

FORUM

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A History of ‘Religious History’

As a category denoting the analysis of religious actors across history disinterestedly and on their own terms, “religious history” is a relatively recent coinage. This article offers a brief contextualisation of the emergence of the field in the twentieth century. It distinguishes “religious history” from an older, “confessional” mode of ecclesiastical history on the one hand; and an anticlerical or secular-minded “anthropological” style of writing the history of religion on the other. The essay particularly emphasises the value of Jane Garnett’s work on the history of Christianity as a model for how historians might pursue a type of religious history which integrates the history of religion with the history of broader movements in intellectual culture.

As a phrase denoting a field of academic history, ‘religious history’ has only come into use comparatively recently. In countries with a predominantly Christian heritage, ‘ecclesiastical history’ was, until the later twentieth century, much the more conventional term. Ecclesiastical history was, and remains, integrally concerned with the history of the Church—an institutional delimitation which ‘religious history’ has tended to grate against. The newer coinage is itself internally ambiguous and admits of several potential emphases. The question of the history and meaning of ‘religious history’ formed one subject for discussion at a symposium held in honour of the Oxford historian, Jane Garnett, at Wadham College, Oxford, in April 2025. Garnett’s wide-ranging oeuvre, spanning the history of ideas, religion and art, has given central attention to the modern history of Christianity.¹ It has particularly sought to draw out the cultural and intellectual contexts of religious life, in a way determinedly independent of a rigidly institutional or ecclesiastical frame of reference. This short essay offers an historical outline of the main categories in terms of which the history of religion has been conceptualised in the Christian world since the Reformation, in order to contextualise the late-modern rise of ‘religious history’ and the distinctiveness of Garnett’s work as a part of this development. Briefly stated, the Reformation gave rise to a ‘confessional’ tradition in writing the history of religion, which came under challenge from an ‘anthropological’ mode that first consolidated during the Enlightenment.

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1. For example, Jane Garnett and Colin Matthew (eds), *Revival and religion since 1700: essays for John Walsh* (London, 1993); Jane Garnett, Matthew Grimley, Alana Harris, William Whyte, and Sarah Williams (eds), *Redefining Christian Britain: post-1945 perspectives* (London, 2007); Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser, *Spectacular miracles: transforming images in Italy from the Renaissance to the present* (London, 2013); Jane Garnett and Alana Harris (eds), *Rescripting religion in the city: migration and religious identity in the modern metropolis* (Ashgate, 2013).

Only after the second world war did 'religious history', in tension with both these preceding frameworks, come into its own. Amidst a global scholarly movement towards reworking the historical study of religion, the integration of religious and intellectual history has been an especially fruitful aspect of research. Garnett's work offers a model of how to bring such a connection about and affords a continuing source of new problems and perspectives.

The oldest approach to religious history may be characterised as a 'confessional' type of ecclesiastical history. Still shaping historical work down to the present day, this category denotes a form of historical scholarship concerned with the Christian churches' apologetic needs or self-understanding: two analytical concerns which often converge, though not necessarily. Ecclesiastical history as a subject has its roots in the patristic period. The first church historian, Eusebius, treated the topic as a means of vouchsafing the continuity and orthodoxy of the church's teachings, at a time when the New Testament canon was still unstable.² Yet it was the much later dynamic of Reformation and Counter-Reformation that first institutionalised ecclesiastical history as a subject in European universities.³ As Protestants painted the papacy as a corruption of primitive Christianity, Catholics had to identify the popes more precisely and historically as the custodian of an unchanging 'tradition'.⁴ In this way, it was the confessionalisation of Europe during the sixteenth century that first drove the historicisation of Christianity, and vice versa. These processes had many later iterations, as successive conflicts called Protestants and Catholics to remember and re-remember their pasts in new situations. The consolidation of 'church party' divisions within the Victorian Church of England, and of nonconformist identities at the same time, were just two examples of religious movements which both drew energy from, and brought new dynamism into the study of 'ecclesiastical history' in the partisan sense which was, by then, already centuries old.⁵ This close relationship between denominational commitment and the writing of history remained deeply ingrained into the subject for many years. Discussing whom to invite to write a particular volume in the *Oxford History of the Christian Church*, Owen Chadwick, a great historian of the modern church, told his brother, Henry, an equally distinguished scholar of early Christianity, in a letter of 1976, that 'to get a non-R.C., to write R.C. history is to send him into a forest with man-traps under every bush'.⁶ Both men had taken Anglican orders, and can be seen, in longer-term retrospect, as late embodiments of a centuries-old connection between historical learning and Anglican churchmanship dating back to the Reformation.⁷ The confessional tradition in church history still persists, sometimes adding a tendentious or rigid colour to work written under its influence. It was nevertheless a sign of that tradition's capacity to generate formidable scholarship that Chadwick himself decided to write the volume he discussed in his letter. *The Popes and European Revolution* appeared in 1981.⁸

