

# Of Christian History

The history of Christian dogma has been one long process of accommodation and deeschatologizing by which one body of belief has been completely displaced by another, eschatological reality being supplanted by sacramental piety.

“The Expanding Gospel,” *CWHN* 12:199

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Every church comes before the world with certain basic historic propositions peculiar to itself. Every church may be judged by those propositions when they are clearly stated. If a group announces that the end of the world is going to come on a certain day or, like Prudentius, predicts victory in a particular battle as proof of its divine leadership, or claims like the Mormons that there once was a prophet named Lehi who did such and such, we can hold that church to account.

“Do Religion and History Conflict?” *CWHN* 12:435

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The things Jesus talked about were entirely outside the range of normal human thought and experience. In time their reality was to be made manifest to all, but meanwhile their rejection was to be emphatic and complete, and pagans could embarrass Christians by chanting about “Jesus the king who never ruled!” A triumphant rule and a triumphant church were not on the program, but the world would settle for nothing less, and of course the world got what it wanted—a church modeled after *its* idea of what a church should be. Such an institution was a clearly prophesied as was the passing away of the true church.

“The Way of the Church,” *CWHN* 4:295

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The constant revival through the centuries of the old stock Gnostic claim that the one true apostolic church has by some miracle of survival come down to the possession of this or that group, is a perpetual reminder of the failure of subsequent Christianity to come up to the expectations of the first Church. For the chronic discontent which haunts the Christian churches is by no means limited to the lunatic fringe. The vigorous beginnings of monasticism and pilgrimage were frankly attempts to return to the first order of the Church, with its unworldly austerities and its spiritual manifestations, and as such were viewed by official Christianity as a clear vote of no-confidence—a rebuke and repudiation of the system.

“The Passing of the Primitive Church,” *CWHN* 4:182-83

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Each of the swarming imposters did everything he could to make the world believe that his and his alone was the true, ancient, and sole surviving heir of the original church and that he alone possessed the secret knowledge

imparted to the apostles after the resurrection; and the smashing success that greeted many of them is a plain indication of how hungry the Christian world was for that very knowledge. . . .

It was a general groping for something everybody felt the church *should* have but obviously no longer did have; Gnosticism was before all else a vacuum phenomenon. The Gnosis rushed in to fill an empty space which did not exist as long as the apostles were still alive. . . .

The trouble with the Gnostics so-called is not that they claimed to possess the wonderful post-resurrection revelations but that they did *not* possess them. They were only faking or wishfully thinking; they didn't have the Gnosis at all, and when the time came to deliver the goods, as it soon did, since they all challenged each other's exclusive claims, they were caught empty-handed. They *had* to come up with something: hence the feverish and irresponsible borrowing of any odds and ends of Oriental lore they could lay their hands on; hence the solemn and impressive appeal to philosophy—especially the recondite and mysterious gospel of neo-Platonism—hence the willingness to make full use of genuine or spurious holy writings or even to forge new ones outright.

What has made the study of Gnosticism so infinitely complex and hopelessly confusing is the willingness of the Gnostics in their need to throw anything into the hopper.

“The Illusive Primitive Church,” *CWHN* 7:72-73

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The hitherto despised and outcast sectaries of the deserts now stand at the door and knock for admission into the company of the orthodox. At the same time the back door by which fastidious scholars have in the past been able to avoid associating with such disreputable people is being effectively blocked as a way of escape. That door was the easy dodge of designating as *Gnostic* anything Jewish or Christian that one didn't happen to like. . . . Whatever we find eccentric, we simply call Gnostic. . . .

If we attempt to classify a document by its teachings we run into a hopeless situation, for half the Gnostic teachings—the preexistent plan, this world as a place of probation, eternal progression, the spiritual creation, the withholding of certain teachings from the world, the divine parentage of man, the preexistent glory of Adam, etc.—were held by the Primitive Church, and the other half—the unknowable and ineffable nature of God, the free use of allegory in interpreting scripture, the appeal of philosophy as a theological foundation, the antithesis of matter (which is evil) and spirit (which is good), the search for God in the mystic way, etc.—were adopted by the later church, so that there are no strictly peculiar Gnostic doctrines to set Gnosticism apart from orthodox Christian views. For some, the very essence of Gnosticism was belief in direct revelation; for others, it was denial of direct revelation.

