



John McIntyre and History

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For those of us who had the privilege of being his students, Professor John McIntyre shed much light on the relationship between Christianity and history, and on many other things besides. I think of the light he shed as rather like the light of a prism, which opened up the unexpected, and sometimes highlighted the strangeness of the familiar. You might not always notice the light. It was not that sort of light. It neither dazzled nor scorched. It was not the sort of light which blinded you and then lurched on to stab at some other random object. It was not that sort of light at all. The best way to illustrate this is to look at John's writing itself, and I want to introduce to you an essay which he offered for the Alec Cheyne Festschrift and which was not published there, because it did not quite fit in with the Scottish Church History theme of that volume.

The essay is "The Uses of History in Theology".¹ John begins with an elegant and substantial tribute to Alec Cheyne, and then turns to the question of a 'special relationship' between history and theology. Special relationships have a habit of imploding at inconvenient moments he reminds us, but then immediately quotes Pannenberg (the more thoughtful Pannenberg): 'History is the most comprehensive horizon of Christian theology'. He opens up the subject of 'the historical revolution, from Gatterer and Schlosser in Germany to Bury and Butterfield'. He traces the development of a new historiographical self-awareness, for example in Collingwood (and indeed Gary Badcock, in his superb study of McIntyre, tells us that he nearly started an Oxford DPhil on the uses of history in Collingwood).

Authorities, sources and interpolations become issues. Science and history collide. Bultmann is a question but not an answer. Philosophers spin new global patterns out of the fragments. The problems of historical positivism remain.

John McIntyre narrows the focus to the biographical uses of history. The spectre of the Historical Jesus, built on a highly selective view of history, stalks the nineteenth century and haunts us still. But deconstruction has to have some limits: ‘There has to be the “historical” if we are to make a process of “dehistoricising” feasible at all.’ One response to the fragmentation was Cullmann: ‘The essence of Christian Theology is Biblical History’ – but this brings new difficulties. In the face of these John reiterates politely what he used to say in his lectures long ago: this *Heilsgeschichte* has more *Heil* than *Geschichte*.

We now come to the section “The Critical-Destructive Use of History”: here he puts his cards firmly on the table – face up. The logical structure of arguments about what could not possibly happen or be true is often unstable – miracles can become too speedily unthinkable. The starting point of a Christology from below need not also become the finishing point – destructive criticism is not enough.

Then we hit a note often heard in John’s work: too often theologians rush to fall on their swords too soon. Kierkegaard embraced theological scepticism for the sake of pure faith. But this was a step too far: the minimal Christian core can’t be salvaged by the subjective act of faith.

The denouement of this drama comes in the shape of “Further Examples of the History Connection in Theology”. If pure subjectivity won’t get us there, artificial objectivity won’t do either.

It is fascinating to compare this essay with *The Christian Doctrine of History*,² published forty years earlier in 1957, and based on lectures at Union Theological Seminary in 1953. In eight chapters history is related to doctrine, definition, necessity, providence, the incarnation (three chapters in all), freedom, memory and structures. Here as in the Cheyne essay, incarnation is THE central clue to a Christian understanding of history. There are the trademark sub-divisions and precise teasing out of meanings. History is clearly interpreted in relation to providence and providence is seen in the light of incarnation.

Incarnation is redemptive and recreative. It is creative, prospective and integrative – there is no talk of The Myth Of God Incarnate here! For McIntyre there are no easy answers or trendy fixes. Typical is this sentence:

While it must be said that the Christian doctrine of history “makes sense” of history, this statement requires the gravest qualifications. For at the same time it introduces profounder depths of meaninglessness into history than any other of the competing views ...³

The death of Christ, as a consequence of our sins, underlines the mystery of the cross at the heart of the nature of the loving God. This is a robust theology with no concessions to the fashions of the times.

