

Winter 2001

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William Vance Trollinger

University of Dayton, wtrollinger1@udayton.edu

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FAITH, HISTORY, AND THE CONFERENCE ON FAITH AND HISTORY

William Vance Trollinger, Jr., University of Dayton

The talk that I give tonight is not the talk that I was originally planning to deliver at this conference. When I was asked to give the keynote address I assumed that I would simply present an elongated version of the paper that I was going to give in this morning's session on "Peace, Justice, and Evangelicals;" my paper was to be on the strengths and weaknesses and omissions in the recent literature written by evangelicals on the notion of a Christian approach to history. But the more I thought about it the more I realized that I needed to do more than this. Presidential addresses have not been a custom in this organization—and after tonight you may conclude that not having presidents speak was a very good tradition indeed—and it gradually became apparent to me that I really needed to take this opportunity to say something about the past, present, and future of this organization. While the original title, "'The Whole Gospel for a Broken World': Evangelicals and the Writing of History," would in some sense still work—I have a fair amount to say about Christian perspectives in the writing of history—the better title is, indeed, "Faith, History, and the Conference on Faith and History."

I should note that this is not a research paper in the traditional sense of the word. This is an interpretive piece, an opinion piece—an editorial, if you will. I do not expect everyone (maybe even anyone) to agree with everything that I have to say tonight; all I ask is that you do not allow your irritation regarding a particular point I make to block out everything else that I have to say. More than this, please understand that I do not see my comment as wisdom from the mountain-top; not only am I quite aware of my intellectual limitations, but there are places here where I have more questions than I have answers. Reflecting this, at the end of my talk we are going to open it up for a general discussion. In saying this I recognize that we have a real mix of people here tonight. At one end of the spectrum we have a number of individuals who were here at the creation, if you will—individuals who helped found the Conference on Faith and History, and who poured blood, sweat, and tears into making this a viable organization. At the other end of the spectrum, we have a good many people for whom this is their first or second Faith and History meeting. I will say right up front that everyone is welcome to

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participate in the conversation—everyone is encouraged to participate in the conversation—we need to hear from all voices. And the nature of my talk is such that everyone here should have a place where he or she can comment.

On to the talk proper. It would seem that the best place to start is by noting that, by a number of quantifiable measures, the Conference on Faith and History is an exceedingly healthy organization. From its origins as a group of Christian historians who gathered at Greenville College in the autumn of 1967, the CFH now has over 500 members. Due in great part to the indefatigable Dick Pierard, the organization operates in the black, despite the fact that our dues are absurdly low. Then there is our journal, *Fides et Historia*, which—thanks in great measure to Ron Wells and the other good folks at Calvin College—has established itself as a solid historical journal, indexed in *Historical Abstracts*, *America: History and Life*, and the *Religion Index*, and subscribed to by approximately 300 libraries. And our industrious friends at Huntington College produce a CFH newsletter that is now available in hard copy and on-line versions. Finally, this organization continues to put on often-lively sessions at the American Historical Association meetings, and often-lively biennial conferences—although, and I mean no disrespect to my fellow Midwesterners at Huntington (where we will be in two years), I suspect that in terms of setting, it's all downhill from this meeting here at Point Loma.

All of this would seem to be very good reason to celebrate the success of the Conference on Faith and History. And yet, there is also good reason to see this organization as being at a crossroads, perhaps even at a crisis point, in its history. Over the past few years there has been an undercurrent—and not always an undercurrent—of uneasy conversation at meetings and among members about the function and future of the Conference on Faith and History. In the past couple of months I have heard from a good number of individuals regarding their concerns for the organization, concerns manifested in the following sorts of questions: What is the purpose of the Conference on Faith and History? Where is this organization headed? What is and what should be its connection with the larger scholarly world? Who should belong to this organization? Why are so many good and so many young historians with Christian commitments not involved? What sort of scholarship should we be promoting, and are we attentive enough to the issue of quality? Do we need to make radical changes in our organization and/or in our journal? More dramatically, to quote one individual, "Should we fold up our tents and call it a day?"

