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Theodosius' Horse: Reflections on the Predicament of the Church Historian

ALBERT C. OUTLER

The second general council of Ephesus was convened on August 8, 449, and adjourned some fourteen days later by the legates of Theodosius II, who promptly confirmed the council's canons and decrees.¹ It had been as regular, or irregular, as Nicea I or Ephesus I had been, and far more general than the Constantinopolitan synod of 381. Its chief importance lay in registering another splendid victory for the Alexandrines. The "school" of Antioch was shattered beyond repair; Pope Leo and the Westerners were walled off and weakened; the bare notion of "two natures" was branded as Nestorian; every principal see in the East was manned by a henchman of Dioscoros. Moreover, the emperor and his grand chamberlain (the eunuch Chrysaphius, godson to Eutyches) were prepared to support Alexandrine policy with police power.

The key to the victory—and the hope of its further exploitation—lay with the emperor. Ephesus I, and its aftermath, had convinced him that the Alexandrine Christology was the true doctrine; that his alliance with Alexandria held more promise than the one with Rome; that Leo could be safely left to fume and fuss. The character of Theodosius has been variously estimated. Socrates praises him without stint as one of the definitely "good emperors"—a sort of model of prudence and piety and, above all, meekness!² Evagrius is much more restrained, representing him as amiable but weak.³ Yet this was the man who built Constantinople's strongest fortifications, founded its new "university" and sponsored the compilation of the *Codex Theodosianus*. He was bold enough to brush off Leo's urgent protests, strong enough to reject the interventions of Valentinian and Galla Placidia. His dealings with the Antiochene theologians were scarcely meek!

Within weeks after Ephesus II, the Alexandrine Christology (with its residue of Apollinarianism) was on its way to uncontested dominance over the eastern Mediterranean basin, from Libya and Thrace to Syria Euphratensis. It had already struck root so deeply in Egypt that it could never thereafter be extirpated. Given a few more years of imperial support (a not unreasonable prospect, with Theodosius forty-nine and healthy) Alexandria might have

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1. The sources for Ephesus II are largely confined to the ruthlessly partisan minutes of Chalcedon and the equally biased "Syriac Acts." These are most readily checked in E. Schwartz (ed.) *Concilium Universale Chalcedonense* (cf. indices in VI, 115) and in S. G. Perry, *The Second Synod of Ephesus...* (Dartford, 1881). The most useful secondary source is Hefele-Leclercq, *Histoire des Conciles* (Paris, 1908), II, 1, 555–621.
2. *The Ecclesiastical History*, VII, 21, 42.
3. *The Ecclesiastical History*, I, 11, 17–19, 22.

either neutralized the primacy of Rome or else have polarized Christendom between the two cities. At the very least, an extreme form of Cyrillianism would certainly have triumphed in the East. Then, if the partnership between Byzantium and Alexandria had lasted another century or so, it is conceivable that Egypt and Palestine would have proved stout bastions against the Mohammedan flood.

Such were the prospects for Dioscoros and the Alexandrine cause when, on July 25, 450, Theodosius was pitched from his horse while riding beside the river Lycus and three days later was dead.⁴ It was an odd and unlikely accident, for the emperor was an experienced horseman, was well-mounted, and the fatality rate for such spills is low. But its consequences were epochmaking.

Immediately, the whole course of Byzantine history veered onto another tack. Pulcheria came out of her convent exile and chose the general Marcian as her nominal husband and emperor-consort. They turned Chrysaphius into the streets, to be lynched by the Constantinopolitan mob. Marcian promptly reopened negotiations with Leo and began stiffening the imperial defenses against Attila and his Huns—hitherto pacified by tribute money. His aim in ecclesiastical affairs was to nullify Ephesus II, to rehabilitate Flavian, to hobble Dioscoros, and then to reunite Christendom, East and West. It seemed obvious to him that the best way to achieve all this was to call another general council, after the model of Nicea I and held at the same place. Meanwhile, however, Leo had come to feel that such a council was now unnecessary; indeed, it might do more harm than good. Marcian ignored the pope's counsel—yet another indication of how little Rome counted in Byzantine policy at this time. The whole body of bishops was summoned to meet in Nicea in mid-September, 451, but as it turned out, increasing trouble with the Huns made it more convenient to remove the assembly to the capitol where Marcian could run the war and the council concurrently. On October 8, in the Asiatic suburb of Chalcedon [modern Kadiköy] across the Bosphorus from the Golden Horn, in the great church of St. Euphemia, some six hundred bishops were convened in council under the joint presidency of the imperial and papal legates.

