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The Recovery of Spirituality: Spirituality, History and Theology[1]

1. Introduction - On Not Patronising the Past

Historians today are increasingly aware of the dangers of `patronising the past`. The past should be studied on its own terms, they believe, within its own frames of reference. Previous generations may have thought about matters in ways different to our own, but that does not mean that they were wrong. Genuine history should seek to enter, as far as is possible, the world-view of the society being studied, including its understanding of spirituality.[2]

The problem with avoiding the `patronising of the past` is that it subverts the possibility of explanation. Take Richard Fletcher`s recent account of *The Conversion of Europe* in the Dark Ages. In almost all the cases he mentions, Fletcher notes that it was the ability of Roman (or sometimes Irish) missionaries to demonstrate the power of God by miracles which led to conversion. Dark age spirituality was predicated on a a fervent belief in the miraculous activity of God. Fletcher`s desire to avoid patronising the past means that he does not want to dismiss this matter out of hand. However, as a contemporary agnostic man he also does not want to affirm the account as it stands. Thus he is actually unable to give much guidance about what really happened. Why were the missionaries so successful in their work that Christendom arose from the ashes of the Roman Empire? As one reviewer put it, `The result is to leave a vacuum where there ought to be an explanation.`[3]

The conclusion to which studies such as Fletcher`s lead is that the current tools of historiography do not help us to find our way back through the past without `patronising it.` What is needed is to find a way which makes it possible to go beyond a modern world view in order to fill the vacuum with explanation.

The aim of this paper is to try to draw some outlines of how we might achieve this task. The method is as follows:

- First, to consider briefly the problems of a modern world-view in taking spirituality seriously.
- Second, to consider some historical case studies which tend to have at their heart `a vacuum rather than an explanation` if they are considered purely within a modern world-view.
- Third, to propose a way in which the use of theology as an allied discipline to history may make it possible to understand the phenomena of the past more fully.

To put this a different way, the argument is that the phenomena of spirituality can only be explained historically with the help of theology.

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[1] A paper prepared for the SGCH Conference, Offchurch 17 April 1998 .

[2] See, for example, J.Sharpe *Instruments of Darkness*: *Witchcraft in England 1550-1750* (London 1997).

[3] A.Palmer `Winning the West`, review of R.Fletcher *The Conversion of Europe: From Paganism to Christianity 371-1386AD* (London 1997), *Sunday Telegraph* Dec 21, 1997.

Before proceeding it is important briefly to define what we mean by `spirituality`, because in seeking for signs of spiritual phenomena we must be clear about what we are looking for. I would define spirituality for the purpose of this paper as being:

a reported awareness of God which affects action,
which may be described as
a call,
an answer to prayer,
or in a number of other ways.[4]

This may, of course, be at odds with other definitions of spirituality (such as those prevalent in NewAge/postmodern circles described below by John Drane), but it will do for our purposes.

John Drane has very helpfully summarised what he believes to be a widely-held view in `New-Age` or `postmodern` contemporary circles:

> *Our present predicament can be traced mostly to mistakes made by western thinkers in the course of the last 500 years, which in turn was rooted in the west`s love affair with the rationality of the Greeks. This philosophy has led to the marginalization of human and spiritual values, and an unhealthy preoccupation with a mechanistic, rationalist, reductionist worldview. There has been a profound loss of spiritual perception, and to resolve the present crisis that trend needs to be reversed. The recovery of spirituality must be a top priority. Traditional western sources of spiritual guidance will, however, be of little help in this process: the Christian church is inextricably bound up with the old cultural establishment, so much so that the defective Enlightenment worldview was, in effect, little more than the logical outcome of classical Christian beliefs and values.*[5]

Drane continues that the `relationship between Christianity, Enlightenment and Western culture is not quite that simple, of course`, but concedes that `there is more than a grain of truth in the...analysis.`[6] He quotes David Bebbington`s comment that `the early evangelicals were immersed in the Enlightenment. They were participating fully in the progressive thought of their age.`[7] The reason for that participation was an unashamedly apologetic one; it was Wesley`s hope to speak the gospel in the language of the day. In this he was remarkably successful.[8] For Christians and especially Christian historians who want to share in some way in that evangelical heritage there is an apologetic task to be done by participating fully in the `progressive thought` of our own age. If Drane is right in his analysis, then historians may have an important part to play in the `recovery of spirituality`. Traditional western sources of spiritual guidance are ignored because they have been largely evacuated of meaning, explained away by rationalist historians. But, if historians are able to reach into the past and make its values and insights live again, then theirs will be a quest which follows a similar path to the one which Drane suggests many contemporary postmodern people wish to travel. The historian`s task will include

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[4] cf. Liz Culling`s definition: `By spirituality I am referring to the living out of one`s beliefs about and experience of God...It is thus not something reserved for the exceptional few.` E.Culling `Spirituality, History and the Church: a view from the Parish` *Anvil* 8 (1993) p.241.
[5] J.Drane `Methods and Perspectives in Understanding the New Age` *Themelios* 23 (1998) p.24. Cf. J.Drane *Faith in a Changing Culture* (London 1997) pp.38-9.
[6] ibid. p.32n.
[7] D.Bebbington `The Enlightenment and Evangelicalism` in M.Eden & D.F.Wells (eds) *The Gospel in the Modern World* (Leicester 1991) p.76 cf. Drane *Faith in a Changing Culture* p.44.
[8] cf. D.Bebbington *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (London 1980) pp.50-74.

attempting to recover that spirituality that has been lost and to give it due weight and attention.

