

## **Interpreting Christian History in the Reformation**

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Every year I teach an introductory course in Church History at Union, covering the second millennium of the Christian era in Europe. The course covers a fairly predictable subject matter: the headline events in one thousand years of history are covered very hastily in twelve weeks' teaching. However, I do warn seminarians that the history of the Christian experience will challenge them in a particular way that no other subject will.

First, students must confront the fact of historical difference. There are many distinguished, creative and impressing Christian minds down the centuries who simply think differently from us: their social circumstances, their education, their cultural environment wired them to respond to the Gospel in very different ways from those natural to ourselves. Augustine, Bernard, Thomas Aquinas, or John Calvin were all outstanding spiritual leaders in their own worlds. They all learned from each other and used each other's writings. Yet they all inhabited different ages, whether they recognized the fact or not. Modern-day historians have to learn to isolate those critical differences in thinking, then empathize carefully and selectively with their separateness from our epoch, while learning from those aspects of their subjects' message that can still work for us in our (also) distinctive and transient settings. We should not go to Augustine for lessons in sexuality, to Aquinas to learn about the limitations of human reason, to Luther for lessons in gender relations, or to Calvin to learn about appropriate

responsiveness to cultural diversity in Christian catechesis. But there are within all their works potent spiritual lessons to be learned, *provided that we use them in the right way*.

Secondly, however, in historical study students will confront what human beings, human passions, and quite frankly human faults have done to the Church of Jesus Christ down the centuries. The Church is no more exempt than the rest of human society from the effects of power-hunger, limited vision, jealousy, greed and fanaticism. In some ways it is more exposed, because the Christian gospel is a sufficiently deep and complex thing that its members are continually tempted to take short-cuts, to pursue the secondary objective, the means as though they were the end in itself. For instance: if one believes that religious poverty is the one supreme way to live the Gospel, then it can make sense to insult and revile those who make absolute religious poverty difficult to attain. By that logic, some Franciscan friars in the 14<sup>th</sup> century ended by accusing Pope John XXII of being the Antichrist, when he refused to allow the order to continue to vest all its chapels, houses and other property in the papacy. Obedience, let alone Christian charity, seemed less important than obsessing over an ideal.

Thirdly, those of us who study the Reformation and its consequences are absolutely bound to ponder how the visible Church can at some times be structurally and massively in error about the substance of the Christian faith. The Reformation happened, at least in terms of church doctrine and worship, because the Western Church of the Middle Ages had developed one aspect of its tradition – the belief that the institutional, sacramental Church wielded the delegated authority to care for and also to discipline souls, here and in the hereafter – to the point where that system stretched its credibility to breaking point and collapsed under its own weight, across great tracts of

Europe. The reformers then – it may be argued – replaced an excessive confidence in sacramental rituals and purifications with an excessive confidence in the clarity, correctness and power of theological doctrine and instruction. They also accepted the existence of plural churches, given that one reformed church could recognize another reformed church even without absolute conformity of doctrine or worship, let alone political and organizational unity between them. We who are heirs of the Reformation traditions, which includes all forms of Protestants as well as Roman Catholics, have to come to terms with the fact that our churches have been and are historically divided, and that we cannot any longer claim to discern with absolute certainty that one is right and the others are wrong. What is more, our very existence as plural traditions bears witness that the human attempt to transmit faithfully and sensitively the message of the Christian Gospel will inevitably, in more or less important ways, go wrong. That is the burden of being a religious historian.

My main objective this afternoon will be to discern two polar aspects of the Reformation response to historical divergence and historical error. Those aspects are characterized, to put it very crudely, by two questions: first, ‘how did we manage to become so mistaken about the Gospel?’ and second, ‘how did *they* manage to become so mistaken about the Gospel?’ The difference between those two approaches to Christian divergence and diversity determines whether we remain mired and stuck in mutual recrimination or open ourselves, humbly and penitently, to the possibility of dialogue with our colleagues and partners in other traditions. Perhaps surprisingly, both responses, the ‘we went wrong’ and the ‘*they* went wrong’, can be found deep within the

heritage of the Reformation's accounts of its own history and of the history of the Church in general.

