

THE CONFERENCE ON FAITH AND HISTORY AND THE STUDY OF EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY

by

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I would like to begin by proposing an ideal for the research activities of a member of the Conference on Faith and History (CFH) engaged in the study of American history before 1865. Then, using our newsletter and *Fides et Historia* as sources, I would like to look at some of the things that members of the Conference have been studying in this chronological period. Then I would like to offer suggestions for how we might relate our particular concerns to those of our profession as a whole.

Ideally, it seems to me that we should be doing at least four things in our historical work: First, we should be speaking *in* the profession. The members of the CFH ought to be engaged in the ongoing regimen of primary research; we ought to be working to create better interpretive models to explain the results of that primary source research; and we should be publishing the final products of that research in the places where it receives the most serious attention and the most searching criticism. Second, the members of the CFH should be speaking *to* the profession as well. From us should proceed a clear confession that the existence of a creating and redeeming God must influence historical perceptions. We need to communicate forthrightly that human beings act as agents responsible to God as well as to the situations of this life. We need to affirm to our fellow historians that social relationships and institutions are sustained by God.

As Christian historians, thirdly, we live not only in our profession but in the church, the company of the redeemed. Beyond speaking to our fellow historians, then, we should be speaking *to* the church. With our expertise we need to illuminate shameful aspects of the Christian past to avoid unworthy parts to emulate. We need to remind Christians how difficult it is to pin down supernatural action in post-biblical epochs. We need to wean the church from an uncritical acceptance of current culture as normative. In this latter regard, if I may ride my hobby for a moment, Christian historians need to proclaim early and late that a judicious reading of early American history cannot justify the belief that the United States is, or ever was, the apple of God's eye. Fourth, but even as

Christian historians speak to the church, they should be conscious of speaking *in* the church as well. As Christians with a transcendent scale of values, we know that our mundane and very time-consuming efforts for our local churches, our families, and our schools are not wasted motion keeping us from our "more important" professional pursuits. Our participation in the church, that is, should keep before us the many dimensions beyond the professional study of history in seeking first the kingdom of God.

So much for the ideal: speaking in and to the profession, speaking to and in the church. What about the real? What are those members of the CFH interested in early American history actually doing? To get at this question, I have allowed myself to be swept up by one of our hottest methodologies. Herewith, therefore, some cliometry of the rudest and crudest sort for early American studies in the CFH. By paging through a complete run of *Fides et Historia* and through the last five newsletters, I have tried to observe more particularly the kinds of work we do.¹ The defects in my method are many and so obvious as to be embarrassing. Many members of the conference, I know from personal experience, do not report their books, articles, papers, or lectures to the newsletter. In addition, my skill at divining the specific content of an article or lecture from just its title is something less than it should be. And, unfortunately for this type of overview, by no means every practicing Christian student of American history is a member of our group. Notwithstanding these and other serious limitations, let me offer the results of my primitive survey.

Since *Fides et Historia* began its career, it has published fifteen articles that deal with American history before 1865. Due no doubt to the bicentennial emphasis of recent years, eight of the fifteen concern themselves with the Revolutionary period. Two treat aspects of the Great Awakening, two deal with the period 1800-1865 (articles on Dwight and Finney) and three involve broader themes ranging over all of early American history. In terms of the nature of the articles, two are bibliographical, one is a comparison of a modern phenomenon with a historical one, and twelve are discussions of individual themes, people, and events. As one might expect for a journal like *Fides et Historia*, all of the articles could be classified roughly as church history. In light of what I will say later, it is noteworthy that no article appeared which combined historical theory and research on a specific topic.

Table 1

FIDES ET HISTORIA ARTICLES ON EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY

<i>Periods</i> (total=15)		<i>Type</i>	
Great Awakening	2	Individual topics	12
Revolutionary	8	Bibliographical	2
19th century	2	"Presentist"	1
Broad themes	3		

The books, articles, and lectures reported in the newsletter offer us a fuller glimpse at what our members have been doing. I identified fifty-nine items in the last five newsletters as treating some aspect of American history before 1865. To say something meaningful about these items, I asked four questions: How many could be classified as church or religious history? How many dealt with denominational history, or the history of other well-defined religious groups? What period of early American history did the items fall into? And finally, what kind of historical treatment did these items represent—intellectual, political, biographical, etc.? Keeping in mind the crudity of the survey, here is what I discovered.

Of the fifty-nine items, forty-three (73%) were clearly identifiable as church history, while sixteen (27%) were not. Secondly, of the fifty-nine items, six (10%) could not be located in the colonial period, twenty-five (42%) in the Revolutionary period, twenty (34%) in the nineteenth century, and eight (14%) dealt with themes stretching across these periods. Finally, the fifty-nine items included a wide variety of approaches: thirty (51%) could be classed as intellectual history (including religious and political studies focusing on beliefs rather than events); eight (14%) could be classed as local histories; seven (12%) as social history (community, educational, adolescent, immigration, economic—with most supplied by Robert Swierenga); four (7%) as biographies; 3 (5%) as histories of specific institutions; 3 (5%) as military history; 3 (5%) as political history; 1 (2%) as cartography.

