

# Historical Theology: Content, methodology and relevance

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## ■ What is in a name? Quite a lot ...

South African universities and theological faculties are in a process of fundamental transformation and restructuring. In recent times, several theological faculties were closed or restructured to form part of faculties of arts. In general, theology is low on the list of priorities at tertiary institutions, especially in

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terms of funding. Theology is under pressure, and in the current academic environment, church history, in its traditional form, has all but disappeared from South African universities.

Church history is challenged not only by external factors such as the restructuring of universities but also by internal factors such as a tendency to function in isolation from other related disciplines. Denis (1997) articulates this as follows:

In South Africa, church history is an isolated discipline, almost completely cut off from the social sciences and from secular history in particular. Its academic status can be described as weak. (p. 84)

He is of the opinion that church historians are to blame for this situation because of their Eurocentric and church-specific approach to church history. Furthermore, church historians (as theologians) are not well educated in terms of normal historiographic methodologies. This criticism was voiced earlier by Maluleke (1995) in his PhD dissertation.

Another factor which is a great challenge to church history is the lack of interest in history as a subject as the research by Black (2014) points out. He is of the opinion that educational institutions in SA regard history as unimportant. In the National Department of Education, history is regarded as a 'dustbin subject' (Black 2014:360–361).<sup>42</sup> Teachers with little knowledge of history, an uninteresting curriculum, the general perception that history is unimportant and emphasis on natural science and mathematics resulted in dwindling numbers of learners interested in taking history as a subject in matric. Students start their theological education at university with very little knowledge of history and very little interest in studying history.

We make a last remark on the 'weak' position of church history in its traditional form. In the past, historians sometimes misused their knowledge of history for ideological purposes, including the justification of apartheid. History was used to exclude people,

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42. It is interesting to note that the #RhodesMustFall campaign has generated a renewed interest in the learning of history. The Department of Education is looking at making it a compulsory subject at schools.

to discriminate and to legitimise certain actions by church and government. As a result, church history is often regarded with suspicion, suspected of having one or other hidden agenda. Some church historians find it difficult to write history in a critical and responsible manner (see for instance Van Jaarsveld 1953; Maluleke 1995). This is of course not true of all church historians, but many examples could be presented where the ecclesial bias of historians is quite evident.

In this contribution, it is proposed that 'church history' should transform into 'historical theology'. However, the name 'historical theology' should be understood in a particular manner. Since Adolf von Harnack's (1851–1930) monumental *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* presented the theological world with an overview of Christian doctrine based on solid historical research, historical theology was often regarded as a history of doctrine. It is suggested here that the term 'historical theology' should be used in a more generic sense, almost as an umbrella term, which would include various subdisciplines such as history of doctrine and church history.

## ■ History and theology

McGrath (2001:380–405) is of the opinion that the relationship between faith and history could be regarded as the central theological question of the 20th century as it influenced many aspects of theology. Against this background, the relevance of historical theology is not only determined by its ability to preserve our factual knowledge of the past but by the contribution that historical theology makes to all theological discourse. In this section, some theologians (and philosophers) are mentioned very briefly just to illustrate the tension-filled relationship between history and theology.

## ■ Heidegger and Bultmann

There is much variety in the way in which theologians approach history. At the start of the 20th century, historians such as

Leopold von Ranke, philosophers such as G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx as well as theologians such as Adolf von Harnack and Ernst Troeltsch exerted a significant influence on historical sciences and theology (see Van Niftrik 1948:29–31). It took a new turn with the publication of Martin Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* ([1927] 1963) to place the question of human existence and historicity in the centre of the theological debate. The *eigentliche* of every human being is that we are always on our way through history (Dreyer 1974:11–12). Furthermore, Heidegger frees historical research from the subject-object scheme (Pieterse 1979:29). Historical documents do not only convey historical facts but articulate human existence. Vice versa, understanding human existence is one of the important requirements for the proper understanding of historical texts.

Later in his life, Heidegger placed more emphasis on the interpretation of texts (Palmer 1969:141) and language as the space of human existence. Our understanding of human existence and historicity can never be divorced from language because language reveals the essence (*Sein*) of human existence (West 1996:104). Language transcends the individual subject and existence.