2. Euan Cameron, *Interpreting Christian history: the challenge of the churches' past* (Malden, MA, 2005), pp. 104–07.

3. Anthony Grafton, 'Church history in early modern Europe: tradition and innovation', in Katherine Van Liere, Simon Ditchfield, and Howard Louthan (eds), *Sacred history: uses of the Christian past in the Renaissance world* (Oxford, 2012), pp. 3–26; Simon Ditchfield, 'What was sacred history? (Mostly Roman) Catholic uses of the Christian past after Trent', *ibid.*, pp. 72–98.

4. Cf. Matthias Pöhl, *Zwischen Gelehrsamkeit und konfessioneller Identitätsstiftung: lutherische Kirchen- und Universalgeschichtsschreibung 1546–1617* (Tübingen, 2007); Stefan Bauer, *The invention of papal history: Onofrio Panvinio between Renaissance and Catholic reform* (Oxford, 2020).

5. J. Bennett, *God and progress: religion and history in British intellectual culture, 1845–1914* (Oxford, 2019).

6. Quoted in John Morrill, 'W. Owen Chadwick', *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, 21 (2024), p. 697–98.

7. Jean-Louis Quantin, *The Church of England and Christian antiquity: the construction of a confessional identity in the 17th century* (Oxford, 2009); James Kirby, *Historians and the Church of England: religion and historical scholarship, 1870–1920* (Oxford, 2016).

8. Owen Chadwick, *The popes and European revolution* (Oxford, 1981).

It was the rise of a second, ‘anthropological’ mode of history from the eighteenth century onwards that first enabled the history of ‘religion’ in general to be written independently of specific churches or theological systems. Later-sixteenth and seventeenth-century scholarship had fostered a new kind of critical and historical analysis of the differences between Christianity and pagan theologies.⁹ But the first work systematically to compare the religions of the world and their development over time appeared in the eighteenth century, with the publication of Bernard Picart’s and Jean Frederic Bernard’s *Religious Ceremonies and Customs of All the Peoples of the World*.¹⁰ First issued at Amsterdam from 1723 to 1737, and identifying a common tendency for different religions to degenerate over time from pure ideas of divinity into systems of superstition, the work was the product of Protestant partners working in a religiously tolerant centre of the early Enlightenment. From its earliest beginnings, therefore, the comparative history of religion tended to carry with it an anti-dogmatic edge. An inclination that encouraged the comparative analysis of religion, at one and the same time fostered a critical distance from theology as an intellectual enterprise or historical force. In the great age of evolutionary anthropology, as it developed in the nineteenth century, students of comparative religion, seeking a science of religion founded upon empirical evidence rather than doctrinal presupposition, tended to be either secularists or liberal Protestants.¹¹ The scientific quest interacted with a concern, variously configured, to purify religious thought from the residues of superstition in the present day. There accordingly grew up within the anthropology of religion a tendency to see theological ideas more as the by-product of social developments or the progress of knowledge, than as creative historical forces in their own right. As the French freethinker, Charles Letourneau, wrote in *L'évolution religieuses dans les diverses races humaines* (1892), ‘the great religions are simply the development of the smaller, of the gross fetichisms with which our exegetical doctors do not deign to concern themselves’.¹² Early anthropologists’ reflexive concentration on the ancient and non-European worlds reinforced an inclination to regard theological dogmas as primitive ‘survivals’. Maurice Vernes, liberal Protestant founding editor of the French *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, wrote in the first issue of the journal in 1880 that the *Revue* would concentrate on ‘the ancient and modern religions of the orient and the ancient religions of the occident’, so as not to jeopardise impartial science by touching upon questions of ecclesiastical controversy.¹³