In his introduction to John McIntyre’s last book, *Theology After the Storm*,⁴ Gary Badcock perceptively says this of *The Christian Doctrine of History*: ‘One might, in fact, describe it as the most Barthian of all McIntyre’s books.’⁵

At the same time, it is no accident that much of *Theology after the Storm* is devoted to “The Humanity of Christ” and “Theology of Prayer”. The accent may have changed, but the substance in no way reflects the trendy modern professor of anything vaguely religious at the University of Barrow-in-Furness. At the centre of “The Humanity of Christ” is a telling section on ‘Humanity as Historicity’. Again. History and incarnation are indissolubly linked. He looks with disbelief at the retreat from history:

The flight from history – one might even call it a stampede – has taken a number of forms. ... If the kind of meticulous analysis had been given to kerygma as was given to its running mate in that celebrated vaudeville act, *Kerygma and Myth*, then I feel that theology generally and New Testament theology in particular would have been considerably better served than it has been by the demythologisers over that period.⁶

Even more emphatically:

In a sentence, the dehistoricization of the faith which is thought to be implied by existential theologies as critical theories is the docetism of the twentieth century, because by its scepticism it takes humanity out of the only milieu in which it can possibly exist, namely, historical process.⁷

For McIntyre, God is active in the world. Not through some shortcut of salvation history but through the dimension of prayer, God invites us to respond to his call in active discipleship:

It has to be said right from the start that a belief in the efficacy of prayer in relation to events in the world, in history and within persons and their relations to one another is an inalienable part of the Christian understanding of prayer.⁸

Here is a sign of God's intervention in our world:

To deny that is both to invalidate the doctrine of *creatio continua* and to subscribe to the noninterfering God of Deism.⁹

And his own prayers memorably combine trust in God with realism about ourselves:

O God, the world in which we are called to live is not
one of black and white but of different grays;
not of truth and falsehood but the compounding of both;
not of good and evil but the ambiguities that divide
them;
not of light and darkness but the twilight between.
Give us, therefore, wisdom this day in our choices,
courage in our decisions,

and a continual discontent with anything less than the best that Thou hast revealed to us so wondrously in Jesus Christ. Amen.¹⁰

In the final essay in *Theology After the Storm*, on “The Cliché as a Theological Medium”, John hammers away again at the easy accommodations of theologians to historical scepticism. He called for a new analytical philosophy of history. But such is the crooked history of thought that before the end of the century intellectuals were pronouncing the end of history.

If we want to be quite precise about what John was saying about history towards the end of the twentieth century – and precision was important to John – we can turn to a highly significant piece which he produced in the Festschrift for James Barr in 1994. The piece is called “Historical Criticism in a ‘History-Centred Value System’”.¹¹ Here he mounts an incisive critique of the ideas of history as homogeneous and of a uniform historical method ‘from Kierkegaard to Pannenberg’ as he puts it. This is partly inspired by James Barr’s own critique of ‘the high value currently assigned to “history”’. As James of blessed memory himself put it, ‘What I have called story is an absolutely essential and central aspect of the Old Testament; it cannot, however, be too simply identified, indeed it cannot be identified at all, with history.’¹²

For John McIntyre in that essay, history is a field-encompassing field, involving geography, anthropology, philology and much more. So there is no single entity called “historical criticism”. John traces this back to his old subject Collingwood’s criticism of F. H. Bradley. He acknowledges debts to Stephen Toulmin and Van Harvey, but criticised Harvey for ultimately selling the pass, as it were, to history:

I think it ought to be said that the theologian rejects a presupposition which Van Harvey never quite brings out into the open, namely that theological method is coterminous with historical method.¹³

No more Mr Nice Guy, as far as the College of Humanities and Social Sciences is concerned. On the other hand, he concludes by asserting firmly that:

Rarely, if ever, do arguments present themselves in totally pure form, as either analytic or substantial. So, once again, we have to return to reliance upon the judgement of the theologian, who reaches his decision, not by some process of blind intuition, but through the assessment of the validity of the arguments which come to him out of the fields which constitute his theological field.¹⁴

There are no theological magic wands, pleas for exemptions to the rules, retreats behind the covered wagons. Theology is theology, strong enough to stand on its own feet and argue the issues out openly and freely among the other disciplines.