2 What should we make of all this? Well, I can imagine that some folks would argue that we should not make much of it at all—that the membership and library subscription and conference attendance totals are clear evidence that we are doing fine, and we should simply stay the course and ignore the malcontents. I can also imagine CFH members who would not go that far, but who would argue that the posing of such questions about the organization is actually a sign of health and vitality, as members wrestle with making the middle-aged Conference on Faith and History meaningful for today. In that same vein, one could argue that it is quite natural that younger and newer members of the organization would raise such questions, as part of making the organization their own—that is to say, the undercurrent of discontent could simply be a natural part of a generational shift within the Conference on Faith and History, a shift that we should be encouraging.

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While there is some truth in all of this, I have to say that I think that there is more here than simply the natural growing pains of an organization in its fourth decade of existence. That is, I think that the questions that have recently been raised about the Conference on Faith and History are crucial questions, and how this organization answers them in the next few years will determine its long-term future: its vigor, its relevance, its significance. It seems to me that the concerns can be boiled down to three key issues: the membership of the Conference on Faith and History, the purpose of the Conference on Faith and History, and the relationship of the Conference on Faith and History to the larger academy. I will address each issue in turn—with the great bulk of time going to the first two—while also taking note of how these issues are intertwined.

Regarding the membership of the Conference on Faith and History, it seems to me that this organization must find ways to open its doors more widely, and to diversify its membership. There are lots of good reasons to do this, including the fact that diversity will enrich the quality of our conversation about what it means to have a Christian perspective on history. In some ways this need for diversity should be pretty obvious. There are many women and many people of color in the historical profession with Christian commitments; however, I am sad to say that both groups are woefully underrepresented in the Conference on Faith and History. Yes, I recognize that there may be relatively benign reasons for this reality—but to be candid, I think that this organization of Christian historians must work much, much harder at not being simply an organization of *white male* Christian historians.

But when I talk about opening the doors to the Conference on Faith and History, I am talking about more than gender and racial diversity. I am also talking about a greater diversity of Christian traditions. Now, at first glance this may seem to be at odds with the essential identity of this organization. The Conference was founded by a group of historians who were—for the most part—self-described evangelicals; a good portion of our membership is made up of individuals who attended evangelical/fundamentalist institutions, and/or who teach at evangelical/fundamentalist institutions; and most of the CFH conferences have been held at conservative Protestant schools—for example, the last five autumn meetings have been hosted by Westmont, Messiah, Calvin, David Lipscomb, and, of course, Point Loma Nazarene. It is thus not surprising that many historians inside and outside the organization understand the Conference on Faith and History to be an evangelical historical association.

There is certainly nothing wrong, at least in theory, with having an evangelical historical association. A number of Christian subgroups have their own history organizations, including the Catholics, the Mennonites, and so on. Of course, in contrast with these groups, evangelicalism is not, strictly speaking, a denomination; more than this, evangelicalism is a notoriously elastic and elusive (and contested) term. It is thus not completely obvious who qualifies as an evangelical historian; to put it another way, to say that the Conference on Faith and History is an evangelical historical association is perhaps not to say very much, or not to say very much that is clear.

But begging the question of what it means to be an evangelical, the fact is that in the official literature of the Conference on Faith and History the organization is

not defined as an evangelical historical association. Instead, and here I am quoting from the CFH brochure, we are an "organization of Christians who are interested in the study of history." Period. And in our statement of membership we say that anyone can join the organization; the official theological stance of the Conference on Faith and History—which (I am quoting again from the CFH brochure) "most members will find themselves in agreement with"—consists of two points:

- (1) The Holy Scriptures are the Word of God, the Christian's authoritative guide for faith and conduct.
- (2) Jesus Christ is the Son of God and through his atonement is the mediator between God and man.