Table 2

CONFERENCE ON FAITH AND HISTORY NEWSLETTER ITEMS
ON EARLY AMERICAN HISTORY (May 1975-May 1977)

<i>Church history?</i> (total=59)		<i>Denominational interests</i> (total=59)	
Yes	43	Individual denominations	19
No	16	Others	40
<i>Periods</i> (total=59)		<i>Types of history</i> (total=59)	
Colonial	6		

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Revolutionary	25	Intellectual*	30
19th century	20	local	8
Broad themes	8	social†	7
		biographical	4
		institutional	3
		political	3
		military	3
		cartographic	1

*including politics and religion as beliefs

†including community, educational, childhood, immigration, and economic

From this brief analysis it would seem that the “typical” product of our research and writing would be an intellectual study of a religious development during the Revolutionary period, with a fair chance that the study would concentrate on a specific denominational group. Thus, a nomination for the “typical” essay could be Robert G. Clouse’s “Brethren in a Revolutionary Era,” or even my own “Tory Believers: Which Higher Loyalty?”² Bicentennial concerns, along with recent interest in the roots of modern groups, have undoubtedly skewed the results of my survey.

With the background provided by this rough analysis, let me now go on to relate this work to larger concerns of the profession. I would like to do this with two general suggestions. The first is that we make more serious efforts to transcend our provincial concerns, without at the same time sacrificing the advantages we enjoy as advocates of an identifiable position. We should, that is, plunge right in to the areas of greatest ferment in the profession today. Or, to mangle metaphors, we need to pitch in where the battles are hottest while, however, keeping the home fires burning.

I am talking about interdisciplinary history which relates heavily on the research and explanatory models provided by the social sciences. If a personal testimony is in order at this point, I have been greatly encouraged by the work of CFH members who are pioneering in the use of quantification and social science models for historical research. To the extent that these methods give us meaningful, if hitherto neglected, questions to ask about the past, our members should hasten to employ them. From the little bits of Robert Swierenga’s work that I have read—on Civil War politics and on the problems of quantification itself, for example—I am

not only enlightened but also encouraged to explore for myself the digital approach to history.³ Similarly, I have been challenged by the way in which Harry Stout, a Calvin graduate and a Swierenga student now at the University of Connecticut, is using quantification and social science models to explore the kinds of religious issues which CFH members have usually approached through intellectual history.⁴ To all and sundry I would highly recommend Stout's article, "Culture, Structure, and the 'New' History: A Critique and an Agenda."⁵ This piece sets out with amazing erudition the strengths as well as some unexamined shortcomings of the quantitative and social science approaches to history.

Work like Swierenga's and Stout's is encouraging because it sustains the capacity of Christian historians to speak in the profession. If we desire our own particular concerns to receive a hearing among our peers, it certainly is necessary for all of us to become familiar with what is still called the "new" history. And it would certainly be good for more of us to become experts in the newer methodologies so that future summaries in our newsletter not be so overweighted toward traditional studies of religious matters pursued through intellectual history.

Hastily, before someone fires Jacques Barzun's *Clio and the Doctors* at my head, allow me to qualify this paean to newer methodologies by some reflections on our concerns as Christian historians.⁶ As stimulating as the new histories are, they do often make headway at the expense of the individual acts and choices of the past. To prevent history's reduction into the covering laws of social science, even more to prevent its deterioration into an argot incommunicable to the interested undergraduate, Christians of all historians must keep the individual acts of individual people front and center on the research agenda. In fact, Christian historians may very well have a key role to play in reminding the profession in these days that covering laws are of great value precisely because they illuminate study of personal choices rather than making such study obsolete. For those to whom the "new" history looms as the sole royal way to universal, I recommend the sharp corrective administered by Edwin Van Kley in his essay, "History as a Social Science: A Christian's Response."⁷

A second reflection on the use of the "new" history is that such work need not replace the traditional concerns of the CFH. Intellectual history, the histories of individual denominations, and biographies of religious leaders do not need to give way before the

onslaught of the new methodologies. But these kinds of history will be enriched, their meaningfulness will be heightened, if they take account of the demographic, sociological, and anthropological studies being produced in early American history. To cite a personal example, I am interested in the evolution of Calvinist theology in the eighteenth century. If I approach this subject as if it were hermetically sealed from other aspects of eighteenth-century life, the results of my research will be much the poorer for neglecting newer studies in ideology, the popular perceptions of law, and the actual religious behavior of the inarticulate masses of eighteenth-century Americans. The CFH can be justly proud of what could be styled the "old-fashioned" histories that its members have produced: Keith Sprunger on William Ames, Richard McMaster on the Mason family in Virginia, Nathan Hatch on millennialism in Revolutionary New England, George Marsden on New School Presbyterianism, and Timothy Smith on the Nazarenes to mention only a few.⁸ Much of the great value of these works produced by our members is their openness to the insights offered by a wide variety of history. The value of our future scholarship will depend even more heavily on how well we can exploit the new histories.