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To make sense of the Reformation's view of church history, we need first to look at how the possibility of error was viewed in earlier centuries. Evidently, doctrinal disagreement appeared everywhere in the life of the Church in the early centuries. The *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea, usually regarded as the first attempt at a full-dress history of the Christian Church, devoted a great deal of space to 'heresy'. However, in Eusebius's hands, the erroneous doctrines of heretics never formed part of the Church's diversity: they were always outside it. Eusebius, in his rhetorical presentations, took the self-evident superiority of orthodox Trinitarian Christianity largely for granted. This attitude was actually somewhat ironic, coming from a disciple of Origen who arrived at the Council of Nicea significantly tainted with the suspicion of Arianism. To some extent Eusebius's view of doctrine remained elliptical and self-fulfilling, since what the Church ultimately discerned to be correct doctrine represented *ipso facto* 'correct' doctrine: all the alternate paths that might have appeared at one time or another were heretical deviations. By definition, the 'true Church' conserved the one, unchanging correct doctrine, and all other branches were 'heretical'.

Moral and ethical failings turned out to be, for much of Christian antiquity, a more common problem in reality, but also a less challenging conceptual issue than errors over doctrine. Humans were expected to be sinners, but they were not expected perversely to teach 'error'. Augustine of Hippo, in his anti-Donatist writings, helped to establish the principle that the Church was still the Church, whatever the moral flaws of

the individual people who held responsibility within it. Augustine left a very deep imprint on the medieval western Church's vision of itself. If the Church was defined by its possession of correct Catholic teaching and the succession of its ministers from the apostles, then moral shortcomings, however outrageous, among its members and its leadership did not call the validity of its sacraments or its jurisdictional rights into question. On one hand, medieval church historians from Bede of Jarrow onwards felt entitled to report, with at times striking candour, the ways in which individual clerics failed to live up to the standards of their vocation. Bede described how many monasteries in his age had become leisured country clubs for sections of the Anglo-Saxon nobility, living luxuriously without any regard for discipline. In the same way, bishops and Church councils could report without embarrassment the faults of individual clerics: much of the most biting 'anticlerical' criticism found in the Middle Ages was, in fact, written by members of the clergy. It was the Council of Basel which condemned the practice whereby bishops levied a 'cradle tax' on those of their priests whose housekeepers produced an illegitimate offspring in the previous year, and derived a significant income from this source. More frivolously, one can use the decrees of the councils as a primary source for the history of costume, since they list all the fashionable clothes that clergy were supposed not to wear, but habitually did.

On the other hand, if anyone dared to suggest that a Church so contaminated by the failure to observe its own disciplinary and moral codes was not, after all, the Church of Jesus Christ, they would immediately incur the charge of heresy and risk exclusion from the Church in their turn. This was the fate of a number of dissenting movements in the Middle Ages, that tended to focus their critique on the apparent implausibility that an

institution tainted by moral failings could really guarantee the effectiveness of its sacramental ministries. In the late 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries various groups called 'Waldenses' across Europe developed a critique of the claims of the Catholic Church to be the true successor to the apostles. Not all Waldenses were full-blown Donatist heretics, at least not at the very start. In fact, a disagreement broke out in the 1210s between two factions within the Waldensian movement over precisely this issue. However, by the later medieval period various Waldensian groups argued that at the time that the Church accepted the gifts of land and political power in the reign of the Emperor Constantine, an otherwise unrecognized minority group had separated themselves off from the Church and preserved the original impulse to apostolic poverty and shunning of political power and responsibility. This minority group, so it was claimed, formed the alternative line of descent from which the Waldensian pastors claimed to derive their authority. This claim about an alternate, clandestine apostolic succession of unrecorded poor preachers and pastors posed considerable credibility problems among the Waldenses themselves, let alone the rest of the community. However, a different version of it would be taken up by Protestant historiography from the 1550s onwards, and constituted a part of the Reformation's vision of its past down to the nineteenth century at the very least.

