Book Reviews

Peter D. Clarke and Charlotte Methuen (Eds.)


It was timely and imaginative of the Ecclesiastical History Society to choose to celebrate its 50th anniversary by examining the ways in which churches have reflected on the past throughout Christian history, and to consider the ways in which ecclesiastical history has responded to developments within the wider historical discipline in the half century since the society’s foundation. The volume under review represents a selection of the papers given at the conferences to mark that anniversary. The past, often under the guise of ‘tradition,’ has always been a central, and often a contested, element in the theological self-understanding of churches, whether it was constructed through the study of Christian history or whether that experience was ignored in favour of the template provided by the apostolic age depicted in the Scriptures. The first half of this volume is comprised of papers which examine the ways in which various traditions have looked at the past, from Socrates Scholasticus in the fifth century to the recent Arts and Humanities Research Council project on ‘Modern Religious History and the Contemporary Church.’ This project was a response to Archbishop Rowan Williams’s appeal of 2005 for the importance of history to the self-understanding of the church, and underlines the fact that the past has been used not only to deepen understanding of the contemporary church but also, on more occasions than one might wish to admit, to justify particularist positions. The past often came into its own at times of theological controversy; most notably at the Reformation when theologians on both sides sought to claim the past for their own purposes. Charlotte Methuen’s paper on Luther and Susan Royal’s discussion of John Bale show how this was achieved by Protestants, who not only saw the past as vindicating their position but also invested it with a prophetic purpose which could lead the church forward. The optimism of these two sixteenth-century Reformers was not shared by Gilbert
Burnet. Writing at the end of the seventeenth century Burnet viewed the years after 1600 as nothing short of disastrous for the Protestant churches, but in the context of the arrival of William of Orange he deployed the two-age model of Protestantism to represent 1689 as a turning point, not only for the Reformation in England, but for Europe also.

In general the evangelical churches have been less concerned to define their identity from the historical record, preferring to trace their descent directly from the apostolic church but, as articles by Chris Wilson and Thomas Ingram show, history was a contested area in both Methodism and Dissent in the eighteenth century. For example, the opponents of early Methodism chose to draw analogies between Wesley and his followers and the ‘enthusiasm’ of the mendicant orders, in reply to which the Methodists linked their tradition to those of the late medieval proto-evangelicals, the Lollards and the Waldensians, likening their contemporary critics such as Bishop Lavington to the persecuting church of that day. For another nonconformist church, the Congregationalists, struggling with what it saw as increasing religious indifference, the anniversary of the great ejectment of 1662 provided the platform for revival in 1912. As the essays in this part of the volume demonstrate, the presence of the past has been a constant feature of contemporary ecclesiastical politics and identity at all periods.

How ecclesiastical history has been practised over the last half century and how it should be practised in the future form the subject of a rousing presidential address from Sarah Foot and of the essays in the second section of the volume. The institutional decline of ecclesiastical history within the UK academy has coincided with a revival of interest in the history of religion and religious movements, and the challenges posed by that apparent contradiction are explored by Foot. After challenging the society to embrace the significance of recent anthropological and cultural approaches to religious history she challenges current practice in intellectual history for not taking religious ideas seriously enough, but concludes with a warning to the society, quoting its first president Dom David Knowles’s prophetic criticism, made in 1964, that “Church historians in general say too little about the changes of cultures and of mental climates.” The essays in the second section of the volume demonstrate that this has not been so in the best work of the past 50 years. Judith Lieu’s essay on women in the early church demonstrates that recent advances in gender studies can assist us in recovering female agency even in periods when their own societies did not expect it. Diarmaid McCulloch reviews the historiography of the Reformation, locating it within the wider ecumenical movement following Vatican II, notwithstanding some recent retrenchment, and chronicling a more pluralist understanding of its history and the ways in which religious ideas