This should be enough of a familiar story to remind you of what happened thereafter: the elevation of a home synod of Constantinople to the status of an ecumenical council, and the confirmation of “the creed commonly called Nicene”; the formulation of the “Definition” of Chalcedon with its balanced coaptation of Antiochene and Alexandrine Christologies;⁵ the restoration of

4. Cf. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed. J. B. Bury (London, 1897), III, xxxiv, 444f.

5. The widely accepted notion that the Chalcedonian definition was a greek adaptation of Leo's *Tome* is in error. Every significant phrase in the definition may be traced to one or another Eastern text that antedates the *Tome*.

the Roman papacy to a new level of universal prestige; the ensuing revolts against the imperial government in Egypt and Syria, and the tragic confusion of the monophysite, monothelite, and iconoclastic controversies. It is not a pretty story and I know of no fully plausible narration of it. But, any way you take it, Chalcedon marks an epoch in church history, the anchor point for the church's Christological doctrine.

My interest here is to call your attention to the role of Theodosius' horse in the story. He literally stumbled into it, an intruder into the natural flow of a plausible narrative. His unwitting agency in removing Theodosius from the scene might well make us wonder, at least in passing, about this baffling business of the trifles that turn history out of its channels: the nail for the want of which that kingdom was lost, Cleopatra's nose, and Cromwell's kidney stones,⁶ battles like Fornovo⁷ and Quebec, and even such banalities as "Happy" Murphy's intrusion into recent American presidential politics. History is erratic at its best but some of its lurches are so unforeseen as to startle even the incurious.

Our wonder about the import of this fortuitous character of history is a symptom of our predicament as historians. The historian's chief business, we might perhaps agree, is the re-collection and re-presentation of selected segments of the human past *in an intelligible narration based on public data verified by scientific observation*. Such narrations are frequently "interrupted" by those accidents that are there in the record but which strain the plausibility of the narrative. Historical truth *is* stranger than fiction and more difficult to make sense of. The plot of a novel gets its "intelligibility" from the coherence of the author's imagination. Historical accidents have no such *logos*. If the incident of Theodosius' horse turned up as the climax in a historical novel, it would be rejected by critical readers as far too artless. Actually, of course, it is only a single sample from a thousand others, all from "real life." Historical existence is a tissue of laws and choices and chance. There are laws, which point to those natural and universal structures and processes in which existence participates; there are human choices which give these "laws" a curiously porous texture in their manifestations in human affairs; there are the chance occurrences that deeply affect such affairs, yet fall outside any rational calculus—and all of these are concurrently effective in any significant event. This is the sort of existence that the historian has to re-collect, narrate, and illuminate; it is the re-presentation of this sort of human past that provides us in any given present with history's distinctive perspective on the human condition.

Our interest in plausible narratives of actual events stems from their power to help us identify ourselves with other men across the gaps of time and

6. Cf. Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, 162, 176.

7. Cf. Luigi Barzini, *The Italians* (London, 1964), 276ff.

memory, and to participate, in some measure, in their experience of the grandeur, the misery, and the radical ambiguity of life. The chief actors in the dramas of history are not horses, nor rats and lice,⁸ nor winds and weathers, but men—men immersed in “the changes and chances of this mortal life,” but not wholly controlled or determined by them. A plausible historical narrative has, therefore, to wrestle with the effects of human motivation as these are affected in innumerable ways by the kaleidoscope of human impulse. This is bound to involve the historian in an analysis of human motives, but this is to say that, as a participant-observer of the interpersonal relations of his *dramatis personae*, his narration is incurably subjective.