Meanwhile more sophisticated theological critics questioned whether one could casually and without qualification assume that the 'visible church' was always and inevitably co-extensive with the true Church, the bride of Christ, the body of those predestined to salvation. Neither John Wyclif nor Jan Hus were historical thinkers, as such: but their witness, and in particular their challenges to the claims of the Catholic

hierarchy, would later form a part of the Reformation's vision of its own antecedents. Wyclif's followers bluntly argued from the 1390s onwards that someone in mortal sin could not possibly be in the state of grace that was a prerequisite of holding spiritual authority or responsibility in the Church. This left the disturbing possibility – not really worked through in Wycliffite theology – that the Church as a whole could have been in error, or entirely absent, for large tracts of the past. Jan Hus was generally more cautious, and the doctrines for which the Council of Constance condemned him as a heretic in 1415 included several things that he never believed and had never taught. However, Hus also denied that anyone could, in an uncomplicated way, simply equate the one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church with the Pope and the Cardinals, since the latter were often common sinners to a greater or lesser extent.

So the majority western Church reached the eve of the Reformation with a somewhat curious view of its own past and its own heritage. While it certainly celebrated the examples of its heroic figures and its saints, it did not allow its authority to depend on their individual acts of sanctity. The Western Church defined itself as the heir to a succession and the conserver of a tradition. Ultimately, though not in an uncomplicated way, it believed that whatever the limitations of its individual members, the Holy Spirit had always been present to the Church, and therefore that the accumulated body of tradition, in terms of doctrine as well as liturgy and legislation, validly constituted the living voice of Christ among the community of the faithful. Therefore the history of the Church, in a Catholic understanding, was of a living and unfolding witness guaranteed by the apostolic succession and in particular by the supposedly unbroken succession of authentic popes. Whenever the Church defined

anything 'new' it did no more than discern, clarify or formulate something that was already implicit in the Church's foundation. *One needs to take this claim seriously.* For instance, when the Church tried to define the precise circumstances of the birth of the Virgin, or to see whether the power to indulge the penalties of sin might be extended to cover the souls in purgatory, no-one among the Catholic hierarchy formally believed that they were inventing 'new' doctrine. The spirit-led Church was rather discovering and setting out in a clearer and more categorical way the implicit witness of past ages.

In these circumstances, 'error' was something that the Church discovered, combated, and purged from its being as time progressed: it was not something that the Church itself could ever, by definition, fall prey to. Individual clerics, individual theologians, even potentially individual popes might fall into error; but the universal Church in its collective identity had never done so and could not do so.

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Given this set of assumptions, we can begin to see what a Herculean task Martin Luther attempted in defending his view of the Gospel against the charge that he was invalidating the witness of the Church across fifteen (or at least five) centuries. However, one element in the cultural ambience clearly assisted Luther in this task. He wrote in the era of the Northern Christian Renaissance. Scholars and writers of the Northern Renaissance had already embraced the notion that, in secular terms at least, there might be a falling-away from truth and a loss of past glories. It might be better to search back to the pure ancient springs of knowledge rather than to accept the distilled, but possibly also contaminated and corrupted contents of the modern reservoirs of beliefs and ideas.