How can this be done? The Enlightenment relegation of spiritual matters to the non-material and therefore non-verifiable realm was seen by Immanuel Kant as a means of keeping a foothold for religion in a secularising world dominated by scientific method. Such an approach arguably enabled Christianity and its spiritual emphasis to survive when the floodwaters of Enlightenment rationalism were at their highest. But it was at a cost; and now, as the waters recede, questions are again being urgently asked about the reality of spiritual experience. The New Age/postmodern position draws attention to the fact that it is hard to speak a language which allows for the possibility of the spiritual today. How can we to take account of what we might call a `God-dimension`, and try to speak a language that can be heard in contemporary culture, as Wesley did? How can we take seriously what the participants in history say about themselves and their own spiritual experiences?

This challenge cannot be met if we are wedded to a purely materialist sub-Kantian world-view. Social sciences operate on this basis and construct an impregnable position on their own terms. Sociological method, for example, is predicated on a syllogism which runs something like this:

1. All explanations are physical and material.
2. Human beings have religious experiences.

Therefore,

3. Religious experiences must have material explanations.[9]

This syllogism, like all such logic, can only be attacked in its first two premises. The conclusion is sound if the premises stand. The second premise is clearly sound: human beings do have experiences which they label `religious`. Therefore it is the first premise which must be examined. How might a Christian historian do this?

The comment that `history is sociology with the ideas left out, sociology is history with the facts left out` is not a wholly facetious one, because the raw source material of history, however poor a record of the past it may be, throws up facts which question the ideas and theories of social science. Historians rightly pride themselves on the provisionality of their judgements, the corrigibility of their hypotheses, and their relative freedom from ideological captivity. Their openness to the source material on which they rely should rule out so concrete a judgement as the first premise of the syllogism. This openness must allow for the *strangeness* of the past, its tendency to escape from our grasp and elude our historiographical nets. It must also allow for the fact that the historian`s basic world view may not be fully comprehensive, and that the world view of the past may challenge that of the present.

[9] I am indebted to Professor Margaret Archer of the University of Warwick for sharing some of the difficulties of the Christian sociologist with the SGCH conference, in her paper `The Soul, the Desert and the City: some methodological comments on Teresa of Avila` (April 15 1998).

2. `A Spark of Grace`: Case Studies in Spirituality

Is it true that there are signs of spirituality in the past? Obviously this is a vast field, and so we shall first concentrate simply on two examples drawn from the rise of Methodism in eighteenth-century England in order to demonstrate that there are indeed phenomena which `secular history` finds it hard to explain comprehensively.

Gordon Rupp in *Religion in England 1688-1791* (1986) surveyed John Wesley`s contribution to the eighteenth-century revival, including his claim that it was largely the result of divine action. Rupp concluded that `if the social historians and the psychologists deserve attention, so do the theologians.`[10] The reason why Rupp made this point was that he considered as a historian that `The story of the Evangelical Revival as described by its most authentic witnesses makes neither rhyme nor reason if the possibility is excluded that it was indeed "kindled by a spark of grace."`[11] In other words, without the addition of a theological dimension to historical method, it is not possible to take Wesley and his contemporaries seriously on their own terms.

David Hempton, in his Alexander Prize Essay on `Methodism in Irish Society 1770-1830` (1986) helpfully qualifies the kind of view which Rupp offers, through his examination of the 1799-1802 revival in Fermanagh and Cavan. He notes that in the source material which he has investigated it is clear that the `Methodists interpreted the revival as God`s blessing on the newly appointed Irish speaking evangelists, together with the spiritual power generated by the cottage prayer meetings of the Methodist faithful.`[12] Like Rupp, he would not exclude the possibility that these sources may well point to some reality: `It would be unwise to ignore this explanation altogether, because the journals of the missionaries themselves and their reports on their activities from other sources testify to the unique role they played.` Hempton recognises that it would be equally unwise to accept the explanation of the sources uncritically: `the Methodist explanation for their remarkable success...is...inadequate.` There were other factors at work, including the revivalist tradition in that part of Ulster, the psychological impact of the 1798 rebellion, and a period of high food prices and scarcity. Hempton concludes that `The missionaries were, therefore, both the conscious and unconscious catalysts of more profound emotions.`[13] Hempton thus gives a guarded acknowledgement of the possibility of divine action here, arising out of his faithful listening to his sources; but it is also clear that as a historian pure and simple he cannot make further judgements without the co-operation of theologians who argue by a different method.

These two examples may help in weighing up how we might evaluate claims that events may be `kindled by a spark of grace.` However, it has often been the case that theologians have been either uninterested in seeing how this might be, or too simplistic in their explanations, perhaps not being as aware as a historian might wish them to be that there are other factors involved in the historical process. Traditionally this has been an issue of concern to philosophical or speculative theologians, who do not place a high priority on practical application. Vernon White gives an example, however, which may be helpful. He uses the instance of the Dunkirk evacuation in

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[10] G.Rupp *Religion in England 1688-1791* (Oxford 1986) p.453.
[11] Rupp *Religion in England* p.453.
[12] D.Hempton `Methodism in Irish Society 1770-1830` *TRHS* 36 (1986) p.128.
[13] ibid.