Rudolf Bultmann follows Heidegger and develops a very specific understanding of history. Bultmann's affinity to Heidegger has been researched extensively (see Macquarrie 1955). In his *Gifford Lectures*, Bultmann (1955) developed his understanding of history and eschatology, and two fundamental questions were put on the agenda, '[h]ow should we understand historical documents as it [sic] developed within a specific tradition' (Bultmann 1955:6–7) and 'what is the nature of historical knowledge' (Bultmann 1955:110). He also enters into the debate on the objectivity of historical research and historical knowledge.

## **Barth**

Although not known as a church historian, Karl Barth was probably one of the most erudite church historians of the 20th century and wrote major works on Anselm, Calvin, history of doctrine

and the history of Protestant theology. With the publication of his *Römerbrief* (1919 [1963]), following Søren Kierkegaard, Barth placed much emphasis on the dialectical tension between time and eternity or between man and God (McGrath 2001:107). Barth describes history as a conversation between past and present wisdom as ‘... *ein fortgesetztes, immer ausrichtigeres und eindringenderes Gespräch zwischen der Weisheit von gestern und der Weisheit von morgen, die eine und dieselbe ist*’ (Barth [1919] 1963:v).

Barth had a major influence on many younger theologians such as Ebeling, Bromiley and McGrath and their understanding of historical theology and theology in general. In 1932, the first part of Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* appeared. He writes (KD I/1/1), ‘*Dogmatik ist als theologische Disziplin die wissenschaftliche Selbstprüfung der christlichen Kirche hinsichtlich des Inhalts der ihr eigentümlichen Rede von Gott ...*’ Barth emphasises the ecclesial and Scriptural nature of theology. According to him, theological reflection should not depart from the religious feelings of humanity (Schleiermacher) but rather reflect on God and the self-revelation of God in history through his Word. All theology should be of service to the church and the proclamation of the gospel.

## **Ebeling**

Shortly after World War 2, Gerhard Ebeling (1912–2001) was appointed as lecturer in Church History at the University of Tübingen. He immediately published his *Kirchengeschichte als Geschichte der Auslegung der Heiligen Schrift* (Ebeling 1947) in which he used the German term ‘Geschichtstheologie’. In this publication, he sets out certain principles for the study of church history. Ebeling places much emphasis on the relevance of historical knowledge for all theological disciplines as well as for the church in its proclamation of the gospel. Like Barth, Ebeling is of the opinion that theological reflection should be of service to the church and the proclamation of the gospel. If historical theology would facilitate knowledge of the history of

Biblical interpretation, it would be of immense benefit to the proclamation of the gospel and as such an indispensable part of theological education for ministry. Historical theology must be of service to exegesis, preaching, liturgy and ecclesial order (Ebeling 1947:22-28). Ebeling places the hermeneutical question in the centre of theological endeavours (Palmer 1969:52). As a result, he regards historical theology as a history of Biblical interpretation.

Ebeling (1947:6-9; 1954:5-6) is of the opinion that theology should consist of hermeneutics (exegesis of Biblical texts), historical theology, systematic theology and PT. He pleads for an open discourse on relevant topics between the various theological and other disciplines. He regards the silos in which the various disciplines function as detrimental to proper theological discourse and not to the benefit of the church (Ebeling 1954:6). Ebeling finds the commonality between the various theological disciplines in the fact that all theology should be based on the interpretation of Scripture. Against this background, Ebeling is of the opinion that systematic theology and historical theology should open the lines of communication with much closer co-operation.

Later in his life, Ebeling placed more emphasis on the interpretation of texts, instead of trying to establish objective and 'true' knowledge of history. Under the influence of Martin Heidegger, he also places much focus on language as 'event'. History is understood as a language event (Palmer 1969:53). Language creates reality and shapes history. As a result, Ebeling is better known among philosophers for his contribution to hermeneutics and among practical theologians for his 'New Homiletic' (see Pieterse 1979). In contrast, church historians rarely mention Ebeling despite his publications on the method and content of historical theology (see Ebeling 1947, 1954). A few exceptions are J.A.A.A. Stoop (1978:112), Graham Duncan (2005:58), Jeremy Punt (2006:892) and J.P. Labuschagne (2008), who all mention Ebeling in one or two sentences without any detailed discussion.