At the same time, and on the other side, his data are public. There is no history without monuments, documents, and public testimony. Good history affords its hearers a vicarious experience of an interesting slice of the human past not unrelated to their own present existence. The plausibility of the story depends on the verisimilitude of the events and on the informed imagination of the historian. But, since actual events are so often unlikely, the historian must supply his hearers with interpretative comments by the way, in order to keep his story clear and moving. This natural interplay between narration and interpretation, however, creates the historian’s characteristic predicament. History is a “science” insofar as it utilizes relevant scientific processes and insofar as it aims at comprehensiveness and order. But one should hesitate a long time before labeling any historical conclusion “scientific,” at least according to modern usage. History is also an “art,” in the sense that its proper study is the human spirit striving for meaning and value in the struggle for existence. Its results may be measured by its contribution to human self-understanding. Yet the typical criteria of validity in the arts are misleading when applied to the craft of history. Historical statements have the form of “evidence”; historical judgments are in the public domain. Historians have no choice, therefore, but to present their inwardly disciplined accounts of objective happenings in the full knowledge of the constant dialectic between event and interpretation in one’s own, or in any other’s, historical narrative. Historical plausibility is very different from certainty in science. The latter is a function of various explanatory models which purport to account for and to predict the behavior of measurable configurations of phenomena, related to their respective explanatory models taken as zero coordinates. Certain hypotheses, as they are verified, are built into other and more inclusive generalizations and this produces a cumulative process in which certain problems are taken as settled and certain models deemed to be universally valid.

No such explanatory models are available for the critical historian. Many

8. Cf. Hans Zinsser, *Rats, Lice and History* (Boston, 1943), chaps. 6–8, a neglected study of an under-estimated historical vector.

of the elements of a historical event may, indeed, lend themselves to scientific analysis and explanation—which is to say, the assignment of proportional causes and effects. But the sum of all the causal explanations of the explicable elements in any event still fails to *explain* that event as a whole. All historical interpretation proceeds under the strictures of a methodological principle of *radical uncertainty*, which has not always been sufficiently acknowledged. Historical judgments may be truly valid and highly meaningful, but they are also, by their very nature, apophatic and dialectic—open to further and even contrary formulation.

We are, of course, familiar with the uncertainty principle in mathematics,⁹ in physics (the observation of sub-atomic particles),¹⁰ and in the dynamics of the transference phenomenon in psychotherapy.¹¹ What is indicated in all these cases are the *limits* of scientific observation. Within these limits, however, science continues to expand and consolidate its certainties. In history, however, the principle of uncertainty is radical and pervasive, built into the process of historical inquiry itself. This may be noted in at least three correlative aspects.

To begin with, there is the radical difference between our knowledge of human action as lived and our knowledge of human action as remembered or expected. This is the point to Augustine's familiar analysis of time—*memoria* and *expectatio* (both perceived as determined and determinate) and *contuitus* (the perception of freedom in the present moment).¹² No recollection of things past, no feat of historical imagination, can recover that past as it was experienced when present. Therefore, no causal attributions based on recollection are ever verifiable. This lays all historical explanations—insofar as they are causal attributions—under the suspicion of the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy, with no way to prove or disprove the suspicion. This is at least one reason why historical explanations cannot be formulated into “laws” and why historical judgments do not support precise predictions—as they would if the human past, present, and future stood within a single causal matrix. Transience and freedom, as experience in human existence, make all our knowledge of “the no longer” and the “not yet” uncertain.

A second mode of the same principle appears in what we might call the paradox of historical perspective. There is a necessary time lag between any event and its optimum retrospect. Eyewitnesses regularly see more than they can comprehend at the moment. Yet, once an event is past, there is the inevitable distortion of evidence, complicated by the strange accidents that affect its preservation. John Craig's bizarre calculations of “the velocities of

9. Ernest Nagel and James R. Newman, *Gödel's Proof* (New York, 1958).

10. Cf. Werner Heisenberg, *Physics and Philosophy: The Revolution in Modern Science* (New York, 1958).

11. H. S. Sullivan, *The Psychiatric Interview* (New York, 1954).

12. Cf. *Confessions*, XI.

suspicion of historical probability” represented a heroic confusion of science and historiography;¹³ but at least he understood the difference between seeing history made and narrating that history in valid perspective. When the historian is himself eyewitness to an epochal event, this difference between history as witnessed and written makes for an acute frustration—as at Vatican II, where I have seen and heard and faithfully recorded the daily proceedings with never better than a liminal comprehension of the whole, and with increasing bafflement as my evolving perspectives frequently clash with the records and comments in my diary. What’s worse, even if we had one of Arthur Danto’s “ideal chroniclers”¹⁴ (who could receive all the evidence and preserve it from distortion), we still could not complete our explanatory model until all the effects were in—and by that time, our conclusions would still be unverifiable, but for a different reason.

