

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

The
Indian Journal
of Theology

Reflections on Evanston

The Vedanta Philosophy and the Message of Christ

To Christ through the Vedanta?

The Religious Philosophy of Muhammad Iqbal

The Teaching of Church History in India

Hinduism Re-thinking Itself

Book Reviews

Book Notices

Volume Four

Number One

March 1955

The Teaching of Church History in India*

JOHN FOSTER

IT WOULD be presumptuous for one who has taught Church History in India for half a year to offer advice upon the subject. However I have taught Church History for 28 years—11 in China, 10 in England, and 7 in Scotland. So I propose to base my remarks less upon this short lecture tour than upon experience in other places, trying, with suitable modifications, to apply it here. I want to plead for Church History

1. a worthier place in the syllabus,
2. a more Indian point of view,
3. better distribution of interest.

Place in the Syllabus

It is possible for a student to take a Serampore B.D. with nothing more than one year's outline course—twenty centuries in thirty weeks! Our Scottish minimum is two years. I should hesitate to advocate any addition to total lecture time. Your students seem to be even more sadly over-lectured than ours. But I would claim for Church History its fair share. If a student cannot understand the New Testament without the Old Testament to prepare the way, neither does he enter into the full Christian heritage if he regards the Apostolic Age as witnessing the end of the mighty acts of God, instead of their new beginning. We need to take as statement of historic fact our Lord's promise about 'greater works than these' and later guidance 'into all the truth'. Fulfilment of these promises, continuing through sixty generations, and spreading over every continent of the globe—this is the stuff of Church History. All that the Old Testament foretells, and that the New Testament fulfils, concerning the People of God, Church History needs to crown with knowledge of Christianity as an on-going cause of ever-growing significance. Of the fourth discipline, Theology, I have not yet spoken. The interdependence of Church History and Theology is such that Church History is often presented as the handmaid of Theology. I object to that for two reasons: first, because interplay between these subjects ought to have led to the historicizing of Theology rather than to the theologizing of Church History. The historicizing of Theology might for example have led to more study of Patristics, in time now spent in introduction to the latest

*A lecture given to a joint meeting of the staffs of Serampore and Bishop's Colleges.

jargon—‘de-mythologizing’ and the like—of European theologians. And second, because over-theologizing of Church History has given students the impression that it is chiefly concerned with heresies and councils, and with disgruntled clerics muttering mutual anathemas beneath their beards. The chief concern of Church History ought never to have been anything less than the chief concern of the Church, its commission, ‘Go ye into all the world’. In this connection it will be seen that I have little sympathy with the separation of Church History and the History of Missions. To do that is to leave Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark.

One reason for Church History’s comparative neglect may be its unpopularity. I remember at a conference of theological teachers being asked by a stranger what my own subject was. And when I said ‘Church History’, he gave me a look of real sympathy and said, ‘How awful!’ Later during one of the sessions I had to read a paper. I began by saying, ‘My subject is Church History. Would you not agree that it is the Cinderella of the theological curriculum?’ It was meant to be a rhetorical question, but a voice replied, ‘No, it’s the ugly sister’. One trouble with Church History, I confess, is that there is so much of it. One must select. And I am persuaded that traditional curricula have selected the wrong things. If you make the history of the Church centre upon the mission of the Church, surely you will silence the complaint that it is a subject which seems irrelevant.

The Relevance of Church History

I was a very young and ill-equipped teacher of Church History in China when my college was visited by Canon B. H. Streeter of Oxford. He pointed me to a book as a model of Church History teaching in the East, *The Ancient Church and Modern India*, by Godfrey Phillips. That small book meant for me a new beginning, and I cannot understand why it has been allowed to go out of print.

For any one with missionary experience, early Church History ought to come to life at every turn. You read the second century Apologists, and think of preaching to idolaters and polytheists now. You go on to Justin’s *Dialogue with Trypho*, and behind the Jew you can discern the Muslim. You find two attitudes to pre-Christian thought, Tertullian with his disdain—‘What has Athens to do with Jerusalem?’—and Clement of Alexandria—‘Perhaps we may say that God gave philosophy to the Greeks till the Lord should call the Greeks; for as the law was to the Hebrews, so philosophy was a schoolmaster to bring the Greek mind to Christ’. I heard the clash at Tambaram in 1938 between the Kraemer attitude and the Chenchiah group, and during this visit sixteen years later I find the dust has not all settled on that conflict.