Martin Luther's thought was, at its core, dogmatic rather than historical, even though it had vital implications for our understanding of the Church's development across history. Luther argued that the very essence of the Gospel consisted in the insight that God's saving, 'justifying' grace came upon the sinner as a garment draped over the still and persistently sinful human being: it did not arrive as a process of internal purification, or as something that could be tracked and documented through the sacrament of penance. *Consequently*, any ritual performances that claimed to 'purify' the inner nature of the sinner, or to place God under any sort of obligation to reward the one who performed the supposed 'good work', represented a blasphemous usurpation of the work of Christ. Christ alone had earned the grace that could be dispensed for the saving of those who, intrinsically, could never deserve it. So, on theological grounds, we must make away with monasticism, masses for the living and the dead, vows to perform acts of penitence, virtually the whole medieval gamut of voluntary acts of religious devotion. That meant that it would, as Luther said in 1520,

'be necessary to abolish most of the books now in vogue, and to alter almost the entire external form of the Churches and introduce, *or rather reintroduce*, a totally different kind of ceremonies'.

That last parenthesis – 'or rather reintroduce' – was vital. Luther betrayed his awareness that (i) he was doing something that would cause seismic tremors in the religious life of Europe but that (ii) the paring-away of the accretions of mistaken medieval devotion should in fact represent a return to the past, a rediscovery of a simpler and more primitive and pristine form of Christianity. If this was indeed necessary to restore the Church to its 'form', its intended and essential state, then that implied that

the majority Church, the visible Church, had been spectacularly in error over the past centuries.

Luther did not embrace an idea of the historic development of the Church's teachings. What he did embrace was the notion of the historic *deformation* of the Church. In fact, Luther seems to have believed that the tendency of the Church to be deformed by human error and folly was so ingrained, that only a prophetic outburst at the very end of time could correct things. He may have seen himself as just such a prophet, and his own times as the prelude to the Second Coming. Towards the end of his life, Luther presented a version of his historical view in a controversial pamphlet entitled *On Councils and the Churches*. Ecumenical Councils appeared to the defenders of the Catholic tradition to be the strongest and most trustworthy embodiment of the continuing presence of the Spirit in the community of the Church. A pope sitting in an ecumenical council solemnly promulgating a belief of the Church could not, it was supposed, be subject to error. Councils, above all else, embodied that concept of a historically unfolding but always coherent and continuous tradition on which Catholicism rested.

Luther's pamphlet took this notion of church councils and shredded it. He argued that the proper role of the councils of the Church was to conserve the apostolic doctrine and to defend it against its adversaries, not to augment or embroider it. He backed this up by claiming (rather unhistorically, if truth be told) that the councils of Nicea, Constantinople, Ephesus and Chalcedon did nothing other than to condemn errors that had arisen within the church over doctrinal matters, from such heresiarchs as Arius, Macedonius, Nestorius and Eutyches. Of the rest of their business, some of it was

transient legislating for the circumstances of the age, and some of it was plain wrong. The whole notion of ‘continuous witness’, in which doctrines grew and were unfolded over time, was a demonic deception. The councils of the Middle Ages, ‘the pope’s councils’, were on the other hand ‘satanic gatherings, where they establish new articles of faith and manifestly contradict scripture’.

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This argument seems to suggest that the reformers, or at least Martin Luther, were *unhistorical* thinkers, at least insofar as they rejected the notion of historical unfolding of the church’s witness, because they needed to reject the form in which that unfolding had occurred in recent centuries and to step back to recover something more primitive that had been lost. That impression would be partly true, but only in part. For the remainder of this talk I should like to explore the potential answers to two questions. First, how did the reformers think that the Christian Church had got into such a state that the Reformation was necessary? Secondly, how did they locate the Reformation within a larger scheme of the unfolding of human history?

Luther, as I have just suggested, took a very negative view of the elaboration of doctrines over time. As he said in the conclusion to *On Councils*, ‘our ears itch so much for something new that we can no longer endure the old and genuine truth ... that we weigh ourselves down with big piles of new teachings. That is just what has happened *and will continue to happen*’. In other words, the human tendency to degrade Christian teaching, to add strange theological ideas or to proliferate unnecessary forms of devotion, was an existential reality about sinful human beings in a fallen world at the

mercy of demonic suggestions. No one era in history had priority over another in that respect.