This uncertainty principle appears, at a third level, in our attempts to deal with historical accidents. Tolstoi spoke of historical events as “the integration of infinitesimals,” and made his case for the notion in *War and Peace*. But many of these infinitesimals are experienced as random—and when they are related as such, they cause a blockage in the narrative flow. This is why “accidents” pose such a threat to the orderly mind—and tempt the narrator to appeal to false forms of metahistory (fate or fortune, God or the Devil, represented as direct causative agents). That such appeals are false appears from the fact that they invariably explain too much, too little, or nothing at all. For example, Gibbon’s tongue was only partly in his cheek when he commented: “Perhaps the Greeks would be still involved in the heresy of the Monophysites, if the emperor’s horse had not fortunately stumbled.”¹⁵ But where was Fortuna at Ephesus II when the monks of Barsumas were trampling poor Flavian? With a different viewpoint, a zealot for the Chalcedonian Christology might claim that it was God who spooked that horse—and so saved the orthodox faith—but this, too, has an entail of preposterous implication. On the other side, “natural” explanations are no better either, for they only open the way to infinite regress. Even if we learned that Theodosius’ horse was stung by a fly or stepped into a gopher hole, we would still be as far as ever from a verifiable generalization about the death of kings and the fate of empires.

The frank acknowledgement of this inbuilt uncertainty in all historical knowledge might well be the beginning of historiographical wisdom. For one thing, it would warn us off from futile efforts to draw proportional analogies in our historical narrations from scientific models. Moreover, it would help us to understand why history is worth doing even if there can be no strictly

13. Cf. *Craig’s Rules of Historical Evidence* in Beiheft 4 of *History and Theory* (S-Gravenhage, 1964), Prop. iii–xv.

14. Cf. “Narrative Sentences” in *History and Theory*, II, 2 (1962), 146–79.

15. *Op. cit.*, V, xlvi, 123.

definitive history. History is not justified by its certainties but its distinctive interest in human experience. As in psychotherapy, so also in historical analysis, the wisdom that may be gained is *insight*—contuitive knowledge. Insight in history is, typically, an awareness of the instabilities of historical existence and the persisting equilibria of human experience. Wisdom of this sort does not amount to *soothsaying*, but it does allow for *foresight*, and it prods us to a greater awareness of the encompassing mystery environing all events and existence itself. In this way, historical knowledge does more to aid man's search for self-understanding and freedom than predictive knowledge ever could, even if it were available. For history is a special form of curiosity about the human enterprise, a distinctive mode of caring about *other* human beings in and through their past.

Thus, the good historian is something of a scientist and something of a novelist—but actually quite different from both. In a scientific hypothesis, the theory exists for the data, but typically on a uniformitarian assumption. In a novel, the characters exist for the story. In a historical narrative, the story exists for the characters, but our interest in them and their story is always aimed at a further goal: a synoptic view of a specific intelligible field of human action, replete with its mutabilities.

Any such view is bound to be blurred at the edges because every segment of the human maze sprawls past the boundaries of reason and marches with infinity. The historian, for all his empirical spirit, cannot escape an occasional nudge from the paradox of human self-transcendence. It is only prejudice that ignores the fact that the same man whose whole existence is rooted in nature transcends that same nature by reason of his *self*-consciousness and freedom. But this means that any truly plausible historical narrative must see man in the context of his relations to the transcendental referent of man's self-transcendence. Von Ranke's passion for objectivity is still the best working slogan we have; yet it was von Ranke himself who could drop metahistorical comments by the way and speak of providence in history without embarrassment:

But providence wanted something quite unexpected to arise from this controversy [between Spain and Portugal over the division of the New World] and what actually happened went far beyond what anyone could have foreseen.¹⁶

Such a comment would offend or amuse many a modern historian, not only because of his positivism but because of the strong and complacent anti-theological bias so widespread in his guild. Allowing him this luxury, we may still raise the questions of etiology and teleology in history and continue to urge that they not be avoided or begged.

16. Quoted by W. B. Gallie in "The Historical Understanding" in *History and Theory*, III, 2, 188. This entire article is one of the most remarkable in the literature of the philosophy of history.

The notion of “providence” has simply dropped below the mental horizon of modern historiography.¹⁷ In its place, we have a baffling array of metahistorical notions that are consistent only in their common anthropocentrism. At their best, these anthropocentrisms are illuminating. In general, however, they amount to so many pseudo-scientific substitutes for discarded religious beliefs. It is rare enough nowadays to find historians who profess the Christian faith with critical understanding, rarer still to find those who dare to let their faith interpret their narrations.