In my remarks above I did not mean to exclude heresy from Church History; sometimes the rise of heresy is closely connected with the progress of the Church’s mission. Gnosticism is a young Church’s mistaken attempt at indigenous expression. To study that is to go on to think of theosophical aberrations in India now. Montanism may remind you of neighbouring sects of sheep-stealers, who, nowadays too, are chorybantic inspirationists, and given to adventist calculations. Julian the Apostate’s tirades against ‘the despisers of our national rites’, and his attempt to reinstate paganism, suitably reformed after Christian models, but without

acknowledgement of the debt, must seem up-to-date in lands where ancient religions have experienced both revival and reform by their association with modern nationalism. So one might go on. The early centuries come to life again and the early Church provides both examples and warnings which should not be lost to us.

Point of View

When I was given the syllabus of the college in India where I was to do regular Church History teaching*, one thing shocked me. I require my students in Glasgow to know more concerning the eastward spread of Christianity than you require in India. I was to teach an outline course (presumably western, since 'Indian Church History' was down as a separate subject, not being taken this year), and the 'Early Centuries up to 451'. Here, incidentally, is an illustration of the theologizing of Church History, and one of peculiarly western emphasis. The Council of Chalcedon, 451, does (I believe) represent a landmark in the progress of systematic theology, but it is achieved by the triumph of a letter from an absentee Pope, in a Greek Council discussing Greek terms, while the Pope in question wrote in Latin and knew no Greek at all. The whole affair is so western that it is small wonder that when one passes from Latin areas of the Church, through Greek, and on to Coptic to the south and Syriac to the east, Chalcedon should not be accepted at all. That is by the way. I do accept Chalcedon, of course, but in Scotland I make the terminus of the early centuries, not 451, but 461, the year of the death of Patrick—not a theologian but a missionary; not in Asia Minor but among the Scots. In India, why not go on from Chalcedon, 451, as far as Cosmas Indicopleustes, 522? This may sound finicky, but there is something in it. A syllabus should be arranged and periods divided according to the point of view which one wishes to encourage. I believe that wherever Church History is taught, the right point of view is that which sees a Universal Church

1. always meant in the purposes of God to come to my land and me;
2. from the earliest times actually beginning to do so; and
3. in spite of failure within and opposition from without, having in every age surprising achievements in this regard.

Let me illustrate from China. In the year 1690 Jesuit missionaries had good hopes of converting the Emperor K'ang Hsi. One day he asked them, 'If all this be true, how is that we do not hear about it for 1600 years? Why are only the barbarians mentioned and the Chinese left out?' When I was in China in the 1920's, it was not a well-disposed Emperor, on the verge of conversion, asking awkward questions. It was a virulent nationalist propaganda, much of it already communist-inspired, charging Christian education with denationalizing Chinese youth, charging Christianity itself with being an agent of 'Anglo-American cultural aggression'. What was the answer? Chinese Christians had no answer. They themselves believed, though they did not complain, that

* Half an academic year was spent in one college, and four others were more briefly visited.

the Christian Church was a foreign institution. Perhaps there lay the measure of our failure, that they should *not* have complained. We had failed to give a right point of view, because many of us had never achieved a right point of view ourselves.

In the Theological College at that time, our Church History textbooks were direct translations from the West. Then a new one was issued, greatly improved. Nine-tenths of it was still western in content, but it had a supplement, 'The History of Christianity in China'. But do you see the point of view encouraged? China was an added extra, an afterthought, apart from the main-line development of the purposes of God.

Syllabus for the East?

I myself began a new syllabus. We followed early Church History up to the fifth century Christological controversies, the eastern divisions, the Syriac-speaking Church of the East—and its arrival at the capital of China in the year 635. Then we went back to the West for the Middle Ages, the rise of Islam, the Crusades, Francis of Assisi (1209), and in 1294 Franciscan Friars reached Khanbaliq, which is Peking. Then to the West again for the Reformation, contemporary with discovery of new routes to the East, the Counter-Reformation, the Company of Jesus—and in 1552 St. Francis Xavier dies off the coast of China. Back once more for the movements of new religious zeal within western Protestantism—Puritanism, Pietism, Moravianism, Methodism, Evangelicalism; hence comes the Missionary Awakening, the modern missionary movement; and in 1807 with Robert Morrison it comes to China. *Everything comes to China.* The division into periods which I made for China, would do, with small adjustments, for the whole of East Asia. Would not that be an improvement upon the conventional western division into periods, the inevitable sequence of western material, and then, as an added extra, 'Christianity in India'?

It is hardly necessary to add that, in doing this, making an 'India-wards' Church History, one must beware of reacting to an opposite extreme. Church History must remain the history of the universal Church; no narrow nationalism must invade and falsify. Nor must our teaching ever be sentimentally unreal for the sake of national interests. The West *is* the scene of Christianity's most striking early triumph; and repeatedly in succeeding centuries sees movements of renewal which are to inaugurate new eastward out-reachings. It is neither a case of omitting history because it is western, nor of falsifying its proportions for the sake of the East. It *is* a question of what the main line of interest should be. If the same scene is viewed from the East instead of from the West, its contents will remain unchanged, but foreground and background will change places.