The Christian Doctrine of History came out in 1957. Coincidentally, in the same year (and this is now half a century ago!) Pannenberg and a group of his friends published the collection of essays under the title *Revelation as History*. The theme of the Pannenberg circle was that, as they put it, kerygma without history is a meaningless noise. The preaching of the word of God is an empty assertion if it is severed from what really happened in history. John would have agreed heartily. Faith cannot live from a kerygma which is detached from its historical basis and content. For after all the kerygma is itself nothing but the declaration of what God has actually done in the course of the events of ordinary human history. The standard history of salvation theology has always foundered on a dualism between revelation and history. It fled from the historical flood tide into the harbour of a supra-history. The theology of existence withdrew from objective history to the ‘historicality’ of the individual.

But revelation comes not merely in or through history but AS history:

1. The self-revelation of God has occurred indirectly through his historical acts.
2. Revelation happens not at the beginning but at the end of history.
3. Historical revelation is there for anyone who has eyes to see. It is universal in character (external clarity of scripture, I hear you cry).
4. The universal revelation of the godhead of God was not yet realised in the history of Israel, but first in the destiny of Jesus of Nazareth, insofar as the end of history occurs beforehand in him.
5. The Christ event does not reveal the godhead of the God of Israel as an isolated event, but only in so far as it is part of God's history with Israel.

The accent on the universal historical scope of revelation is of course the big break from Barth and Bultmann. The totality of reality as history is not just the world, but God's world, which he created and through which he reveals himself. Pannenberg would agree that he borrows much from Hegel – but Hegel was wrong in identifying his own philosophy with that end standpoint from which one could view the whole. The final revelation has taken place in the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. But what has happened to him still remains outstanding, unaccomplished, for us, and so history goes on and promises have yet to be fulfilled.

It is not possible to base the gospel on the Christ of faith. The Jesus of history himself must be the actual starting point of Christology. Even and precisely, a theology of the resurrection, must establish itself

squarely upon the earthly Jesus. The resurrection did not happen in a vacuum. Judaism already expected a resurrection from the dead. For those who already hoped, the resurrection would be a sign of the coming of the end of the world, a corroboration by God of Jesus' claim to authority.

The key to history is apocalyptic. Here John would certainly have switched to watching the cricket on another channel.

Why the man Jesus can be the ultimate revelation of God, why in him and only in him God is supposed to have appeared, remains incomprehensible apart from the horizon of the apocalyptic expectation.¹⁵

But how is primitive Christianity as a whole to be related to the present, if not through the Word? Pannenberg's answer is framed in terms of a theology of universal history, which deals with what he calls the horizon of the historical process. The gap between past and present is bridged by the continuing history of God's unfolding plan for the world. The Church and its tradition have a structural significance in a hermeneutic of universal history.

What then of the Protestant tradition of *sola scriptura*, the Bible alone? The subject matter of scripture, the person and history of Jesus Christ, can no longer be found in the external clarity of the text. We have to find a new understanding of the relation between past event and present faith by creating a new hermeneutical bridge. We can't just call for obedience to the authority of the word of God. Cool! But alas, the 'totality of history' to which Pannenberg calls us may prove to be at least as elusive as the Word mythology which he rightly questions.

For Pannenberg, Israel came to understand itself in terms of its own history, and understood its God as a God who is active within that history. This understanding was reinforced by God's revelation in Jesus, in whom the end of history has broken in anticipation.

History and hermeneutics become the magic wands. Unkind critics mutter the Marxist mantra that the theologian must be concerned not only to interpret but to transform the world and human history. Of course if you change it without first understanding it you end up – probably – in George Bush’s White House. Don’t just do something, stand there!

Everything turns into history. Pannenberg draws connections between contingency in physics and contingency in history. Sceptics might think there is no obvious link between a statistically indeterminate future and the eschatological future of God, and so Pannenberg’s ‘fusion of horizons’ which should create universal historical meaning never quite happens. Nevertheless, Pannenberg’s criticism of the verbalisation of the gospel in much of the tradition, especially the Protestant tradition, may still be important.