This certainly can not be construed as an exclusively evangelical theological statement. The point is that in our official statements the Conference on Faith and History has defined itself not as an organization of evangelical historians and evangelicals interested in history, but as an organization of Christian historians and Christians interested in history. If this is what we are, or if this is what we want to be—and I think this is precisely what we should want to be—then it seems to me that we have to reach beyond traditional or mainstream evangelicalism to historians from the broad range of Christian traditions, including Catholics, Orthodox, and the incredible variety of Protestant groups. The Society of Christian Philosophers might serve as a good model for us, in that it has been an ecumenical organization that has sought to include the very best of Christian philosophical thought, across the spectrum. We are certainly well-positioned to be this sort of organization, but we would have to be much more intentional about reaching out than we have been. Still, it seems to me that this process of opening the doors could be terribly invigorating for the Conference on Faith and History.

I will come back to this matter of "opening the doors," of creating a more inclusive organization, of intentionally and aggressively establishing ourselves as a broadly Christian organization—because it directly relates to the second question that I want to address tonight: What is the purpose of the Conference on Faith and History? That is to say, what is our reason for being?

4 From the very beginning one of the purposes of the CFH has been fellowship and conversation among Christian (primarily evangelical) historians. This is certainly in keeping with the officially-stated objectives of the organization, which blandly refer to "interaction" and "discussion" among "individuals . . . interested in the study of faith and history." Anyone who has attended even one of this organization's biennial conferences, who has had coffee and Pierard's budget doughnuts at the annual CFH session at the AHA, or who has been involved in this organization for any length of time can attest to the fact that the members of the Conference on Faith and History generally do a great job of interacting and discussing, a great job of "fellowshipping."

But this organization has always had greater aspirations than simply fellowship. In particular, from its very inception the Conference on Faith and History has sought to promote historical scholarship from a Christian perspective. What "historical scholarship from a Christian perspective" means exactly has engaged this organization for much of the past decade, most notably in Paul Boyer's address at the biennial conference at Messiah in 1994, and George Marsden's address—in

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many ways a response to Boyer—at the biennial conference at Calvin in 1996. As a Paul Boyer student—and the person responsible for bringing him to the 1994 Conference on Faith and History—and as a historian of fundamentalism who has benefited a great deal from both the scholarship and the advice of George Marsden, I am not going to try to summarize or evaluate the Boyer–Marsden debate, except to say that I think at least some of the conversation—particularly as it played among us—was a bit akin to two trains passing in the night. Let me say that it seems obvious to me, and I suspect that it seems obvious to most of you, that our faith commitments have and should have an impact on how we do history. I am skeptical that there ever really was as much historical objectivism as has been claimed—in many ways this has been an overly convenient “straw man”—but there is no question that at the beginning of the twenty-first century we can not somehow claim to be “objective” in the sense of writing history neutrally, outside of ourselves, as it were. Moreover, and again I suspect that many or most of you would agree with this, it also seems clear that, as George Marsden argues in his 1997 book, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship*, we should be willing to reveal such commitments to our readers and our students. My only question here has to do with our being open about our other commitments—our political commitments, our economic commitments, and so on—and, relatedly, our social location (race, class, and so on). While one may argue that, as Christians, our religious commitments are privileged, I really do not see how one can argue for religious self-disclosure and not include one’s other primary commitments. (But I digress.)

Back to the point at hand. Let’s say that we agree that our Christian faith commitments affect how we do history. The next and much more difficult question is: What exactly does this mean? How does it/how should it affect how we do history? One obvious place to look for an answer to this question is us, that is, the Conference on Faith and History. How have we answered this question? In a controversial paper given at the 1996 conference at Calvin, a version of which is included in the excellent book edited by Ronald A. Wells, *History and the Christian Historian*, Darryl Hart observes that “the conviction that the faith of the Christian historian sets his or her scholarship apart from that produced by the rest of the profession” has animated the Conference on Faith and History from its very beginning. But while the question has remained the same, Hart argues that over the three decades of its existence the conference has changed its mind as to the answer. In the early years—and Hart provides a number of specific examples—a fair number of CFH members argued for a sort of providentialist approach to history, in which Christian historians sought “to determine those specific events where God had . . . directed the course of human affairs.” But according to Hart, over the course of the organization’s history this approach has become increasingly unacceptable, to the point that, by the 1990s, the Conference on Faith and History “was uncertain about what Christian history looks like,” the result being that the conference had simply become “an evangelical and smaller version of the American Society of Church History.”¹

¹D. G. Hart, “History in Search of Meaning: The Conference on Faith and History,” in *History and the Christian Historian*, ed. Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 68–87.