The anthropological impetus had brought terms such as ‘religious evolution’ and ‘the history of religion’ into quite widespread use by the later nineteenth century. But these usages still tended to denote a comparative history of pre- or non-Christian religions, in a way that did not yet extend to church history, or to the autonomous power of ideas within it. Only after the Second World War did the notion begin to spread that the medieval and modern history of Christianity might also be a part of ‘religious history’ in the sense of a general history of beliefs and practices, studied in a way that was deliberately open to cross-confessional dialogue. This shift was not primarily the result of the percolation of anthropology into church history. It arose more immediately from religious intellectuals’

9. Cf. Dmitri Levitin, *The kingdom of darkness: Bayle, Newton, and the emancipation of the European mind from philosophy* (Cambridge, 2022), pp. 165–223.

10. Jean Frederic Bernard and Bernard Picart, *Ceremonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (11 vols in 9, Amsterdam, 1723–1743); cf. Lynn Hunt, Margaret C. Jacob, and Wijnand Mijnhardt, *The book that changed Europe: Picart and Bernard's Religious Ceremonies of the World* (Cambridge, MA, 2010). I am grateful to Jonathan Nathan for drawing my attention to Bernard's and Picart's work.

11. Arie L. Molendijk, ‘Introduction’, to idem and Peter Pels (eds), *Religion in the making: the emergence of the sciences of religion* (Leiden, 1998), p. 19.

12. C. Letourneau, *L'évolution religieuses dans les diverses races humaines* ([Paris], 2015), p. 9.

13. Maurice Vernes, ‘Introduction’, *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 1 (1880), p. 13.

desire to re-ground cultural and historical debate on renewed spiritual foundations amidst the crises of the twentieth century and the related rise of the ecumenical movement. Such a movement inherently tended to place a stronger emphasis upon the historical creativity of Christian theology and belief as forces understood on their own terms. Hans-Joachim Schoeps, from his unusual starting-point as a Jewish Prussian conservative who had survived Nazism, founded the *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* in 1948 as a platform for Jewish, Protestant and Catholic scholars to address one another on subjects arising from the continuum he perceived between religious and ‘spiritual’ or ‘intellectual’ history.¹⁴ Twelve years later, the *Journal of Religious History* was launched. It was no accident that the first Anglophone journal to enfranchise the term began in Australia, where inter-church cooperation had long been a strong feature of Protestant religious life.¹⁵ One of its founding editors, Bruce E. Mansfield, drew upon the language of the ecumenical movement in order to characterise the *Journal’s* objectives. In a field notorious, he considered, for ‘polemics and evasions’, ‘scholarly inquiry is an act on behalf of truth which makes possible honest conversations—between believers and non-believers, Christians and non-Christians, Catholics and Protestants.’¹⁶ In their reorientations of religious history, Schoeps and Mansfield, though writing on other sides of the world, shared a concern to elevate a newer, inter-confessional approach to history of over an older, intra-confessional one. They both emphasised the interest of religious history as a human phenomenon, the study of which need not require any particular normative value-commitment in religious questions. At the same time, their corresponding assumption that the study of religious history could still serve as a help to reflection on practical questions of religious life and its status in the present registered a continuity with older approaches to the history of religion, whether believing or secular. Frictions between the ideal of value-neutrality, and aspirations towards critique, seem inescapable in the pursuit of religious history, as in any other form of historical study.