Everything is served with history, like with Diet Coke and fries. Man is by nature an historical creature. The combination of events in a man’s life gives him his individuality, and drives him forward to seek a meaningful future. By looking at man in his historical environment we can see who he really is and we may come to see that this existence can only be fully realised in the light of Christ, the key to true humanity. Sceptics may complain that God’s prophetic word may cut across the development of human history, which occasionally leads to genocide.

Now you may wonder why I have dwelt on Pannenberg at such inordinate length – and of course one has to respect the power and comprehensiveness of Pannenberg’s vision. What I want to bring out by contrast is the immense care and precision which characterises John’s work. He never wraps himself up comfortably in that woolly blanket of dogmatic complexification that the rest of us turn to when we feel the chill of rigorous intellectual scrutiny. You may say that this is a rather austere perspective on Christian faith. But it is always at least honest. This is what we can say. It may not be all we would love to claim but we can justify what we have set out. Is that all there is? It appears to be more than enough to undergird a generous and catholic vision of Christian community as empowered by prayer, by

worship and by discipleship. That is why we remember John today with gratitude and with fond remembrance.

And if you think I've been a little unfair to Pannenberg – whoever said theology was meant to be fair? – I should perhaps add that he is the soul of clarity compared with more recent writers on history and events. I quote:

The moment the real is identified as event, making way for the division of the subject, the figures of distinction in discourse are terminated, because the position of the real instituted by them is revealed, through the retroaction of the event, to be illusory ... There is no doubt that universalism, and hence the existence of any truth whatsoever, requires the destitution of established differences and the initiation of a subject divided in itself by the challenge of having nothing but the vanished event to face up to.¹⁶

In reality, the Pauline break has a bearing upon the formal conditions and the inevitable consequences of a consciousness-in-truth rooted in a pure event, detached from every objectivist assignation to the particular laws of a world or society yet concretely destined to become inscribed within a world and within a society. What Paul must be given exclusive credit for establishing is that the fidelity to such an event exists only through the termination of communitarian particularisms and the determination of a subject-in-truth who indistinguishes the One and the “for all.”¹⁷

Well exactly.

Whatever we may think about the destitution of established differences, John was dead right to stress that history can always come back to bite us. Take this month's little sensation about finding the lost tomb

of Jesus. Here is a comment last week of some worth, of Professor Charlesworth, to be precise:

There is nothing that archaeology can provide that can be damaging to Christian faith. Archaeology cannot form faith; it can only inform faith.¹⁸

But I expect if archaeologists found an authentic diary from Jesus recounting a happy retirement in the Bahamas this might somewhat impinge on faith! History is important.

In the Preface to *The Christian Doctrine of History* John refers to the many conversations he had with Reinhold Niebuhr during his tenure of the Fulbright Fellowship in Union Theological Seminary, New York in 1953. What does it mean to be a Christian and to imagine Christian community? Niebuhr says this, using I think for the first time that expansive word ‘Christomorphic’ which was to be used later by so many theologians:

They know themselves to be Christian when they see their companions in need in the form of Christ; there echoes in their memory in such moments the story Christ told which ends in the well-known statement, “inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brethren you have done it unto me.” The symbol is not a mere figure of speech. Symbol and reality participate in each other. The needy companion is not wholly other than Christ, though he is not Christ himself. He is a Christo-morphic being, apprehended as in the form of Christ, something like Christ, though another.¹⁹

I think John would have had a lot of sympathy with these sentiments. Christians in community believe that in God’s purpose for humanity Jesus Christ plays an indispensable and decisive role. This is a pointer to a Christomorphic mystery.

All our theories are only pointers in the direction of the divine love. We participate in the life of God, but as pilgrims on the way to a mystery, a mystery which will reveal itself in all kinds of ways in the future. Christian truth is true, but it remains a suggestion.

The norms of our theology will be determined by the kenotic shape which is the hallmark of Christian faith and the catalysing contribution to human dialogue about the most serious issues facing humanity. Such norms are sensitive to cultural and political marginality, to the dialogue of world religions, to humanist projects of various sorts. But they are not infinitely inclusive. Faith remains decisively opposed to evil in all its forms. This paradigm sets priorities as always related to those at the greatest point of need – especially in a political context in which there is often a huge gulf between appearance and reality. It is through a conception of divine action, through a sense of the divine love in history, social, political and personal, that theology comes to speak most readily of God. For Christian faith, the Christomorphic paradigm is the icon of God’s unconditional generosity – both self-subsisting and self-relating. How this is so remains the divine mystery.