“The Illusive Primitive Church,” *CWHN* 7:67-70

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Are we to believe that all that authority which Christ himself divided among twelve men, each of whom was an apostle, was one day to be poured into a single vessel? Every Catholic will admit that there have been bad popes, but hasten to point out that there was also a bad apostle. If one strand of a twelve-strand rope is rotten the rope is still strong; but if one link for a chain is bad the entire chain is worthless. Only one man, Jesus Christ, was able to

tread the winepress *alone*. To regard the fullness of his power and authority as concentrated in the single person of a Borgia is simply blasphemous.

[Furthermore], this theory is completely discredited by the fact that great teachers of the Church—Origen, Justin, Tertullian, Augustine, etc.—were universally appealed to, instead of the bishop of Rome, to settle “the more important and difficult questions,” and they in turn do not refer their questioners to Rome as the proper place to seek an answer. Even the official councils of the Church base their decisions on the writings of these “doctors of the Church” who were almost never (and then only incidentally) bishops of Rome.

“Questions on Authority,” 16

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Wherever we look in the ancient world the past has been controlled, but nowhere more rigorously than in the history of the Christian church. The methods of control, wherever we find them, fall under three general heads which might be described as (a) the invention, (b) the destruction, and (c) the alteration of documents.

“The Way of the Church,” CWHN 4:219

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The key to conventional church history is its fair-weather determination not to face up to certain unpleasant, nay, alarming possibilities, in particular the proposition that the church of Christ did not survive in the world long after the apostles. . . .

Christianity has never come anywhere near either converting or saving the world. Instead of the moral reform which the fourth-century fathers promised with such confidence, if the empire would only turn officially Christian, came a disastrous deterioration of morals; instead of world peace (also promised), world war; instead of prosperity, economic collapse; instead of the promised intellectual certainty, violent controversy; instead of faith, speculation and doubt; instead of tolerance and love, ceaseless polemic and persecution; instead of trust in God, cynicism and power politics. The world once Christianized not only remained barbarian, but became also more and more barbaric as it passed from one century of Christian tutelage to the next.

“The Way of the Church,” CWHN 4:263

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The first great doctrinal guide of the Church and the founder of orthodox theology was Origen. All serious questions of doctrine came to him for solution; he kept seven secretaries busy night and day turning out his instructions to the Church. Yet he was only a presbyter whose ordination was not recognized by his own bishop. The significant thing is that he himself claims *no* authority beside his mother wit and learning. [A] typical statement of Origen [is]: “The above are the thoughts which have occurred to us while treating of subjects of such difficulty as the incarnation and godhood of Christ. *If there be anyone* indeed, who can discover something better, and who can establish his assertions by clearer proofs from the holy Scriptures, let his opinion be received in preference to mine.” . . .

Thus the man who is quoted by later Church writers more than any other when speaking of first principles always hedges and qualifies, is always very cautious and very uncertain. What makes this attitude so significant is that he is not speaking on abstruse and minor details but of the very first principles of the gospel. The introduction to his work of that title makes the clear and unequivocal statement that an *understanding of the first principles was not to be had in the church in his day*, since neither the scriptures nor the tradition contained the necessary plain and adequate explanations. . . .

What does Origen take as his guide? Scripture and philosophy. And when the two clash? Scripture must give way. You simply cancel any contrary passage by giving it an allegorical (Origen says “proper” or “mystical”) interpretation. This method is followed by all subsequent theologians.

#### “Questions on Authority,” 8-9

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In the 270 letters of Augustine that have survived, we see the man at work trying to answer the great questions of doctrine and administration that should have been answered by the head of the church. Letters pour in to him from all over the Christian world, and he answers them as best he can. He never refers the questioners to any higher authority, even though the cases are sometimes very serious and have nothing at all to do with his diocese; nor does he personally ever appeal to any higher authority, either in administration or in doctrinal matters, however important they may be. . . . Let us consider briefly the doctrinal perplexity and the complete lack of leadership and direction in the church that is apparent in the *Confessions*.