Some of the Swiss reformers took a slightly different and rather interesting tack. Humanist-inspired reformers like Heinrich Bullinger of Zürich and Joachim Vadian of St-Gallen both agreed that the perfect form of the Church subsisted in the primitive apostolic and post-apostolic age. When they described that age, of course, it looked rather like sixteenth-century reformed Switzerland: there was a very simple liturgy, no cult of images or veneration of saints, a very pure, chaste and chastened Church. What was intriguing was their analysis of how one had got from the apostolic age to the medieval decline. Unlike Luther, Vadian and Bullinger did not suppose that *any* addition whether of doctrine or practice was by definition mistaken and evil. They recognized that something might begin for a good reason at an early date, but then with the passage of time it could turn into something much worse. In other words, constant vigilance was needed to ensure that accumulated practices or teachings did not become a burden to the Church.

Joachim Vadian argued that the monastic life arose originally as a pragmatic response to the need to form preachers away from the threats of persecution or the distractions of urban life in the late Empire. The first monks, whether in Egypt or Cappadocia, were simply preaching clergy undergoing a temporary extended retreat. They did not take perpetual vows or make a big issue of how they were dressed. Vadian admitted that there was nothing in scripture about monasticism, and that Jerome's attempts to derive it from Elisha or John the Baptist were spurious; but he described it

as being thought 'tolerable' because there was no pretentious pursuit of reputation or grandeur.

In a very similar way Bullinger argued that the cult of saints began as a perfectly understandable commemoration of the martyrs of the early church. During the time of persecutions, people instituted anniversary commemorations for Christians who had been put to death, 'for a memorial of their constancy, to strengthen the hearts of those who were trembling, and for a signification of the resurrection of the body'. As Bullinger observed, 'no-one would condemn that practice even if it were done nowadays'. However, as Bullinger remarked, over time the process suffered a sort of creeping exaggeration and hypertrophy. The relics of martyrs came to be enclosed in beautiful shrines; too much attention was paid to the miracles around their altars; and the notion grew that the saints in heaven would be caring for their devotees with the same affection that they regarded their Christian brothers and sisters when on earth. In the same way, the first Christians met in private houses. Then, when they had permission to build dedicated places of worship, these grew in complexity. Only in the time of Justinian were churches built to the memory of saints. Always pragmatic, Bullinger insisted that he did not disapprove of buildings large enough to house big congregations and allow them to hear sermons; he did not wish all churches to be levelled; but he disapproved of the 'abuse and luxury of temples'.

The cultural changes of the Christianization of the Empire, and then the decline of the Empire in the face of barbarian invasions, affected the experience of the churches. The reformers anticipated the Enlightenment theory that some of the degradations of early Christian worship derived from the need to make concessions to

recent converts from paganism. Statues were imported into churches to make 4<sup>th</sup>-century converts from paganism more comfortable. Prayers for the dead replaced the pagan practice of the *parentalia*. Saints became specialists in particular crafts, situations of life, dangers or diseases just as the pagan gods had been. After the collapse of the Empire, there ensued a shortage of learned priests, and the bishops, more ignorant and uncultured than their predecessors, made all sorts of concessions to popular superstitions. The iconoclastic controversies of the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries divided Western from Eastern Churches and left the West in its state of relative ignorance.

‘After the time of Charlemagne there followed much more corrupt centuries. For as the wealth of the bishops increased, every day superstition grew on superstition and luxury increased. Finally the papal tyrant subjected all human and divine things to himself. There was born around 1212 the most true deception and perdition of the world, the useless crowd of mendicant monks [*sic*], bold, stubborn, perversely religious, and marvellously appropriate for planting and nourishing superstition.’