The omnipresence of luck, good and bad, and random evil, raises a question mark about all this. We become aware that faith is sometimes effective despite the appearance of things. Most of the time we see fragments, sometimes hardly a trace, of a Christomorphic element in the complexities of society. Yet it is the Christian vision which ‘traces the rainbow through the rain’ and may provide an antidote to indifference. This is a *trace* which we may recognise in other religions and in humanist action, wherever we recognise the lineaments of the signature of the divine love. These lineaments are more likely to be found in coordinated instances of attention to grinding poverty than in sentimental reflection.

Looking back to 1995 – now light years away – and the 150th Anniversary *Disruption to Diversity* volume,²⁰ I see that I wrote of one of his books, “As often, a cool sense of humour is just about allowed to emerge, in the entitling of a chapter, ‘Universalisers, Relaters and

Contemporanisers’, and the work ends with a focus on forgiveness.”
I went on to note that:

McIntyre followed John Baillie in combining appreciation of the constructive content of Barth’s theology with scepticism about the doctrine of revelation which was integral to his theological programme. He reinforced the influence of the liberal evangelical tradition, and though not especially liberal by contemporary standards was widely held to represent the best of the broad church inheritance in Scotland.²¹

And I ended with the testimony that:

Those who had the privilege of sitting under Torrance and McIntyre had the benefit of a uniquely valuable double perspective in systematic theology.²²

Looking at the world of systematic theology in 2007, and with the distinguished exception of the current incumbent of John’s chair, this is even more apposite now than it was then. It is truly meet, right and our bounden duty that we should now praise famous men, and not least John McIntyre.

¹ The essay was subsequently published in *Studies in World Christianity* 7 (2001).

² *The Christian Doctrine of History* (Edinburgh, London: Oliver and Boyd, 1957).

³ *Christian Doctrine of History*, 114.

⁴ *Theology After the Storm: Reflections on the Upheavals in Modern Theology and Culture*, edited, with a critical introduction by Gary D. Badcock (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1997).

⁵ *Theology After the Storm*, 13.

- ⁶ *Theology After the Storm*, 108.
- ⁷ *Theology After the Storm*, 116.
- ⁸ *Theology After the Storm*, 233.
- ⁹ *Theology After the Storm*, 235.
- ¹⁰ *Theology After the Storm*, 258.
- ¹¹ “Historical Criticism in a ‘History-Centred Value System’” in *Language, Theology, and the Bible: Essays in Honour of James Barr* (ed. Samuel E. Balentine and John Barton; Oxford: Clarendon, 1994), 370-84.
- ¹² James Barr, *Explorations in Theology 7: The Scope and Authority of the Bible* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 11.
- ¹³ Balentine and Barton, *Language, Theology and the Bible*, 378.
- ¹⁴ Balentine and Barton, *Language, Theology and the Bible*, 384.
- ¹⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus – God and Man* (trans. L. L. Wilkins and D. A. Priebe; London: SCM Press, 1968), 83.
- ¹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism* (trans. R. Brassier; Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 57-58.
- ¹⁷ Badiou, *Saint Paul*, 108.
- ¹⁸ James H. Charlesworth, ‘Reflections on the So-called “Lost Tomb of Jesus”’. Online: <http://www.ptsem.edu/NEWS/images/Charlesworth%20comment.pdf>.
- ¹⁹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy* (Robertson Lectures, 1960; New York and London: Harper & Row, 1963), 154-5.
- ²⁰ David F. Wright and Gary D. Badcock, eds., *Disruption to Diversity: Edinburgh Divinity, 1846-1996* (Edinburgh : T & T Clark, 1996).
- ²¹ Wright and Badcock, *Disruption to Diversity*, 129-130.
- ²² Wright and Badcock, *Disruption to Diversity*, 130.