For twenty years at least, Augustine was never able to find out just what the Christian church believed. He tells how he went to school as a boy and made fun of the things his mother believed, how he joined a strange Christian sect, the Manichaeans, which enjoyed enormous popularity at the time, and for once in his life thought he knew certainty. When he left the Manichaeans, he says the bottom of his world fell out, and he spent the ensuing years in black despair. He joined a group calling themselves the *sancti* [holy, or consecrated], large numbers of whom were living secretly in Rome; and all the time his mother kept after him to return to the church of his birth, but this he could not do because their arguments could not stand up to those of the Manichaeans, from whom in a vague way he still hoped for light. When he finally became a catechumen upon the urging of his mother and St. Ambrose, easily the most important leader in the church of the time, he still did not know what to believe but was “doubting everything, tossed back and forth in it all.”

#### “A Substitute for Revelation,” *CWHN* 3:92-93

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There was a real knock-down, drag-out fight between the “Allegorists” and the “literalizers” in the Church, ending with complete victory for the intellectuals. Henceforth any reviving spark of crackpot sectarian Mantic is attacked by the churchmen with hysterical fury. That group cannot be in the Catholic Church, which claims to have prophets and charismatic gifts, even though it follows all the proper Christian forms. The Mantic has become the very essence of heresy.

The Creeds of the fourth century and after were Sophic, phrased in the jargon of the schools, to the horror of many, if not most, good Christians. There is nothing open-ended about them, since their whole purpose is to settle *all* problems once for all. The mood of the early Fathers is one of desperation rather than of faith. The fantastic

cruelty and intolerance of the fourth century are, Alföldi observes, a natural expression of the thinking of the times: “The victory of abstract ways of thinking, the universal triumph of theory, knows no half-measures; punishment, like everything else, must be a hundred per cent, but even this seemed inadequate.” There was no place for the nonconforming Mantic in this Sophic world of hundred-percenters.

St. Augustine completes the process of de-Manticizing antique culture that began with the sixth century B.C. It was he, we are told, who cast the Christian and antique culture together “once for all in one mighty mold,” thereby achieving that fusion of once hostile traditions which make up the metal of our own civilization to this day. But what the great man put into the crucible was not the whole of the Christian or the Greek heritage but only the Sophic part of each.

Much has been written about Augustine as the man who finally closed the books on chiliastic, charismatic Christianity, but what is not so well known is that at the same time he finished off the lingering traces of Mantic glory in the antique tradition. His famous justification for including the learning of non-Christian antiquity in the curriculum of the Christian schools was the doctrine of “spoiling the Egyptians.” The Egyptians have good stuff which we can use without danger if we make a careful selection.

“Sophic and Mantic,” *CWHN* 10:353-54

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Let us remember that the schools had reached an all-time intellectual low at the time the church chose to embrace their methods. The church married a sick man, says Duchesne, when she joined forces with the state under Theodosius; she married a much sicker one when she embraced the schools of the same decadent age.

What could the church gain by such a match? It is inconceivable that the wedding could have taken place had either of the parties retained its original vigor and independence—but both, as the writings of the fathers make painfully clear, were in a desperate condition. One of the earliest fragments of church history is Hegesippus’s remark: “Up *until* then the Church had remained a pure and incorrupted virgin.” Up until when? Until the philosophers took over. The last Roman, for Grabmann, was also the first scholastic, who “minted the authentic coin of its Latin terminology”—that noble Boethius, who in his last hour was comforted not by religion but by an allegorical visit from Dame Philosophy.

Now again, why was the marriage with philosophy necessary? Answer: “To overcome the objections of reason to revelation,” that is St. Augustine’s famous reconciliation of classical and Christian learning. But how can you call it reconciliation when it is always the church that gives way? It is always reason that has to be satisfied and revelation that must be manipulated in order to give that satisfaction; this is no compromise but complete surrender.

“Sophic and Mantic,” *CWHN* 10:366-67

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Once the church historian has picked out the most highly favored passages to call to the witness stand and, as a textual critic, carefully tidied them up and brushed their hair to make a favorable impression for his client (the client being the church of his choice—for most church historians are professional churchmen) a most effective

control still remains; for before the evidence can be heard by the general public, it must be *translated*. Translation is a far more effective and aggressive way of controlling the past than most people suppose.

“The Way of the Church,” *CWHN* 4:216

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Catholic, Protestant and Jewish writers cover the vagueness of their message with a massive lubrication of words which allows them to slip through tight places. They still insist that God has spoken his final word; they deny him the privilege of adding to his own words even if he wants to, while they go on with their commentaries, translations, reinterpretations, explanations, etc., adding here a little and there a little, line upon line, precept upon precept to God’s word.