1940 as a kind of `thought -experiment`,

> because of its rare, putative, status as a specifically intended act of God *already clearly visible from within the human perspective*, combining an extraordinary coincidence of unusual factors but without recourse to the "breaking" of natural laws.`[14]

He assumes for the sake of argument that this event was an example of specific divine action, and we may follow him in this also for the sake of argument. He explains the operation of human and divine agency in this situation thus:

> God knew that in this instance Hitler would respond to all sorts of interlocking pressures themselves known and steered by God (at all moments of their creative development) by `unaccountably` halting his Panzer divisions. He also knew and in like manner `placed` Allied divisions to evacuate at a certain time. From the beginning of all relevant causal sequences he also `thought` the fine weather to interlock with these decisions - and the `miracle of Dunkirk` was actualized. Why he chose Dunkirk and not other events to make this kind of activity so luminous relates no doubt to wider purposes as yet opaque from the human perspective, but that is not for the moment our problem.[15]

One of the weaknesses of White`s account is that because there are only two dimensions to his explanation, human and divine, he leaves a great deal open simply to his interpretation of God, with the result that his explanation fails to account for the apparent action of God, because the final purpose is not disclosed. It is left, agnostically, to another time to resolve this problem. This kind of approach, often known as the `double agency` theory does not really, the historian may say, do justice to the complexity of the world.

Let us then take three further examples, each deliberately involving different kinds of factors: the first deals with a single event, Constantine`s conversion; the second with a particular historical process in one nation, the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sense of national election in England; the third with a widespread phenomenon of modern history, the question of nationalism.

(i) Constantine`s Conversion

At some point before the decisive battle of the Milvian Bridge in 312, Constantine, would-be Emperor of Rome, received a vision of a cross of light, with the inscription *in hoc (signo) vinces*.[16] This seems to have altered Constantine`s sense of his own mission; where before he had been sympathetic to Christianity but himself a follower of Apollo the Sun god, he developed a new awareness that he was God`s servant with a mission to uphold the church and bring peace and unity to the empire. There is dispute about the vision, though most historians agree that after the battle of the Milvian Bridge there was a change in Constantine`s behaviour, for whatever reason.

The sceptical view of Constantine`s conversion was stated by Edward Gibbon in 1775[17]; it is associated with the Enlightenment attack on miracle *per se* which was stated most eloquently by David Hume.[18] In Gibbon`s view any `religious man was either a fool or a knave,`[19] and any miraculous or `spiritual` explanation of the

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[14] V.White *The Fall of a Sparrow: a Concept of Special Divine Action* (Exeter 1985) p.117.
[15] ibid. pp.117-8.
[16] Eusebius *The Life of Constantine the Great* (tr. E.C.Cushing) I.28 in H.Wace & P.Schaff (eds.) *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* I (Oxford 1895).
[17] Edward Gibbon *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1775) Ch.20
[18] D.Hume *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (1748) Ch. 10.
[19] A.H.M.Jones *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* (Harmondsworth 1972) p.242.

conversion was ruled out *a priori*.

In response J.H.Newman argued in the 1820s that there were three historical points in favour of the vision: first, the vision has widespread contemporary attestation, by no means all from Christian sources; second, the adoption of the `Labarum` standard very soon after the battle of the Milvian Bridge suggests that something happened which was associated with this symbol; third, the testimony comes from Constantine himself, by a reliable source (Eusebius).

Newman recognised that the chief problems were first, that Constantine`s testimony is given a considerable time after the event, and is not public; second, there is no independent or ecclesiastical testimony after the publication of the *Life of Constantine* (a point also made by Gibbon). Newman answers these problems first by asking how Eusebius got the story if not from Constantine? The army came from Gaul and Eusebius from Caesarea, so the opportunity for Eusebius to pick up military rumours was small. Second, he points out that there were few writers of stature between 330-80 whose works have survived except Athanasius, whose concerns were very different. In particular Newman argues that knowledge of the form of revelation in the Old Testament makes such a vision likely before a battle which had decisive consequences; `One would be inclined then to receive the wonderful event in question on very slight evidence, if that evidence were good as far as it went.` [20] On these grounds, Newman was prepared to accept the reliability of the account presented by Eusebius.

A.Alfoldi in 1948 took a Bultmann-esque view of the credulity of the fourth century and `the excitable religious fancy of the late Roman Empire.`[21] There is an obvious anti-theological stance implied here, even though it is held in the name of historical objectivity. In Alfoldi`s view the sensible modern person should see symbols such as the cross as `purely abstract reminders` of spiritual reality.[22] In fact examination of the sources suggests that Eusebius, on whose account the story relies, was far from credulous, and he makes a point of giving strong reasons for any miraculous elements in his work.[23] On the account of Constantine`s vision itself he notes that `it might have been hard to believe had it been related by any other person.`[24] There is some evidence that Eusebius found Constantine`s religion rather less sophisticated than his own, and that this caused him embarrassment.[25] He wrote down the Emperor`s testimony because despite his scepticism about such matters, he believed it to be historically true.