I have no particular pastoral responsibility for my fellow historians’ faith or lack of it. There is, however, a legitimate concern about the integrity of the historian’s vocation. It is his business to re-present the human past—radically historical, yet not merely historical; rooted in nature, yet not merely natural; public and social, yet also inward and personal. In getting *this* business done, metahistorical judgments are inescapable—comments that exceed the warrants of verifiability, that say something or other about the human environment in its broadest reaches. Not only as men, but specifically as historians, we are bound to have convictions about what makes history possible and meaningful. But *any* such conviction will have the very same *function* as a doctrine of the divine providence of, and in, historical events. It goes without saying that such doctrines can run the gamut of all the conceivable alternatives. Nevertheless, they regularly focus on the presuppositions and implications of the historian’s recognition that history and metahistory are vitally interdependent.

Now, if his topic is *church* history, his predicament in handling this interdependency is compounded. For here the story concerns the historical experience of the Christian community in space and time and the persistence in that community (and its sub-communities) of distinctive aggregates of convictions and commitments. The very choice of such a field of study argues some sort of interest that deserves inspection, and success in the study requires some degree of insight into the meaning of the Christian convictions and commitments. The church historian may, of course, deny their validity and still tell a plausible story of the Christian past—but only if he has taken seriously the possibility that the truths that have in fact been believed by honest and intelligent men are believable. But it is a very tricky business to prevent our disbelief from generating negative value judgments on those who profess beliefs we have ourselves rejected. On the other side, the devout believer may also tell the same story plausibly—but not if his commitments

17. Cf. The Social Science Research Council Bulletin, 54, *Theory and Practice in Historical Study* (1946), especially ch. V, “Propositions,” pp. 134–40, and the comments on religion on pp. 28–29, 63–64; see also ch. VI, “Methods: Theory and Practice,” in Bulletin 64, *The Social Sciences in Historical Study* (1954), pp. 128–55. In the fourteen volumes and *Beiheften* of *History and Theory* thus far, it is as if there never had been such a problem—and yet this is our liveliest contemporary forum of historiography, with no apparent bias against metahistorical notions.

turn his narrative into a partisan “success story.” And avoiding this is tricky business, too.

The peculiar problem of interpreting *church* history comes from the historian’s obligation to rehearse the Christian past in the light of the Christian world view. Thus his problem with the notion of providence is a special case of the larger problem. The special problem is posed by the Christian community’s understanding of its origin, mission, and destiny in the world. It professes to be the pilgrim people of God on earth. It claims a significant continuity throughout the centuries and civilizations, and a significant identity between its origins and its subsequent developments. Moreover, Christians generally have attributed this identity and continuity to the action of God in history, and even if this notion has been variously interpreted, it has always amounted to one or another aspect of the doctrine of God’s providence. Any plausible narrative of any part of this history must proceed with this background in view. As we know, there has been a long succession of church historians, from Eusebius to Latourette, who were explicit in their notions of God’s providence as one of the modes of God’s sovereignty in relation to the contingencies of creation. They were also good historians. Their narratives were grounded in the available evidence, even as they were also shaped by personal convictions. All of them aimed at generating a live encounter between the present and the past. One of the early ones, Evagrius Scholasticus, could speak for the company about their historiographical intentions:

To resurrect significant events from their entombment in oblivion, to reanimate them by their retelling and to make them immortal by providing them with a public memorial [written history].¹⁸

However, they were also committed to providing *causal* explanations of the implausible events in their stories—and for this it was all too easy to fall back on their doctrines of providence for attributions that are often glib and always unverifiable. In this way they confused their history and their metahistory, i.e. their understanding of the correlations between spiritual realities (*logoi*) with natural processes (*erga*), *Heilsgeschichte* with *Weltgeschichte*. In this way they not only flawed their narratives; they came near to spoiling the doctrine of providence. Thus presented, it persuaded few unbelievers, but it did give mischievous reinforcement to partisan pride (“the Chosen People”), self-righteousness and triumphalism among Christians. This became all the more intolerable when the Christian community was hopelessly shattered into separate and estranged fragments. The monstrous absurdity of the same providence being invoked—always uncharitably—on both sides of irreconcilable conflicts did as much as anything else to discredit the triumphalist

18. *Op. cit.*, I, pref.; cf. also Palladius’ phrase about history as “a helpful medicine against forgetfulness” in his *Lausiac History*, Prologue, 3.

traditions of denominationalist church history. This, in turn, opened the way to a radical secularization in ecclesiastical historiography¹⁹ in which the problem of providence was “solved” by being suppressed. There has been loss and gain in this: the reduction of obscurantism and the narrowing of the gap between church history and critical history in general. Our loss has been that church history, in this century, has largely ceased to count as a *theological* discipline. Yet even the most resolute secularization of church history has not gained for us that status of full membership in the guild of general historians to which we think we are entitled—and this is a pity, for us and for them.