## Bromiley

Geoffrey W. Bromiley (1915–2009) published his *Historical theology* in 1978 (Bromiley 1978). In the introduction (Bromiley 1978), he writes:

An ideal historical theology – or even an introduction to it – lies beyond the limits of human possibility. Indeed, even the ideas of the ideal differ so broadly that what might approximate the ideal for some falls hopelessly short for others. Writing a historical theology involves a venture and rests on a series of choices of aim, method, matter and approach, choices which are in some sense arbitrary and all of which are open to dispute. (pp. xxi–xxix)

Bromiley continues to explain his aim, method, content and approach to historical theology. In his approach, he places the emphasis not primarily on the origin and historical development of doctrine but rather on the individual theologians, their contribution to the church and their role in the history of the church. Bromiley (1978) also makes an important remark when he says the following:

Historical theology is not just a history of Christian theology but is itself theology. Hence the observer ceases to be an observer and becomes a participant. He is himself a Christian doing theology in its historical dimension. (p. xxv)

According to this approach, a historical theologian is primarily a theologian and not an historian. Following Karl Barth, Bromiley (1978:xxvi) is of the opinion that historical theology has a very important function in describing the way in which theologians and the church engaged with the Word of God through the centuries. It should also be regarded as a discipline which is practised to the benefit of the church (Bromiley 1978:xxviii) and serves the ministry and mission of the church.

## McGrath

In recent times, Alister E. McGrath had a major influence on the content, structure, methodology and teaching of historical theology through his various publications (see for instance

McGrath 2001, 2013). McGrath (2013) describes historical theology as follows:

[T]he branch of theological inquiry which aims to explore the historical development of Christian doctrines, and identify the factors which were influential in their formulation and adoption. Historical theology therefore has direct and close links with the disciplines of church history and systematic theology. (p. 8)

In comparison to Bromiley who structures his approach according to individual theologians in various historical periods, McGrath places more emphasis on the history of doctrine in his approach to historical theology. However, reading his publications, one is struck by a strong sense of history, a clear understanding of the context within which certain doctrines developed. This underlines McGrath's view that the interface between church history and systematic theology is quite pronounced. Therefore it makes sense, as in many faculties across the globe, to have a 'Department of systematic and historical theology' as will be the case at the UP.

In the following section, some remarks are made on the content and structure of historical theology, based on some of the ideas of the abovementioned theologians as well as the practical situation of teaching historical theology at the UP.

## ■ **Historical theology: Content and structure**

### ■ **Introductory remarks**

The traditional approach to church history is to divide it into four periods (Early Church, Medieval Period, Reformation and Modern Period) and to describe the main events and personalities of a certain period. Well-known examples of this approach are Bakhuizen van den Brink (1980) who divided his *Kerkgeschiedenis* into four volumes corresponding with the four periods. Bromiley (1978) also followed these periods in his *Historical theology* but in a more nuanced manner.

Reventlow (2009) divided his *Epochen von Bibelauslegung* into four volumes, following the four periods, and McGrath (2013) followed the same pattern in his *Historical theology*.

We are of the opinion that the structure and content of historical theology should not be determined by only one aspect such as period or a particular content. Historical theology consists of diverse elements, determined *inter alia* by the approved curriculum, pedagogical principles, context (Africa), internationally recognised fields of research, ecclesial tradition and the need to train well-equipped candidates for ministry. With this in mind, it is suggested that historical theology be structured and organised in seven subsections:

- introduction to historical theology
- history of churches
- history of theology
- history of missions
- public theology
- church polity
- ecumenical history.

This approach to historical theology is quite daunting in its scope and content. It will require a high level of specialisation, especially in terms of research (Vosloo 2009:56–57). However, it provides a thematic structure which enables a contextual approach to reading, understanding, interpreting and applying history. The focus on ‘context’ as a key indicator and factor in the study of church history is extremely important. For example, in our endeavour to teach church history at the UP, it has become our practice to relate periods of early, middle and reformation history to the African context. The stress on context draws us into the expansion of ideas that emanate from the African experience and encounter rather than simply rely on Western influences and interpretations. The focus on themes rather than on specified periods in history opens the doors for contextual engagement and the quest for Africanisation. This we consider to be absolutely essential in the quest for relevance and application to our own context and experience.

## □ Introduction to historical theology

An introduction to historical theology will not only reflect on the origin, methodology and aim of historical theology as discussed above but should also ask three questions.