More recently T.D.Barnes (1985) has argued that the military crisis facing Constantine`s army as it approached Italy from Gaul was less serious than many have suggested, and Constantine did not need to rely on a miracle because he already knew he would win. Nevertheless there was a significant psychological change in

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[20] J.H.Newman *Two Essays on Biblical and on Ecclesiastical Miracles* (London 1870) p.274
[21] A.Alfoldi *The Conversion of Constantine and Pagan Rome* (Oxford 1948) p.19.
[22] ibid. p.22.
[23] e.g. the story of the `Thundering Legion` *Church History* V.5.
[24] Eusebius *Life of Constantine* I.28. cf. his defensiveness over the Red Sea deliverance, *Life of Constantine* I.12, 38; the same point is made by Newman *Two Essays on Biblical and on Ecclesiastical Miracles*, p.281.
[25] cf. G.F.Chesnut *The First Christian Historians* (Paris 1977) pp.163-5.

Constantine around the time of the battle. A.H.M.Jones` suggestion that the vision was an example of the `halo phenomenon` created by ice crystals falling across the sun`s rays, and occasionally observed in the Alpine North Italy, commands widespread agreement. Barnes suggests that the words were added to the vision by imagination,[26] and concludes that Constantine`s conversion was a subtle one: `since his accession, Constantine had given the Christian church political support; from the Battle of the Milvian Bridge onwards, he publicly proclaimed himself God`s servant and the church`s champion.`[27]

Constantine`s conversion seems to have been a genuine response to what he felt was a mission given him by the Christian God. This is not to say that Constantine`s actions were the actions of God, whatever Constantine may have claimed, somewhat to Eusebius`s embarrassment; as with the example of Oliver Cromwell below, there is a strong admixture of egotism and sinfulness in Constantine`s subsequent career.[28] Such considerations need not rule out the action of God in this event which functioned as the foundational experience of the Christian empire. In the case of Constantine`s vision, a theological analysis can help to illuminate the significance of an event which a naturalistic analysis leaves partially unexplained.

What happened to Constantine matters because, to some extent, we still live with the consequences. Ultimately one has to decide whether the Christian basis of Western civilisation is founded on an accident of ice-crystals, or whether it does have some (however strange and possibly misinterpreted) connection with the will of God, as Constantine`s theologians, such as Eusebius, believed. In other words Constantine`s conversion does have some relation to the question of the roots and future direction of Western civilisation which John Drane draws attention to.

(ii) `God`s Englishmen`

In *Areopagitica* (1644) John Milton wrote,

> God is decreeing to begin some new and great period in his Church, ev`n the reforming of the Reformation itself: what does he then but reveal himself to his servants, and, as his manner is, first to his Englishmen.[29]

This idea of England as the `chosen nation`, guided and inspired by God was a major factor in the English civil war period.[30]

The idea of the `elect nation` grew largely out of the experience of the Genevan exiles in Mary`s reign a century before, reflecting on God`s dealings with England.[31] Their views were largely disseminated by John Foxe`s *Actes and Monuments of the English*

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[26] T.D.Barnes `The Conversion of Constantine` *Classical Views* 4 (1985) p.386. Jones *Constantine and the Conversion of Europe* pp.99-100.

[27] ibid. p.391. cf. T.D.Barnes *Constantine and Eusebius* (Cambridge Mass. 1981) pp.43, 306n. cf. also the account of M.Sordi *The Christians and the Roman Empire* (London 1988) pp.135-40.

[28] cf. W.H.C.Frend *The Rise of Christianity* (London 1984) p.482: `What mattered to Constantine, however, was Constantine, and like other egotistical generals such as Wallenstein or Naopleon, he believed completely in his star, whether this was represented now by the Sun god or by the Christian God.`

[29] J.Milton *Areopagitica* in F.A.Patterson *The Student`s Milton* (New York 1930) pp.748-9.

[30] See the fine recent contribution to the debate about whether nationalism is a `modern` phenomenon, or has older antecedents, with particular reference to England and the importance of Christianity, in A.Hastings *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge 1997), especially Chapters 2 and 8.

[31] See D.M.Loades *Politics and the Nation* (London 1979) p.247.

Martyrs (1563), which was `designed to set before his countrymen in overwhelming detail a conception of universal history and of England`s place in history.`[32] Foxe very consciously set the election of England in the context of the overall plan which God had for the good of the world: England was a chosen instrument in the salvation of others. The Armada of 1588, entering this atmosphere, was seen as a decisive test of God`s favour by both English and Spanish. After its defeat Philip II believed that his constant prayer had limited the extent of the disaster.[33] Interestingly it was at first the Dutch who praised the providential aspect of the victory of the English fleet, while English sources were more circumspect.[34] The defeat of the Armada did have significant consequences, however, in stopping the Spanish drive to supremacy and the re-uniting of Christendom by force.[35]

It is Oliver Cromwell who provides a particular problem for the historian who does not take spirituality and theology seriously. Cromwell`s career has been described by his biographer R.S.Paul as one which `brings theology and politics into a single focus,`[36] the mainspring of his activity being his religious motivation, his response to the call of God for himself and his nation. Paul considers that `few men in history appear to have acted more consistently and with a clearer conscience than Oliver Cromwell. The explanation can only be that within Cromwell`s own mind his ambition was itself the instrument of a greater cause which he served with absolute sincerity.`[37] The question of whether Cromwell was deluded in this belief, which he held sincerely, is rarely addressed. Christopher Hill has done so, and he considers that the Puritans did to some extent reflect the truth in their belief that God was on their side:

> If we substitute some such phrase as "historical development" or "the logic of events", as the Puritans almost did, then there can be no doubt that powerful impersonal forces, beyond the control of any individual will, were working for Cromwell and his army...The future lay with the causes supported by the Puritans and Parliamentarians. In that sense they were co-operating with history, with God...God and the cause would triumph the faster, and both God`s glory and England`s welfare would be the greater, the more convinced Christians fought the good fight here and now.[38]

From a broadly Marxist position, Hill identifies what Cromwell saw as his divinely appointed `mission` with `impersonal forces.` Hill thus raises the same question which we noted in Hempton`s work: how to address: `impersonal forces` such as economic factors, which go beyond a simple human/divine `double agency` explanation.

With John Milton the issue is more complex even than with Cromwell; for though in

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[32] W.Haller, `John Foxe and the Puritan Revolution` in R.F.Jones et. al., *The Seventeenth Century* (Stanford 1951) p.210. See also V.N.Olsen *John Foxe and the Elizabethan Church* (Berkeley California 1973) especially pp.1-50; Olsen does not see Foxe as quite so definitely nationalist as Haller would (cf. p.37). Also P.J.Olsen `Was John Foxe a Millenarian?` *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994) pp.621-4.

[33] See F.Fernandez-Armesto *The Spanish Armada* (Oxford 1989) pp.41-4.

[34] ibid. pp.238-9. Queen Elizabeth`s prayer of thanksgiving at St Paul`s on 24 November stressed the sense of God`s grace which she and the whole nation had experienced. See M.Perry *The Word of a Prince* (Woodbridge 1990) pp.290-1.

[35] See G.Mattingly *The Defeat of the Spanish Armada* (Harmondsworth 1962) pp.417-18.

[36] R.S.Paul *The Lord Protector* (London 1955) p.387.

[37] ibid. p.392

[38] C.Hill *God`s Englishman* (Harmondsworth 1972) pp.221-2

Areopagitica Milton showed a strong sense of national chosenness, in later life the onset of blindness and the failure of the revolution caused Milton to draw different conclusions. In Christopher Hill`s words,

> The united nation of earnest seekers after truth envisaged in *Areopagitica* was replaced by the reality of fierce faction fights between the Presbyterian majority in Parliament and the Independent-dominated army.[39]

The restoration of 1660 was seen by many, including Milton, as a defeat for God`s cause, but in the longer term it took its place in a series of providential events. Richard Baxter in his *Autobiography* commented on the Restoration (though it was to have serious personal consequences for him),

> Thus did God do a more wonderful work in the dissolving of this army than any of their greatest victories was which set them up. That an army that had conquered three such kingdoms...should...disband themselves, and all this without one bloody nose!...let any man that hath the use of his understanding judge whether this were not enough to prove that there is a God that governeth the world and disposeth of the Powers of the world according to his Will!`[40]

Perceptions such as Baxter`s led to the breaking and re-forming of the ideological or theological matrix which Foxe had provided. 1640 (the `Parliament of the Saints`) and 1649 (the execution of Charles I) preceded the Restoration, and the `Glorious Revolution` of 1688 followed it. These four events `combined to produce eighteenth-century Whiggery, a sense of England`s destiny to rule the world,`[41] but also a sense of mission in pioneering the principle of political freedom. In this sense the Whig interpretation continued to bring an echo of the covenantal activity of God into English history long after the explicit links with Foxe, Cromwell and Milton were forgotten.[42] Hill also points out that there were other reasons besides political defeat why the understanding of God`s call to `his Englishmen` changed after 1660, as the scientific revolution and ensuing Enlightenment assisted God`s withdrawal `into the Newtonian stratosphere.`[43]

For all that Hill seems to accept some reality as lying behind the claims of Cromwell *et al.* he has shifted the boundaries of explanation. What the puritans regarded as the action of God, and therefore primarily caused, Hill argues is in fact the result of secondary causes. In doing so he holds resolutely to a materialist expalnation of phenomena. What this does helpfully point up, however, is the inadequacy for a historian of the `double agency` model, rather as Hempton has also done. A comprehensive model of reality must take account of the `powerful impersonal forces` which Hill sees as the motive power of the process of history. We shall return to this point presently.

(iii) Modern Nationalism

The third historical case study is the issue of modern nationalism.[44] A typology offered by Peter Alter divides nationalism into two main types. The first is `Risorgimento Nationalism` which is

> an emancipatory political force that accompanies the liberation both of new social

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[39] C.Hill *Milton and the English Revolution* (London 1977) pp.161-2. cf. C.Hill *The Experience of Defeat* (Harmondsworth 1985), especially pp.307-19.
[40] R.Baxter *Autobiography* (London 1931) p.92
[41] Hill *The Experience of Defeat* p.325.
[42] cf. Hill *The Experience of Defeat* p.328
[43] C.Hill `God and the English Revolution` *History Workshop Journal* 17 (1984) p.27.
[44] An earlier version of some of the material in this section appeared in my `National Traditions and the Call of God` *SGCH Newsletter* 1991.