Cultural change could be invoked for humour as well as tragedy. John Calvin, in his *Inventory of Relics*, marked how absurdly the pedlars of alleged relics neglected the evidence of cultural evolution and difference over time. The table of the Last Supper exhibited at Rome was the wrong height for people to recline at (though Mel Gibson tried to sort that one out in his notorious movie). The various shrouds of Christ exhibited as relics ignored the clear statement in John’s Gospel that Jewish burial rites required the covering of the head with a separate cloth. The Virgin Mary’s wedding-ring or St Laurence’s deacon’s equipment both betrayed a lamentable lack of sense of the realities of life in the past.

Overall, the point was the same: human fallibility and folly, when not disciplined by a severely rational grounding in Scripture, would inevitably lead people to elaborate their religious practices and to dilute true Christianity. The intention need not have been evil in the start: the passage of time and inadequate discipline in the life of the churches could do the damage. Even wishful thinking and uneducated devotion could play their part.

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My second major question was to ask how the Reformation theologians and church historians integrated their vision of their own era into a more comprehensive philosophy of world history. For Martin Luther, it seems that there was not a great deal more world history to look forward to: at least in his bleaker moments, he believed that the end of history was fairly imminent. The followers of Philipp Melanchthon approached the historical predicament of the churches in a quite different fashion. They believed that the history of the world would follow clear and predictable patterns, and that the Reformation marked one of a number of decisive turning-points. A series of disciples of Philipp, led by Viktorin Strigel, Christoph Pezel and David Chytraeus, founded Protestant church history as a discipline. Pezel argued that Christian world history could be divided into four periods of roughly 500 years each, comprising late antiquity, the early Middle Ages, the catastrophic time of the High Middle Ages and the ascendancy of the papacy and monasticism, then finally the age of the Reformation. In a manner somewhat resembling the three ages of Joachite prophecy, Philippist Protestants analysed the history of the Christian Church according to its closeness or

remoteness from the truths revealed to the early church and rediscovered (so the argument went) by the reformers.

However, the categorization of the ages of the Church carried with it its own risks. Pezel's four ages could turn into distinct periods in the apocalyptic drama of the rise and decline of the power of the devil within Christendom. A later editor of Christoph Pezel's work, Johannes Lampadius, divided the Christian era into periods in terms of the prophecy of the seven trumpets in Revelation 8-9. For instance, the fourth trumpet referred to the time of Emperor Henry IV and Hildebrand (Pope Gregory VII) "up to the beginnings of the Apostasy or of the Papal reign"; the sixth prophesied "the Reformation of the Church or the revelation of Antichrist." The last era would run from the death of Luther to the end of the world. This apocalyptic strain in Reformation world history found imitators in all the major traditions. In strict Lutheranism, Matthias Flacius Illyricus adopted the argument in his *Catalogue of Witnesses* and *Magdeburg Centuries*. In the Church of England John Foxe, compiler of the *Acts and Monuments*, adapted Flacius's arguments to demonstrate how subtly Satan had subverted and invaded the Christian Church across the centuries. In the course of the first millennium the Church went through a gradual process of decline, becoming visibly worse after the 6<sup>th</sup> century; but from the time of Hildebrand 'Satan was let loose' in the Church, according to the prophecies of Revelation 20.

Apart from all the obvious dangers of an unrestrained apocalyptic reading of world and church history, of which *Left Behind* offers only the most recent and striking evidence, Foxe's chronology provoked Protestant thinkers to distance themselves in a most dangerous way from their medieval forbears. Whereas for Luther and even for

some of the Swiss humanists the fault lay in human folly, ignorance, or the misguided pursuit of secondary intentions, for the apocalyptists it lay in the Satanic takeover of the Church. The medieval clergy and bishops ceased to be the reformers' ancestors and became the tools of Antichrist. Insofar as the reformers recognized any medieval figures as their religious antecedents, it was not the Catholics but the medieval heretics. Somewhat like the Waldenses, Protestant theologians construed an alternative, subterranean tradition running from the early middle ages up to the Reformation, comprised not only of Waldenses (who more resembled Catholics in many of their beliefs and practices) but also of Cathars, whom neither Protestants or Catholics ought plausibly to have reckoned as their ancestors. The problem here was alienation. The erroneous past had clearly become 'other', just as contemporary Catholicism had become 'other': it was now alien, incommensurable, and demonic:

