CHAPTER 2

The Long March of Religious History: Where have We Travelled since the Sixties, and Why?

Hugh McLeod

In 1966 Owen Chadwick published the first volume of his *Victorian Church*, a classic of English church history as traditionally understood.\(^1\) The subject is indeed ‘the Church’, meaning principally the Church of England, though Nonconformists and Roman Catholics do receive some attention. The book is elegantly written. It is strong on personalities, on ecclesiastical politics, and on the links between bishops, governments and the Crown. It is well-informed on theology, though this is not the principal subject-matter. Many of the events recorded took place inside the so-called ‘magic triangle’, linking London with Oxford and Cambridge, within which the major institutions of the British Establishment are located. Chadwick’s main sources included ecclesiastical biographies, the papers of Queen Victoria, autobiographies of the prime ministers and leading bishops of the period, and church periodicals. The affinities of this kind of church history were with political history and to some extent intellectual history, rather than with the emerging social history.

In the same year, the journal *Past & Present* chose as the theme for its annual conference ‘Popular Religion’. The topics included medieval heresy, ‘popular Catholicism’ and ‘popular Protestantism’ in the Reformation era, American revivalism, and ‘Religion and Recreation’. If Chadwick’s book was one of the finest products of an older tradition, the *Past & Present* conference pointed to the future, and laid down the first foundations of a new orthodoxy in the writing of religious history.\(^2\)

In this paper I shall trace the development of the writing of Christian history from the 1960s to the present. I shall focus on histories of the modern period, and mainly on historians writing in English, though I shall draw some comparisons with historians writing in French or German. My principal concern will be on histories of the nineteenth century, though some writings on other periods will also be considered. The paper will be in four parts, the first focusing on work published in the 1960s and ’70s, the second on publications

---

of the 1980s and early ‘90s, the third on work appearing in the later ‘90s and the early twenty-first century; there will then be a summing up.

The 1960s and ‘70s

Past & Present, founded in 1952, had grown out of the Communist Party Historians’ Group, and it was originally sub-titled ‘A journal of scientific history’. By the 1960s the sub-title had been changed to the bland ‘A journal of historical studies’. Several of the leading figures on the editorial board were still Communists or ex-Communists but the journal now stood for a broader kind of social history and one that gave serious attention to religion – partly, perhaps, because of the Methodist or other Nonconformist roots of such leading figures as Christopher Hill, Victor Kiernan or E.P. Thompson. It was also very open to continental influences – because of personal links with Marxist economic and social historians in other parts of Europe, and also because of Eric Hobsbawm’s admiration for the Annales school. By the later 1960s it was clearly established as the leading historical journal of the English-speaking world, and in the years following it would publish several key contributions to the new social history of religion which in the 1970s seemed to be carrying all before it, and in the process sweeping aside the older church history.3

Probably the most influential exponent of the new history was Keith Thomas, whose monumental Religion and the Decline of Magic has become a classic.4 But perhaps the most representative was the American historian James Obelkevich, whose Religion and Rural Society: South Lindsey 1825–1875, though less widely known, is equally deserving of classic status, as well as being more tightly argued and less over-burdened with a multiplicity of examples.5 He chose for study one of the most rural parts of England, central Lincolnshire, assuming that ‘its strongly agricultural character also made it an optimum environment for organized religion’ and at a period, the mid-Victorian years, when ‘Christianization’ was likely to have reached a high point. Already in the preface he laid down his gauntlet: he was writing explicitly as an outsider – a disciple of Feuerbach, who believed that ‘the secret of theology is anthropology’, and ‘the secret of religious history is social history’.6 And though

---

4 Thomas 1971.
5 Obelkevich 1976.
6 Obelkevich 1976, pp. vii–x.