historical thinkers—Herbert Butterfield, Christopher Dawson, and Reinhold Niebuhr—whose varied responses to the modern moment might, he suggests, help Christian historians keep their eyes trained on why their vocation
matters. “Progress in history,” McClay writes, “has turned from a complacent march into a tense tightrope walk.” In an age suffering great uncertainty about the direction of history and the very definition of human being, Christian historians must seize upon the “epistemological advantages of Christian commitment” to render the past with all of the conviction, ingenuity, and intelligence at hand.

Such writing and teaching amounts, of course, to confession. And that confessing is above all the gamble Christian historians must take.

**Confessing History: Prospect**

Do these essays, in the end, provide evidence of a new consensus emerging within this circle of historical thinking and practice, one that will change—is already changing—the way we do history? Or do we have instead what earlier critics of the project have charged: yet more talk about how we might practice history differently, but little if anything that will lead to narratives, analyses, and practices that differ substantially from that which takes place beneath the auspices of the American Historical Association?²⁴

Although its manifestations vary, I believe that, if not a new consensus, at least a common inclination has emerged over the past two decades, an inclination both generational and philosophical at root and with the promise of altering actual practice at many levels. The modern search for explications of causality and agency through the analysis of “observable cultural forces” has proven to be an inadequate approach to the past for many in this generation of Christian historians, and, accordingly, an unsatisfying means to the fulfillment of our vocations. We seek instead to clothe history in rumination, conjecture, meditation, and judgment, all rooted in Christian visions of reality and all in the service of fostering moral intelligence and spiritual vigor in the communities we serve. Moreover, rather than turning to leading theorists of the modern academic disciplines alone for guidance, we find ourselves in consequential and intimate conversation with the work of theologians and philosophers, joining a tradition of reflection with ancient roots and one that continues strongly to this day, with or without the
historical profession. Jay Green casts this overarching vision and hope with succinct force. For those harking toward this hope, “real theological language, strengthened by a biblical framework with real authority, would powerfully invade and transform our very real and critical pursuits of historical understanding.” Christian historians would weave into their thinking and practices “the vivid texture of their confessions, the rich heritage of their traditions, and the immense learning of modern theology.”

Of course, moving beyond the profession’s ideological and methodological strictures would almost certainly require a willingness to move beyond the profession itself, at least in part, and at least for a time. Far from being self-destructive, though, this exodus might in the end prove to be a boon: it could free us to devote our energies and resources to speaking not to a very established and fairly intransigent academic profession, but rather to each other. We might, in other words, find ourselves participating more fully in a commonwealth of Christian scholars, a land with a geography and polity, and with a set of ideals, symbols, and standards, at fruitful variance with the academic mainstream.

To be sure, the risks in this sort of movement are considerable. At its best, the world of mainstream academe continues to hold forth and maintain a stringent and demanding scholarly ethos. Only the naïve would assume that such truly necessary standards and resources, reflective of a historically powerful tradition, could be easily transferred to an institutionally distinct (and financially poorer) academic world. And the creative tension between diverging worldviews and traditions that scholarly excellence—of whatever philosophic orientation—has always required is far more difficult to maintain than the default tendencies of either total withdrawal from or submission to the dominant culture.

But in view of our truest purposes, Christian scholars have no choice but to pursue this alternate pathway. If we are to fulfill our callings to bless the church and the world, we must devote ourselves to the costly process of rerooting our thinking about the ways of God, his creatures, and his creation in the rich soil of deep, expansive Christian reflection. Noll and company are undoubtedly right: the “Christian mind” is indeed necessary for the ongoing vitality of Christianity itself, and for
something like it to exist, distinctly Christian organizations, institutions, and discourses (such as those reflected in this volume) must not simply exist, but *thrive*. What recent history shows us, in no uncertain way, is that to rely on either mere congregational life or the secular academy for this sort of specialized, intensive intellectual and educational labor is to risk continued enormous loss. The ongoing renewal of deep and variegated Christian intellectual traditions demands a different kind of rooting.

In a word, as we remain in committed conversation with those beyond our confessional pale, we must continue to devote energy and wealth to the construction and cultivation of nurseries for Christian thinking and learning: colleges, presses, journals, conferences, societies, foundations, retreat centers, and more. If Christian intellectuals of this generation can seize upon the good inheritance that is theirs, and with it press toward the realizing of this ongoing project, then a tradition, one their faith holds to be of enormous consequence, may be renewed.

**Notes**


14. Ibid., 76.


17. Kurt Peterson, 23 April 1997, on HISTEC 2 listserv. A copy of this discussion is in the possession of the author.
24. Donald Yerxa has sharply but sympathetically summarized this line of criticism in “That Embarrassing Dream.”