Distribution of Interest

I am a strong believer in an outline course, done either by lectures or by required reading. There is much to be said for lectures, if there is time, and if there is some one who can do them with insight and with enthusiasm. If I am studying a map, give me the company of one who knows and loves the countryside. But I would never recommend an outline course standing alone, all the Church History a man ever does.

That is like giving him a map and telling him that he has had his excursion. It is experience in detailed exploration which makes a map of other areas significant.

A second criticism which I must offer about an outline course is that it is not examinable. I quote the Serampore syllabus: 'General outline from the beginning to the present time, one paper'. That sounds like asking the impossible. I have sufficient Indian experience to know the difficulties of an unexamined course. When I told one class, 'We have completed the required syllabus, so we will go on to do some other work just for fun', fifty per cent of the class resolved that I should have the fun to myself. Still I believe in always teaching more than I examine, and I think there is something of principle in having it so, even if the inferior students do slack off.

A third criticism is that the field of Church History is so great that the syllabus ought not to have room for courses which (as with Serampore at present) overlap.

Outline and Detail

If everybody studied Church History for two years, the division which most naturally suggests itself is Pre-Reformation and Post-Reformation. That is how my own syllabus divides. We have three terms, and, in the first year, spend two on the first five centuries, followed by one term (outline, and unexamined) on the next thousand years. The second year contains two periods for detailed study, one covering the parts of the Reformation which most nearly concern our own denominational inheritance, and the second being nineteenth century and mainly concerned with the modern missionary movement. The rest of post-Reformation Church History is again outline, required, but unexamined, and done, according to time sequence, around these two periods of detailed study. Our third year provides for special students going further, with advanced study of three subjects, including this time first-hand acquaintance with relevant documents. At present the subjects are: (1) the second and third century Apologists, (2) a century of modern Scottish Church History, (3) the Missionary Awakening, with developments in India, or China, or Africa, up to 1914. It will be noticed that, once the required minimum is covered, there is leisure for overlapping. This third year course, in any case, is for the few.

Permanent and Transitory

I am far from meaning that your pattern in India should correspond, even roughly, with mine in Scotland. I would, however, stress the importance of two periods, the early centuries, and the nineteenth century. I was inclined to add a third, the period of denominational origins. This was because of my feeling that union schemes can hardly be engineered by those who do not understand divisions, nor contributions to a united Church be made by those who are not acquainted with denominational traditions. However, one of my Indian colleagues expressed himself forcibly about this: 'Theological education in India', he said, 'has been so busy with denomination that it has failed to develop a supra-denominational conception of the Church.' I do not know enough either to

confirm or to contradict that judgment. Of course it was my intention to include other people's denominational origins, as well as one's own, not just one peculiar people. With regard to denominationalism, indeed with regard to all divisions in the Holy Catholic Church, it is my firm conviction that we all need to examine the inheritance, and with ruthless honesty separate it into two parts, the transitory and the permanent. We shall usually find that the transitory is made up of negations—opposition to this or that abuse in the sixteenth or seventeenth century Church, of only antiquarian interest today; denial of this or that superstitious regard, irrelevant in an age when men believe too little, not too much; contradiction of some one else's mis-statement, a some one of whom Indians have never heard and never will. Transitory! And that which is of abiding worth, the denominational contributions which we are meant to carry with us, and to continue to enjoy in the unity of a reunited Church—these are the positive affirmations, concerning experience, conduct, rite, or doctrine, for a time forgotten, obscured; or overlaid, but belonging to all time, all places and so, through us, to India. Church History can make us wiser as to such judgments, and, if it does, it is worth including 'denominational origins'.

If I had to choose two periods, instead of three, I should have no hesitation in saying: (1) the early centuries, which contain the fixing of so much—canon, creed, church order, theological terms, even the directions of Christian geography; and (2) the nineteenth century, which Professor Latourette has called 'the Great Century', to which he has given three out of his seven volumes on *The Expansion of Christianity*, and about which, having passed the age of three score years and ten, he has settled down to write for the next decade. It is a cheering thought to those preparing for life-service in the Church's ministry, that the last completed century of the Church's history is the greatest, and, what is more, it happens to be true.

[This is the first of a series of articles on the teaching of subjects in Theological Colleges which we plan to publish in the Journal. Comments on this and subsequent articles, in either correspondence or article form, will be welcomed.—Eds.]