The first question is: *What is the church?* Ebeling made the point that our understanding of the nature of the church (ecclesiology) is of fundamental importance to historical theology. The way in which the church manifests empirically in different contexts and in different traditions is the subject matter of historical-comparative ecclesiology (see Kärkkäinen 2003). It is also important to the study of the ecumenical movement and ecumenical ecclesiology during the modern period. The history of the church is the history of God's Church. It is thus important to keep in mind this bigger picture and not reduce it to mere denominational interest. While the Department of Church History and Church Polity at the UP is keenly supported by certain participating denominations, our focus is to expand this to research, understanding and stressing the universal (catholic) nature of the church.

The second question is: *What is history?* It is important to understand history and humanity in its historicity. To this extent, a sound knowledge of the philosophy of history is important. Questions regarding time and eternity, the meaning and purpose of history, the method of historical enquiry and the relationship between subject and object all need attention (see Berkhof 1958; Brunner 1953; Bultmann 1964; Cullmann [1946] 1962; 1965; Dreyer 1974; Ebeling 1954; Van Oordt 2012). To simply study history as past events has no bearing on the present or shaping of the future. The latter elements are crucial to the studying of history. As Cairns (1996:17) puts it, '[h]istory as event is absolute, occurring only once in time and space; but history as information, inquiry, and interpretation is relative and subject to change'. Cairns' definition further reminds us that research is not done in an ivory tower. He sees in this the need for the contextualisation and communication of events.

The third question is: *What is the meaning of history?* Historical enquiry helps us to understand human existence and the realities we have to contend with. It assists with making sense of historical events. It even helps us to find meaning in life. Dreyer (1974) describes it as follows:

Die historikus moet die verlede op so 'n wyse beskrywe dat dit sinvol is. Dit beteken dat ons beskrywing 'n koherente verhaal is wat reg laat geskied aan die wese van die mens as mens, maar tegelykertyd die spesifieke mens in sy spesifieke leefwêreld beskrywe ... Sinvolle beskrywing is dus waar en dit berus op drie grondpilare: die noukeurige kennis van die verlede, die samehangende beskrywing en die intuïtiewe insig in die mens as medemens. (pp. 83-84)

This implies that historical research is not so much about 'objective' truth and historical facts but rather about making sense of the past, of understanding why things happened. It is not only a question of what happened but rather why it happened. This focus sheds light on human activity, which is significant in the sense that it enlarges our understanding of the past and of the present and that it contributes to meaningful thinking about the future.

## **History of churches**

In this subsection of historical theology, the history of specific churches is studied. This also includes specific events or personalities in such churches. It could be regarded as a 'history from below' (Vosloo 2009:59-60) where the forgotten and marginalised people are recalled, the little stories which disappeared behind the grand narratives.

Ebeling (1947:20) is of the opinion that a 'history of Christianity' (for instance Latourette [1964] whose *History of Christianity* covers 1513 pages) is practically impossible and not worth much. However, it could be argued that a general knowledge of church history is important to all theologians, even if it is just for their general education and as reference to their own fields of expertise.

## □ History of theology

The various approaches discussed above (history of biblical interpretation, history of doctrine, history of individual theologians) could all form part of a subsection 'history of theology'. As such, a history of theology would study the life and contribution of individual theologians, theological movements (Dialectical Theology, Liberation Theology, Black Theology, etc.) as well as the development of doctrine in various traditions and churches. The historical background to these theologies is vital to understand the context in which they emerged and to see how they can be relevantly applied to another experience. For example, Liberation Theology has been applied in many different contexts in the world.

## □ History of missions

If we understand the church as part of the *missio Dei* and the church as essentially apostolic, history of missions is simultaneously a history of the church (Bosch [1991] 2006:390). The history-of-missions movements in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and other parts of the world are at the same time a history of the church. A study of the history of missions shows how the church has been involved in the world throughout the ages. This is often reflected, sometimes controversially, in the writings and records of missionaries.