> strata within an existing, formerly absolutist western European state, and of a people that has grown conscious of itself in opposition to a trans-national ruling power in east-central Europe.

It is `a medium for the political fusion of large social groups, the formation of nations and their self-identification in the national state,`[45] and it recognises the plurality of nations.[46] Alter`s primary historical model for this type of nationalism is nineteenth century Italy. The second type is `Integral Nationalism`, `an ideology that asserts the interests of one nation-state in a ruthless and expansionist manner,`[47] as an absolute necessity to the exclusion of other nations or an overall world order. Its chief examples are Fascist Italy and Nazi Germany.

Many of the first exponents of `Risorgimento nationalism` identified their hopes with the action of God; especially Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), its inspiration, and Guiseppe Mazzini (1805-72), who later put it into practice. `Risorgimento nationalism` suggested that each nation had a unique mission or calling as its contribution to humanity.[48] Mazzini developed his understanding out of the justification of French revolutionary nationalism as a mission to propagate *liberté*. He saw England as called to industrialise and colonise overseas, Russia to be the civilising agent in Asia, Germany to extend philosophy and Italy to become a `third Rome.`[49]

Alter describes the way in which `Risorgimento nationalism` can change from a response to the perceived call of God to national freedom into a chauvinistic desire to dominate others:

> It is as if, at a certain historical juncture a boiling point is reached, and nationalism enters into a new chemical state...What is now "ethical" and morally justified is whatever serves the nation and its power.[50]

Such a `boiling point` can be seen in German history in the late nineteenth century. The aims of the first stage of German unification, which had been largely emancipatory and liberal, began to be superseded from the 1880s onwards by a number of `national associations` such as the Pan-German League, formed in 1891 and `whose spokesmen regarded national unification in 1871 as nothing more than a stepping stone for Germany to become a world power.`[51] The tension between God`s call to service and pride in a developing national tradition can be seen in the two parts of Heinrich von Treitschke`s comment in 1884 that the Reich should exercise its power only `for the purpose of improving the morality of humanity, and to render the name of Germany both fearsome and dear to the world.`[52] In 1889 Ludwig Bamberger, a Liberal Reichstag deputy, saw the way in which the national identity was in danger of becoming a narrow nationalism when he observed that `a generation [has] emerged...for whom patriotism signifies hatred; a hatred of everything at home and abroad that refuses unquestioningly to go down on its knees.`[53] A similar boiling

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[45] Peter Alter *Nationalism* (London 1989) pp.28-9. A third type of nationalism, called Reform nationalism by Alter, is related to this type.(pp.34ff)
[46] cf. ibid.p.30.
[47] ibid. p.40
[48] ibid. p.29
[49] cf. H.Kohn *Nationalism: its meaning and history* (London 1955) pp.41, 118-21
[50] Alter *Nationalism* p.39
[51] ibid. p.41
[52] ibid. p.41
[53] ibid. p.43

point, which just avoided spilling over, can be seen in the outbreaks of `jingoism` in Britain at the turn of the century.[54]

Post-revolutionary France was an early example of integral nationalism, militant, agressive and imperialist. It was also the nationalism most clearly associated not with religious but atheistic or deistic thought, and the Jacobins built altars to the *patrie*.[55] Nationalism in its integral form replaces God as the legitimation of the social order and puts the human state in his place. As Walter Wink points out, the idea of divine vocation `is likely to elicit shudders from any student of history,`[56] but `in the absence of any divine constraints whatever, nations are free to behave as if they had complete autonomy, as if the nation were indeed absolute: as if it itself were God.`[57] An understanding of reality which includes a theological element may have a political as well as a historical importance.

[54] Kohn *Nationalism* p.52 also sees a change in the mid-nineteenth century.
[55] Alter *Nationalism* p.39.
[56] W.Wink *Unmasking the Powers* (Philadelphia 1986) p.99.
[57] ibid. p.100. cf. Kohn *Nationalism* pp.10-11.

3. The Powers

If historians are to take seriously the issues raised so far, then theologians` models of reality need to take greater account of `impersonal forces` in history. In other words, theologians` models must go beyond a simple human/divine agency dichotomy. I would propose that this might be done by giving more attention to the biblical theme of the `powers`.

This is a theme which has been treated equivocally by theologians. As Rudolf Bultmann famously remarked, `We cannot use electric lights and radios and...at the same time believe in the spirit and wonder world of the New Testament.`[58] Nazi Germany in 1941 was an ironic situation from which to make such comment, and in contrast to Bultmann in the immediate post-war situation in Germany many argued, as one pastor did, that `You cannot understand what has happened in Germany unless you understand that we were possessed by demonic powers. I do not say this to excuse ourselves, because *we let ourselves be possessed.*`[59] Karl Barth found when he returned to Germany from Switzerland in 1945, `much talk of demons.` He rightly warned his German friends that too much attention to demons could have the effect of absolving them from responsiblity: `Why don`t you say outright that you were political fools?`[60] Barth`s distaste for demons was, he said, `not out of any desire for demythologizing but because they are not worth it.`[61] Walter Wink comments on the tension between the pastor`s view of possession and Barth`s emphasis on human responsibility that the `problem with both of them...is that they treat the demons as if they were disincarnate spiritual beings in the air, rather than *the actual spirituality of Nazism*.`[62] The challenge to see demons, or more biblically, the `powers`, within the causal pattern of history is one which, if it is taken up, might make possible a less simplistic reading of history. In particular the concrete identification of the powers with abstract concepts like nationalism, as Wink suggests, may assist theologians whose theory of `double agency` relies heavily on a dialectic of divine rule and human autonomy; it might be possible to use the concept of the `powers` to add a third term to the dialectic, creating a richer and more complex picture of history which recognises the importance and effects of economic, social and cultural factors within the divine-human relationship.