'Instead of the ministry of the Word, a perverse government compounded of lies rules there, which partly extinguishes the pure light, partly chokes it. The foulest sacrilege has been introduced in place of the Lord's Supper. The worship of God has been deformed by a diverse and unbearable mass of superstitions. Doctrine (apart from which Christianity cannot stand) has been entirely buried and driven out ... In withdrawing from deadly participation in so many misdeeds, there is accordingly no danger that we may be snatched away from the church of Christ.'

That was Calvin's verdict on the Roman Church of his day. Given that Calvin was trying to reassure French converts to the Reformation that they would not be forsaking the true Church by worshipping in a reformed congregation, one can understand the fervour of his language as an inevitable aspect of a bitterly divided age. However, it

served the Reformation very badly to abandon any awareness that we, too, may in all sorts of ways fall away from truth. As Karl Barth would remind us all much later:

‘[The Church] may, like Israel, be guilty of failure and error. It may deny its Lord and fall from him. It may degenerate. Indeed it has never existed anywhere except as a Church which has degenerated to a greater or lesser, a more serious or a less serious degree: not even in the New Testament period and certainly not according to the records of Church history, and, worst of all, where it has been most conscious and boasted most loudly of its purity ...’

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The reading of Church History ought, at best, to lead one to humility and a penitent self-awareness. Unfortunately, the slide from ‘how did we go wrong?’ to ‘how did they go wrong?’ is, as Luther would have acknowledged, an existential risk about the human condition. Specks always look larger in the neighbour’s eye. If one takes a truly integrated view of Church history, however, important grounds for hope appear. For in spite of terrible discontinuities, rifts, schisms, and ideological battles, the Church remains in a curious way discernible as a whole, as the battered and sinful body of Christ that exists in the eye of faith even when it does not appear visible to the eye of the mordant secular sceptic. Some years ago I discovered, rather to my surprise, that Luther, the theologian of *simul justus et peccator*, had discerned that what was true of an individual was also true of the Church: [*I apologize for the long quotation*]

‘Therefore learn to open your eyes, to recognize the church, and to *believe* that it is holy. ... Since reason hears that the church is holy and without spot, it thinks that Christians are spotless. Indeed, even Christians have a hard time coping with the

occasions for offense in which they find themselves from time to time. They, too, draw the conclusion from their works: “You are not so free from sin, therefore you are no Christian.”

‘For that reason it is necessary to state here definitely what “holy” means. The church is not called holy because it has no sin. Paul says (Rom. 6:12), “Do not let sin reign,” namely, “that you obey it.” He confesses that there is sin and lust in Christians, and he admonishes them not to let sin reign. Therefore the church is holy, and it is called holy according to its *first fruits*, not according to its tithes and fullness. It is holy through faith in the name of Christ, in whom it has purity. This it does not have in itself, but because of His name. ...

‘... The church is holy, but we are not to see it as such, since the article of faith says: “I believe a holy church,” not, “I see a holy church.” If you want to judge by sight, you will see that it is sinful. You will see many, in fact, countless occasions for offense, brethren dominated by their passions, one person incited by impatience, another by anger, another in some other way. It is not written: “I see a holy church,” but, “I believe”; for it does not have its own righteousness but Christ’s, who is its head. In that faith I perceive its holiness, which is a holiness that is believed and not one that is palpable or visible. ...

Luther applied this insight to moral failings, but it applies just as well to misdirected zeal, fanatical partisanship, or the overgrown exaggerated growths of liturgy, dogma, or political power. The Christian historian is called to view the Church with a clear and appraising eye, and yet to say, ‘this is the body that Jesus died for’. It sorely needs redemption, but it has its redeemer.