## □ Public theology

The inclusion of public theology within the ambit of historical theology would require more explanation as this is normally not the case. We are, however, of the opinion that there is a case to be made for this view, considering the nature of public theology. Gerard Mannion (2009) describes various definitions and approaches to public theology. He (Mannion 2009:122) points out that, throughout the history of the Christian church,

there had always been public theology or ‘theology in the public square’. Jesus Christ preached in public places and confronted the authorities (civil and religious) with their moral bankruptcy, explaining the values of the kingdom of God (Mannion 2009:128). This was continued during the early development of the Christian church (the best known example is the apostle Paul’s discussion of a Christian’s relation to the government and emperor in Romans 13). Augustine’s *City of God* is a classic text, written in the context of a Roman Empire which was in decline, facing major political, social and moral collapse. During the Medieval and Reformation eras, there was a continuous stream of theologians who struggled with questions of how faith should relate to evolving patterns of social and political change. These included theologians such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–1275), Marsilius of Padua (1275–1342), William of Ockham (1288–1348), Margery Kempe (1373–1438), Ignatius de Loyola (1491–1556) and Mary Ward (1585–1645) as well as Luther and Calvin during the Reformation (Mannion 2009:132).

The same point is made by Roger Haight (2005:81) when he argues that, during the Reformation, it became clear that the relationship between the church and society is forever dynamic and changing, resulting in a particular ecclesial identity. No church or religion ever functions or exists in isolation. Society influences the identity of the church and the shape of faith, and religion equally influences the identity of society. Consequently, there is a close connection between sacred and secular history. They constitute a polarity: They are interdependent concepts – not opposites, not contradictory but existing in a tension. As Avis (2003:53) points out, ‘... both sacred and secular are constellations of meaning denoting significance for human life in society’.

Most would agree that public theology is social, political and practical in nature. Mannion (2009:122) is of the opinion that the ‘best public theology involves theological hermeneutics in the service of moral, social and political praxis’. In public theology, questions of ethics, ecclesiology and being church with integrity is of constant importance. This was illustrated in the 20th century in

Nazi Germany, especially by theologians like Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Karl Barth as well as the Barmen Declaration which became a classic text of public theology (Mannion (2009:137). The Belhar Confession could also be included in this line of classical texts.

Over the last three decades, public theology has become so popular that it is impossible to give a complete overview (see Mannion 2009:126–132). Suffice it to mention that it is an area of theology where one has to tread carefully in order to avoid the pitfalls of generalisation, lack of nuanced historical discourse, exclusivism, hypocrisy and a pessimistic world view. Public theology requires sound knowledge of social and ecclesial history.

## □ **Church polity**

Church polity is a theological discipline which builds on ecclesiology and understanding the church within a very specific context (Koffeman 2009:11). Church polity is imbedded in a specific ecclesial tradition and history (Van Wyk 1992:294). When church polity is studied as *ius constitutum*, the history of the church as well as the present situation of the church are of the utmost importance. One of the noticeable observations we make today is the need for the cross-pollination of ideas related to church polity. In this sense, it becomes necessary to interact on different understandings of church polity which enriches and informs church-specific practices. In this respect, mission ecclesiology and ecumenical ‘ecclesiology’ is increasingly becoming attractive to denominational institutions. It is thus imperative that church polity should be taught with this interactive method in mind.

## □ **Ecumenical history**

Ecumenical movements have helped churches and Christians all over the world to reflect on and engage with different realities and common experiences. World bodies such as the World Council of Churches (WCC) and The World Communion of Reformed Churches have directed the churches to global issues

such as poverty, racism, climate change, economic justice and gender justice. These themes have helped churches to reflect on and engage with broader realities and global matters. In SA, the South African Council of Churches played an instrumental role in dismantling apartheid. Tracing the origins, work and witness of these ecumenical movements is imperative in understanding and appreciating the history of the church in the world. Ecumenical issues and the opportunities offered by religious pluralism and concerns for justice and equality have led us to become more sensitive to differences of opinion and approach. They have also indicated the need for church history to broaden its relationship with other related (theological) disciplines.

## ■ Conclusion

In placing Church History in a theological curriculum, there can be many overlapping interests with other disciplines, for example history of missions, history of the Bible and exegesis, history of spirituality and systematic theology. In this chapter, we argued that 'church history' should transform into 'historical theology'. We examined the various approaches to historical theology and with this broad understanding, indicated how this might shape the restructuring of church history at the UP, both in curriculum transformation and departmental structure.

## ■ Summary: Chapter 5

In this contribution, the authors reflect on historical theology as theological discipline. The authors propose that historical theology be applied to different areas of research, namely prolegomena, history of the church, history of missions, history of theology, history of ecumenical theology or public theology and church polity. The point is made that historical theology, when properly structured and presented, could play a major role in enriching the theological and ecclesial conversation and in assisting the church in the process of reformation and transformation.

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