Herbert Butterfield, as a historian with a keen interest in historiographical and theological issues, suggested in 1952 that historical events might be seen `at three levels and with three different kinds of analysis.`[63] Just as it is possible to take three different cross-sections of a piece of wood and each would be a different shape, so the three levels of explanation can apply to the same event and differ in their description of its cause, and yet all be true at the same time. Butterfield proposed a first, biographical level, which deals with human motivation, and a third, providential level, which deals with the action and intention of God. These two levels correspond to the `double agency` theory`s interaction between the human and the divine. Butterfield`s second level was the one where `we find that history, like nature itself,

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[58] R.Bultmann *New Testament and Mythology and other basic writings* (London 1985) p.4.
[59] W.Wink *Unmasking the Powers* Philadelphia 1986) p.54.
[60] E.Busch *Karl Barth* (London 1976) p.328.
[61] Busch *Karl Barth* p.365.
[62] Wink *Unmasking the Powers* p.54.
[63] H.Butterfield `God in History` (1952) in C.T.McIntire (ed) *Herbert Butterfield*: *Writings on Christianity and History* (Oxford 1979) p.5.

represents a realm of law - its events are in a certain sense reducible to laws.`[64] This level of explanation, the sense of laws or rather `hypotheses` which represent `our ways of formulating to ourselves the movements and processes that we observe to be taking place in the universe`[65] is formulated in the social science disciplines which historians frequently use as allies in their work.

Butterfield`s proposals for the way in which providence operated in history were sketchy, but his introduction of the middle term of analysis is very helpful. The theologians` emphasis on divine rule and human autonomy needs to be expanded to take account of the action of historical processes. The problem with this analysis lies not with the action of God *per se*, but with the operation of the intervening processes of secondary causation. If the historical processes are given some autonomy in the understanding of reality, then history is seen to be more complex than theologians usually recognise. The historical processes may be seen theologically as built into creation, and their autonomous role corresponds to the language of the `powers` which Paul frequently uses (e.g. Rom 8:38-9; 1 Cor 2:8, 15:24-6; Eph 1:19-21, 2:1-2, 6:12; Col 1:16, 2:15). These powers are not held to be intrinsically evil by Paul, but to have been created for good and turned to evil by the fallen nature of the world.[66] Although the precise way in which the `powers` might correspond to the historical processes of economic and social factors requires a good deal of further attention,[67] it is submitted that this may be a fruitful way in which to develop the understanding of God`s action in history. The activity of God and humans in history might be seen, therefore, as part of a three-way tension rather than a two-way one.

To return to Vernon White`s example discussed before, we may remember that White sees Dunkirk as essentially a transaction between God and Hitler. A theory like Butterfield`s brings a new dimension into the explanation, for wider themes of historical process can now be seen to be operating, rather than simply the biographical level of pressures on Hitler. `Powers` such as, for example, the ethos and coherence of the Prussian officer corps, or the English national spirit of enterprise and co-operation, celebrated in many wartime filsm and seen in the actions of the crews of the `little ships` intrude as further factors in the situation.[68] Thus at Butterfield`s first level of explanation the factors lie in Hitler`s biography: his inability to order the final blow when it was open to him (which may be compared with Napoleon`s lassitude on the day before Waterloo, a similar ultimately fatal indecision). At the second level of historical process, this was a clash of national `powers` and identity. At the third level of providence we may be inclined to see a wider perspective of divine `steering` in the judgement of God which was ultimately to fall on Nazism and in which Dunkirk was a component part, a view unclear in 1940 but which can be seen retrospectively.

The theory of three levels sees God`s action as functioning in different ways: God is

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[64] ibid. pp.5-6, see also H.Butterfield *Man on his Past* (Cambridge 1955).
[65] ibid. p.4.
[66] Both H.Schlier *Principalities and Powers in the New Testament* (London 1961), and W.Wink *Naming the Powers: the Language of Power in the New Testament* (Philadelphia 1984) see the `powers` as a significant part of Paul`s worldview, but contend that the same is true for the whole of the New Testament. cf. especially Wink p.100.
[67] cf. W.Wink *Engaging the Powers* (Philadelphia 1992)
[68] cf. Wink *Naming the Powers* p.105 which describes the `powers` as the `material or "earthly" reality of which they are the innermost essence.`

not responsible for evil because his authority has been delegated in creation to `powers` and people. The relationship between God and creation is therefore a complex one, but his action in creation can be seen to have different levels of intensity.[69] Human beings are free in that God allows the individual the liberty of accepting or denying his will and intention, though his sovereignty means that ultimately, he will take up even disobedience into his eschatological future goal for creation.[70]