What is clear is that no plausible account of any segment of church history is possible without a responsible attitude toward the basic Christian convictions, for the Christian story, in every episode, exhibits the correlations (positive and negative) between Christian profession and practice, thought and behavior, spiritual community and sociological institution—and both poles in each of these correlations have to be kept in constant view. Just as the church historian is obligated to honest competence in the scientific methodology of his craft, so also must he be theologically knowledgeable, in order to understand the story he has to tell. In *this* story he *has* to speak of providence, even if only to deny it in its “traditional” form. But it would be helpful if his denial of the notion that providence means God’s episodic interference with “due process” does not exclude or overshadow the deeper meaning it has had in the Christian tradition: God’s total resourcefulness in dealing with his human children. *Pronoia* is God’s provision and maintenance of the structures and processes of human possibility in the order of creation. It speaks of God’s actions in revealing man’s potential to him, of God’s rightful expectation that men realize their potential. It points to God’s compassionate involvement in the human *agon*, his redemptive love of the human rebel, his stern denial of final victory to the powers of sin and death. God’s providence does not amount to his predetermination of historical events. It is, rather, his real presence in every crisis of human decision—where history’s *meanings* are born or aborted. As men perceive this presence and learn to rely on it, they gain new power to transvaluate their past and their future—to appreciate the past, even as it was; to face the future with a lively hope, whatever it may be. This new freedom toward our past and future is at least part of what Christians have meant by “salvation.”

The standing marvel of the Christian story is the survival of the church through its successive transitions from epoch to epoch. If one denies that it is the church that has survived these transitions, he has no further problems about *church* history, save as a chapter in the story of human illusions. If, on the other hand, he attempts to explain the church’s survival by reference to

19. Cf. Walter Nigg, *Die Kirchengeschichtsschreibung; Grundzüge ihrer historischen Entwicklung* (München, 1934), 245–57.

the causal intervention of providence, he has as obviously renounced his interest in church *history*. The remaining alternative, one might think, is some sort of acknowledgement of the dynamic presence of the Holy Spirit in the church in history, leading men toward a knowledge of their true identity and their true community. In this light, the story of the church's strange and wayward pilgrimage since Pentecost can, and ought to, be an exercise in "speaking the truth in love." As Professor Florovsky has put it:

The purpose of a historical understanding is not so much to detect the divine action in history as to understand the human action—that is, human activities—in the bewildering variety and confusion in which they appear to a human observer.²⁰

In the Old Testament it is the rehearsal of their history under God that gives the Jews their dauntless courage toward the future. In the New Testament, the people of "the new covenant" gain their confidence from their memories and hopes of Jesus Christ and their assurance of his Lordship in earth and heaven. Down through the centuries, the people of God have lived by what little they have known of the gracious effects of God's love—incarnated in Jesus Christ, symbolized in the sacraments, confirmed in the *magnalia Dei*. This assurance of God's invincible grace in life, death, and destiny has nerved Christians for martyrdom and glory, age after age—and has supplied them with a motive for accepting their share of the world's work and weeping.

Can some such vision of God's *pronoia* be conveyed in a critical narrative of the Christian past without debasing the canons of honest historiography? Can the church in history be delineated, warts and all, with a modesty born of uncertainty and a confidence born of a glimpse of God at work not only in the Scriptures but in all succeeding ages? If this is impossible, then more than the enterprise of church history is at stake, for the Christian faith itself will not long outlive its major premise: God's real presence in human history—past, present, and future. But if this Christian metahistory can be seen as the intelligible context of historical narration, more is gained than merely our license to pursue historical studies. Honest, yet faithful, church history can probe and purge our Christian memories of at least some of their pathological residues. It can deepen, even as it will complicate and humble, our Christian self-understanding—and so bolster our courage toward the future with that confidence on which all the others hang "that *nothing* in all creation [past, present, *nor* future] can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."²¹

20. "The Predicament of the Christian Historian" in *Religion and Culture; Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich*, ed. Walter Liebrecht (New York 1959), 166.

21. Rom. 8:39.