How might ‘religious history’ be written in the here-and-now? Conceptualising religion as an agent within general history, with a dynamism as pronounced in modern as in pre-modern periods, holds especial potential in opening up the history of ideas to new analytical frameworks. Representing, in one sense, an Oxford manifestation of a wider, late-twentieth and 21st-century impetus towards freeing religious history from confessional categories, Jane Garnett’s work offers a particular stimulus to scholars interested in thus rethinking conventional divides between religious and secular subjects in intellectual history. A large part of her research has concentrated on nineteenth-century intellectual culture. A unifying feature of this corpus has been a persistent emphasis on integrating the history of Christian thought with the wider intellectual and cultural history of the time. Religious actors here emerge not solely as agents within Church history, but as responding to, and in turn reshaping, wider climates of debate. Garnett’s work on Victorian responses to the eighteenth-century Anglican philosopher, Joseph Butler, instantiates these characteristics. In an early essay on the uses to which Victorian critics put Butler, Garnett finely distinguished between the complex rhetorical stances Victorian Anglicans, Presbyterians, Catholics and unbelievers applied to his work, in order to construct not so much a blow-by-blow reception history, as an argument about the role that engagement with Butler’s work played in galvanising post-utilitarian moral and religious philosophy in universities

14. Hans-Joachim Schoeps, ‘Einleitung’, *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte*, 1 (1948), [p. 1]; cf. Micha Brumlik, *Preussisch, konservativ, jüdisch: Hans-Joachim Schoeps’ Leben und Werk* (Cologne, 2019).

15. Cf. Geoffrey Houghton, ‘Australia, New Zealand, and Oceania’, in *History of Global Christianity Online* (Brill), https://doi.org/10.1163/2589-5656_HGCO_fulltextxml_COM31900.

16. Bruce E. Mansfield, ‘Foreword’, to *Journal of Religious History* (June 1960), pp. 1–2.

and the public sphere.¹⁷ More recently, Garnett's exploration of the lifelong importance of Butler's thought for John Henry Newman has exposed how the complex legacies of Newman's Anglican period were diffracted through his emotional friendships, and concern to reconcile Catholicism and 'Englishness'.¹⁸ The focal points of Garnett's approach bear application in relation to other settings and problems. The insistence upon a careful historicisation of the interpretations placed upon a given figure or text calls attention to the scholarly importance, and interpretative potential, of peeling off and analysing past layers of partisanship in the course of getting to the core of the individuals who have made religious history. Garnett's interest in the integral interplay between theology and moral philosophy in the Victorian context makes a wider point, too, in suggesting the existence of creative interfaces between religious debate and modern spheres of knowledge. Resisting both an overly abstract type of intellectual history, and some historians' dismissiveness towards interiority, her work makes connections between thought, feeling, action and visibility in the lives of concrete individuals. The intellectual creativity of the approach is moreover sustained by a recognition that history is made by an open-ended interplay across boundaries between denominations, faiths and communities; and between the religious and the secular worlds. As an aid to human understanding, of which religious history is but an aspect, its value is permanent.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

None of the authors have a conflict of interest to disclose.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

17. Jane Garnett, 'Bishop Butler and the *Zeitgeist*: Butler and the development of Christian moral philosophy in Victorian Britain', in Christopher Cunliffe (ed.), *Joseph Butler's moral and religious thought: tercentenary essays* (Oxford, 1992), pp. [63]–96.

18. Jane Garnett, 'Joseph Butler', in Frederick D. Aquino and Benjamin King (eds), *The Oxford handbook of John Henry Newman* (Oxford, 2018), pp. 135–53.