If a role is given to the `powers` in the created order of history, as concrete phenomena, then the role and importance of the cross also comes more clearly into focus. Paul in Colossians 2:14b-15 speaks of how Jesus on the cross `disarmed the rulers and authorities (αρχας και εξουσιας) and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in it.` Here and elsewhere Paul sees the cross as the decisive battleground between the forces of good and evil, but there is an ambiguity in his treatment of the issue, for the cross is described as a definite victory over the powers in this passage, while in others (e.g. 1Cor 15:24-27a) their subjection lies in the future.[71]

Paul`s view seen in Colossians has been described by Gustav Aulén as the origin of the patristic idea of atonement which Aulén regards as the `classic type` of the doctrine.[72] Aulén`s aim was to retrieve historically the earliest attempt to understand the significance of the cross, an attempt which Aulén believed has `been suppressed and treated with contempt`[73] for philosophical reasons since the eighteenth century. In Walter Wink`s exposition, Paul`s doctrine of the defeat of the powers is seen to be an eschatological truth: the defeat of the powers was accomplished by Christ on the cross, but God`s ultimate victory will not be shown beyond doubt until the end of time.[74]

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[69] cf. M.J.Langford *Providence* (London 1981) especially pp.5-7.
[70] Butterfield `God in History` p.16 emphasises this.
[71] cf. Wink *Naming the Powers* pp.55-60.
[72] G.Aulén *Christus Victor* (London 1931) p.82.
[73] Aulén *Christus Victor* p.174.
[74] cf. Wink *Naming the Powers* p.115.

4. Conclusions

In this paper we have seen that historical study open to a theological approach is possible, and can remain critical, rather than naively credulous or supernaturalistic. Eusebius`s apparent reluctance to take Constantine`s account of his conversion at face value is a good example of this. Such an approach may make it more possible to take seriously the existence of the phenomena of spirituality found in a reported awareness of God which affects action. It remains to consider two issues: first, what is happening in such a broadening of historians` horizons, and second, how the argument may help to address the questions raised in John Drane`s analysis of `our present predicament`.

As we look at the first issue, G.W.F.Hegel`s work is worth consideration as an attempt (albeit flawed) to philosophise without Enlightenment assumptions.[75] In his proposal for an idealist conception of history Hegel noted that there was a metaphysical assumption involved in his work. Determining the unfolding revelation of God in the process of world history was not, Hegel maintained, susceptible of proof *within* the discipline of history. However, this did not imply that faith in revelation is uncritically accepted: philosophy and theology have their own critical rules for determining the truth of such a claim. Nor does it imply that history is therefore unimportant or secondary to philosophy and theology; it has a vital role to play in determining the adequacy of the claims of philosophy through correspondence with historical events.[76] What Hegel draws attention to here is a kind of historians` version of Gödel`s theorem. The mathematician Kurt Gödel proposed in 1931 that `systems of sufficient complexity to include whole numbers always contain propositions which are stateable but not decidable within that system.`[77] Hegel`s conception of history has faith in the rationality and intelligibility of the historical process, but claims to `give that faith some sort of metaphysical, ontological justification.`[78] Any attempt to rehabilitate the idea of history as in some sense a place where God acts and human beings respond requires a metaphysical grounding for the theology of history in the doctrine of God; history and metaphysics are integrally related to each other. As with Gödel`s theorem in the field of mathematics, therefore, historical analysis requires propositions which are stateable but not decidable within its own discipline.[79] Such claims must, however, always be open to scrutiny. As we noted above, history as a discipline requires the testing of hypotheses, rather than their wholesale and uncritical adoption.

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[75] cf. G.Graham *The Shape of the Past: a philosophical approach to history* (Oxford 1997) especially pp.20, 38 for a recent defence of Hegel`s enterprise, though not his conclusions. S.Houlgate *Freedom, Truth and History: an introduction to Hegel`s Philosophy* (London 1991), especially chapters 1 and 5 is a good introduction to Hegel.

[76] cf. G.W.F. Hegel *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge 1975) pp.28-9.

[77] J.Polkinghorne *One World: the Interaction of Science and Theology* (London 1986) p.106. cf. J.D.Barrow *The World Within the World* (Oxford 1988) pp.254-60.

[78] R.Plant *Hegel* (London 1973) p.131, quoting J.N.Findlay.

[79] cf. G.G.Iggers *New Directions in European Historigraphy* (London 2/1985) pp.202-3 for a recognition that historical study is not autonomous and requires an `ideological component` which may come from another field.

With regard to the second issue, the `profound loss of spiritual perception,` which John Drane diagnoses in our culture, the kind of historical approach outlined above may give the Christian historian confidence. Just as social historians in recent years have sought to do their history `from below` in order to recover the identities of those who were lost to conventional political narratives, and feminist historians have recovered the lost voices of women, and black historians have sought to give weight and attention to those marginalised by their race, so Christian historians may look into the past and seek to take its spirituality seriously by critical study which recognises that theology may have important insights to offer to the historian, and that recognising the place of God in history may develop and not restrict our understanding of the past. In essence this task is one which recognises, as Pascal did at the beginning of the Enlightenment era, that `the heart has reasons that Reason knows not.`[80] Not patronising the past means recognising that there are older ways of knowing than our own, and that explanations which invoke God are not necessarily irrational, so long as we do not impoverish our definitions of reason.

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[80] B.Pascal *Pensees* IV 27