I am quite aware that a number of conference attendees were dismayed by Hart's paper. But I have to say that I think that a good portion of what he had to say was on the mark. To see why I say this, let's take a look at our journal, *Fides et Historia*. By my count, in the 1990s there were 150 articles published in *Fides* (excluding book reviews and book review essays). 33 of these articles—22%—dealt with pedagogy, historiography, and the philosophy of history; many—but certainly not all—of these pieces dealt in one way or another with, to quote from the editors' introduction to the autumn, 1997 issue of *Fides*, the question of what it means to employ an "explicit[ly] Christian analysis" in the writing of history. Then there are the remaining 78% of articles published in *Fides* in the 1990s—the research pieces, where the rubber meets the road, as it were. What is particularly striking here is the fact that only three of these 117 articles do not qualify as religious history; these three articles dealt with the place of history in a medieval curriculum, a conflict between artists in Renaissance Florence, and the journalism of Ben Franklin.² The remaining 114 research articles were in the field of religious history, with 43% of these in U.S. religious history. While I am pretty sure that I am safe in saying that none of the theoretical pieces published in the 1990s argued for such a truncated understanding of what it means to have a Christian perspective on history, the fact is that when one moves from the articles that deal with the philosophy of history and historiography into the realm of historical research—into the doing of history, as it were—it would be quite logical to conclude that, according to our organization, to have a Christian perspective on history first and foremost means that one chooses religious history for one's topic. In other words, D. G. Hart had good reason to assert that one might legitimately view the Conference on Faith and History as the poor (evangelical) man's American Society of Church History.

6 In saying this I absolutely do not want to minimize the importance of our faith commitments in the choice of historical topics and in the sorts of questions we ask about the past. Nevertheless, the fact is that claims for a Christian perspective on history have always involved much more than taking religion as a topic for historical study. That is to say, despite the fact that most *Fides* articles and most of the papers at this conference deal with religious history, the Conference on Faith and History has always been driven by the conviction that, whatever the historical sub-field, there is and should be something like a distinctly Christian perspective. In this regard, George Marsden has probably done the most work in attempting to delineate exactly what a Christian perspective would look like. As he has argued in a number of places—including in his 1996 keynote address to this conference—a Christian historian's scholarly writings would necessarily be affected by, among other things, his/her belief that God is the creator of heaven and earth, that hu-

²Willard Dickerson III, "History as Moral Philosophy: A Look at History's Place in the Liberal Arts Curricula of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," 27 (Fall 1995): 29–51; Yael Evan, "Lorenzo Ghiberti and Filippo Brunelleschi Reconsidered: Forced Alliances Between Lifelong Adversaries," 22 (Summer 1990): 38–46; Ralph Frasca, "Benjamin Franklin's Journalism," 29 (Winter/Spring 1997): 60–72. A more expansive definition of what constitutes religious history would eliminate the Dickerson article from this list of *Fides* articles that deal with topics outside religious history.

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man beings are sinful and limited, and that there are God-given and absolute moral principles.³

I suspect that most of us here would agree with Marsden, and would agree that he is saying something that needs to be said. And yet, I must also say that all of this is at a pretty abstract level. I am not exactly clear, for example, how an acknowledgement of God as creator or of human beings as sinful would necessarily mark out a particular sort of historical interpretation. That is to say, it is not clear to me how they will result in a definably Christian interpretation of history; certainly such an interpretation would not be distinct, at least distinct in the way that a Marxist interpretation is distinct. In all of this I am reminded of a painful experience I endured when I was teaching at Messiah College. In the early 1990s the college embarked on a project I am sure many of you have gone through, the great effort to revamp the general education curriculum. Our faculty spent the entire first year of this effort slogging through meeting after meeting, in the process of developing the abstract principles—such as “understanding the contemporary world in historical perspective”—that would presumably guide the development of a new general education curriculum. But at the end of the year, with the list of hard-won principles in hand, someone pointed out in faculty meeting that the varieties of specific general education programs that could grow out of these general principles was almost infinite; in fact, it was hard to imagine a curriculum that could not fit with the general principles that we had spent an agonizing year to develop.