“Chattanooga,” 1-2

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In vain does the scripture insist—the clergy has made up its mind.

“The Way of the Church,” *CWHN* 4:241

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The last and favorite resort of the clergy when they are questioned too closely [is]: their questioners simply don’t understand; they are “uninstructed and amateurish.” “Unless you accept our interpretation of the texts,” the layman is told, “you obviously do not understand them. And if you don’t understand them, you have no right to question our interpretation of them!”

And so the layman is put in his place. The guarded degree, the closed corporation, the technical vocabulary, these are the inner redoubt, the inviolable stronghold of usurped authority. Locked safe within the massive and forbidding walls of institution and formality lies what the Egyptians called “the king’s secret,” the secret of controlling the past.

“The Way of the Church,” *CWHN* 4:245

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The Christian world has been reconciled for centuries to the belief that certain things were “spiritual” rather than “historical”: the physical resurrection, the literal return of the Lord, supernatural gifts and manifestations, prophecies and revelations. They have been ruled out. They have been the very essence of heresy. . . .

When the Reformation started out they tried to get back to these things. Then Luther, after a very bitter experience, gave it up; so did the [other] great Reformers. They said that they would have to turn back to scholarship, just as St. Augustine and the rest of them did, because they could not deliver the goods. They *wanted* the prophecy; they wanted to get the spirit again; they wanted these gifts and beliefs; but they were out of the church.

“Early Christian Church,” 17-18

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We believe that [Rudolf] Bultmann is quite wrong in choosing to throw away the old Christian eschatology in that the ministry has no chance but to oppose him. But he is quite right in insisting on the terrible truth that if you don't throw it away you have to believe it! There he has the ministry checkmated, or rather they have checkmated themselves, for it is they who for over a century and a quarter have with a single voice hurled against the Mormons the awful charge of actually believing in visions, miracles, and the visitation of angels! And now Bultmann tells them they must believe in those things, too, or else forget about them.

But what now complicates the game, to the embarrassment of both players, is the increasingly frequent and maddeningly unpredictable introduction of new pieces onto the board. New discoveries of documents are “compromising” modern Christianity all the time, making it harder and harder for anyone who would call himself a Christian to brush the old eschatological teachings aside.

At the same time the realities of the hydrogen bomb and the very real possibility of world destruction have occasioned a worldwide resurgence of eschatological thinking. . . .

When the world is topsy-turvy and the danger is real, Christians have a way of suddenly remembering how fundamental to the gospel are those eschatological and Messianic concepts of which official Christianity disapproves. The ancient faith was no summertime religion, and its preoccupation with eschatology—the “end of all things”—no “brain-sick nightmare” but a hard-won decision to consider things as they are.

“The Way of the Church,” *CWHN* 4:311-13

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The Dead Sea Scrolls are teaching us as Christians to sit down to dinner with strange cousins from all over the East—Essenes, Ebionites, Therapeutae, Gnostics, even Moslems—whom a few years ago we turned out of doors as tramps and aliens: Catholics and Protestants are now falling over themselves . . . to hail the forlorn strangers of Qumran as long-lost brothers.

“Sophic and Mantic,” *CWHN* 10:318

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The world of conventional Christianity lends itself to the most restrained or the most extravagant imaginings of the artist. It is a painted canvas, a two-dimensional world whose lack of reality is smothered in Baroque or Byzantine excesses, or preserved in a Puritan deep-freeze. The Restored Gospel is something else; it adds a third dimension, so to speak, accepting the other world as a reality—quite matter-of-fact. . . . The Book of Mormon cuts through all the dense literary, philological, and theological undergrowth that bars access to the Garden. It shows us first of all the kind of document we should be thinking of when we talk about the scriptures.

“The Apocrypha and the Book of Mormon,” 1

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No one knew better than Joseph Smith that sacred things could be corrupted and changed, surviving in various parts of the world in different degrees of purity. Those traditions are to be held in respect; Joseph reprimanded those who mocked the “old Catholic Church, . . . worth more than all” by the richness of the elements of the history of the ancient order it has preserved.

“One Eternal Round,” *CWHN* 12:425