Now, to be fair, I certainly can imagine historical interpretations that are indeed at odds with the sort of Christian principles that Marsden delineates. I still wonder, however, how such abstract principles can translate into a particular interpretive perspective on history. But perhaps the problem here is the way in which the question has typically been posed. That is, given that Christianity has taken wildly contrasting forms, given that there are innumerable Christian subgroups, the notion of a Christian perspective on history may simply be a chimera. Put much more positively, perhaps it is when we move down to specific Christian subgroups that this whole question of historical perspective and interpretation becomes much clearer, much more interesting, and much more provocative.

Let me use as an example here the peace churches, specifically, the Mennonites and the Quakers. (In the interest of self-disclosure, I should note that I am a member of a Mennonite church.) For (most) Mennonites and Quakers, nonviolence is central to the gospel message: it is not peripheral and it is not optional, as believers are called to follow Christ's example and live lives of peace. What such convictions could mean in the writing of history is seen in *The Missing Peace: The Search for Alternatives to Violence in American History*, a U.S. history reader written by Carol Hunter of Earlham College (a Quaker school in Indiana) and Jim Juhnke of Bethel College (a Mennonite school in Kansas). In an interpretive approach that grows out of their religious commitments, Juhnke and Hunter examine American history through the lens of nonviolence. As the authors point out, this is a radical de-

³See George M. Marsden, “What Difference Might Christian Perspectives Make?” in *History and the Christian Historian*, 11–22.

parture, given that the notion of redemptive violence suffuses the common understanding of American history, and given that wars are used as central signposts in the narrative of American progress and freedom. With the contrary perspective that grows out of their understanding of the gospel, Juhnke argues in his chapter on the American Revolution, for example, that the war was definitely not necessary for Americans to achieve a much greater measure of self-determination, that there were legitimate and viable alternatives to the Revolution (a few of which were successfully attempted before the outbreak of war), that for African Americans and others the American side of the Revolution was not the side of freedom, and so on.

Now here's a clear interpretive perspective. A Christian perspective, very much in keeping with what this organization has been calling for. But it is also a Christian perspective very much at odds with other Christian perspectives that see Jesus' statements against violence as applying to a "future Kingdom," that find violence as a necessary evil in this fallen world, that accept the notion of "just wars" (a term that some Anabaptists and Quakers find to be oxymoronic). These differences are not minor; they can not be smoothed over by appealing to a general Christian principle that we are all to be peacemakers; they will result in very different historical interpretations. In fact, I am confident that Juhnke and Hunter will have a much easier time having this book accepted in "secular" public schools than in "Christian" fundamentalist schools, even though this is history that clearly grows out of Christian faith commitments, and even though some scholars see both Anabaptists and fundamentalists (if not Quakers) as part of the "evangelical denomination."

8 My point is a simple one: given the great variety of Christian subgroups, it seems obvious that there would be a great variety of Christian perspectives on history. And to come back to the Conference on Faith and History, while this organization has, from its inception, been animated by the desire to articulate and promote a Christian perspective on history, it has not always been clear what precisely this means, beyond the choice of religion as a topic. But it seems to me that once we acknowledge that there is a great variety of Christian perspectives, that once we move down to the level of Christian subgroups, then we have the wonderful opportunity to explore, compare, contrast how these various traditions lead to particular historical perspectives, in all fields of history. Obviously, this ties in very well with my other proposal, that we enthusiastically embrace the fact that we are not an exclusively evangelical organization, and we throw open the doors, seeking to reach beyond our base of mainstream evangelicalism to historians from the great variety of Christian traditions, as well as to women, and to people of color. In doing this I can easily imagine conference sessions on general historical topics such as the Renaissance, or, to return to an earlier example, the American Revolution. And while I think that we should move beyond our obsession with religious history in this organization—reaching out to people with Christian faith commitments in all fields of history—I do recognize that it is only natural for the Conference on Faith and History to remain very interested in religious history; in that regard, my experience of teaching at a Catholic university has made clear to me that it could be fascinating to have a dialogue on how differently historians from the

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Catholic and various Protestants interpret the Reformation. Actually, such a dialogue would become particularly interesting if we expanded this to include Jews and Muslims. In fact, while I would assume that we would continue to be an explicitly Christian organization, I would really like us to take "Conference on Faith and History" seriously as a title, and bring to our meetings historians from non-Christian traditions, with one central question: What does it mean to be a person of faith when it comes to writing and teaching of history, and how is this similar and how is this different according to tradition?

There is much here that remains to be discussed and debated. Please understand that I do not have a detailed blueprint for the future of the Conference on Faith and History. But while I celebrate our successes, and while I thank those who had the vision and energy to establish and maintain this organization, I also think we need to make changes in the Conference on Faith and History, in terms of broadening our membership, deepening and complicating our understanding of the notion of Christian perspectives on history, and expanding the discussion of what it means to be a person of faith and a historian.

In conclusion, I would like to say something about the third issue that I said I would discuss, and that is the relationship of the Conference on Faith and History to the larger academy. As I was putting this talk together, a fascinating article appeared in the October, 2000 issue of *Atlantic Monthly*, an article which I know many of you have read: "The Opening of the Evangelical Mind," by Alan Wolfe. In this article, Wolfe—who borrows much (apparently including the title) from Mark Noll's superb *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*—notes how "evangelical Protestantism, at least in its twentieth-century conservative forms, has ranked dead last in intellectual stature;" he looks at Wheaton College and Fuller Seminary, where he finds much more intellectual energy and openness than he might have expected, especially among the students; he criticizes those evangelical colleges that require faculty members to sign faith statements, because doing so cuts off honest intellectual inquiry and discussion; and, in his concluding section—which is the most relevant to the topic at hand—he scores evangelicals for their residual intellectual defensiveness, and their great tendency to withdraw into their "own subculture" of "journals, conferences, and publishing houses," where they talk with and cite and applaud each other in relative isolation.

It seems to me that while Alan Wolfe paints with an extraordinarily broad brush in this article—there is virtually no attention to the diversity among evangelical schools—the fact is that he raises some very important questions that evangelical scholars really must address. As to his observation that evangelicals have sequestered themselves in their own subculture of conferences and journals, the obvious question here is: Does this apply to the Conference on Faith and History? Well, to respond with a simple yes would be inaccurate and unfair, given how many historians in this organization have substantive connections with the larger academy. Instead, it seems to me that the best answer to the question is: "Too often, yes; sometimes, no."

But instead of trying to quantify the degree to which our organization has sequestered itself in the evangelical subculture, it seems to me much more important to affirm that, at its best, this was not the intended purpose of the Conference on

Faith and History, nor should it be our intention today. Interestingly, and I do not think coincidentally, both Alan Wolfe and Mark Noll call for evangelicals to put aside their residual anti-intellectualism, to put aside their defensiveness, and instead engage in the demanding and exhilarating work of the mind. Noll puts it this way in *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*: "If the evangelical tradition has neglected the life of the mind, it does little good simply to bemoan the fact . . . evangelical intellectuals must simply set about the task."⁴ More than anything else, it seems to me that this is what the Conference on Faith and History should be about: encouraging and promoting historical work that is shaped by our deepest faith commitments but that also meets the most exacting standards of our profession. We should promote, we should expect, we should demand this sort of rigorous scholarship in our conference and in our journal.

⁴Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 247.