One final reflection on the use of the new historical methodologies is appropriate. You may feel as I do that it is a near impossibility to take advantage of these newer methodologies, to become either an expert practitioner or a knowledgeable exploiter for traditional concerns. The prospect of "re-tooling" of either skills or reading is frightening. Equally frightening may be the prospect that quantification or interdisciplinary history will replace our legitimate concerns for traditional denominational, intellectual, and biographical study.

In the face of these real difficulties, and as a means to take advantage of new methodologies without abandoning the old, let me propose three strategies: (1) *Teamwork*. Although the history departments of our individual institutions may not include a group of individuals working on common concerns, the CFH and the wider community of Christian historians certainly does. By its very nature, the new histories demand close cooperation among those who have mastered various specialities. Although it goes against the grain of American religious individualism, we too should make an effort to enlist our colleagues in well-conceived research projects. (2) *Grants*. The several programs of the National Endowment for the Humanities for college teachers are ideal vehicles for getting

into newer studies. The NEH seminars are conducted by leading scholars during the summer and also during the school year. They offer released time to do the serious reading and reflection that are necessary to keep abreast of current historical work. Not every application for an NEH or other grant will be successful, but some do make it. And these offer just the opportunities for study necessary to keep speaking in the profession. (3) *Lobbying*. History teachers need to be more aggressive and more effective in presenting their case to the powers that be in their institutions. Whether in state schools or private colleges of a Christian or secular character, historians need to press home how essential it is for their institutions to provide scholars time for research and concentrated study. The funding crunch has been with us for some time, and it will probably get worse. But historians must not be daunted. To pluck the fruits from the trees of recent research takes time, and we must not let our bosses forget it.

So much, then, for leaping into the issues of current concern within the profession. By way of summary, let me repeat that I think the members of the CFH need to move beyond our current interests into the mainstream of contemporary historical research. We need, however, to do this without neglecting the personal agent as the ultimate reference in historical study. And we must not abandon the very valuable things we are doing now, but allow them to be enriched by the newer histories. I've suggested teamwork, grants, and lobbying as strategies for reaping the harvest of newer methodologies.

It might be asked at this point whether my advice does not represent a sell-out to "the world," letting it set an agenda which we slavishly follow. This could indeed be the case if we did not go on to ask for a specifically Christian approach to the use of the newer methodologies. Such an approach, combining theoretical reflection and specific research, would strive for a logic of explanation for early American history that is both historically sophisticated and Christian. Such a logic would require serious concentration on theoretical matters—what, if anything, can even a Christian historian say about God's work in any individual historical situation? Where, if anyplace, can the Christian convictions about man as responsible agent stand in scientific explanations for behavior? What openness to divine influence, if any, can a Christian expect to argue for in the analysis of methodologies. These are the types of philosophical questions with which historians are often very uneasy, but

they are the ones we must deal with if we as Christians are to use the newer models of historical explanation as servants rather than see them become our lords.⁹

This attempt to construct a way of explaining early American history must, therefore, take theoretical questions seriously. It must deal straightforwardly with the assumptions, the controlling beliefs, of both Christian conviction and scientific explanation. It must also be engaged in serious primary source research. It requires not only an examination of theory but an immersion in data, not only speculation but the dusty digging through printed works and manuscript records, not only lots of reflection but lots of *Sitzfleisch*. For if our theory is not matched by research, we will become smug ideologues who have all the answers and can't be troubled with the facts. Or to be immersed in historical particulars with inarticulate assumptions about what they can mean is to have unregimented facts milling blindly in search of formation.

What, concretely, would such an effort entail? It would mean that our research and writing would arise less from the ephemeral demands of the moment and more from settled convictions about which paths of research lead to the most significant findings. I say this, ironically enough, after having spent the last three or four years writing articles and a book about Christians in the American Revolution. So much the worse, if need be, for work like this. To redeem such study which is so much related to immediate concerns we must be sure to do it with one eye cocked to longer range and more profound questions.

It would mean, secondly, a greater concern for dialogue with members of our profession at large. We need to know what is going on in the American Society of Church History, the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and in the many specialized organizations that abound in the study of U.S. history. We should also try harder to contribute to such groups wherever possible, and to let members of these organizations critique our own work.

What would histories of America before 1865 look like if they were undertaken with a desire to include up-to-date research and a Christian point of view? Let me take one area I know a little bit about. Serious students of the Great Awakening by members of our conference certainly should not be undertaken as they might have been 100 years ago—to score easy denominational points, or to trumpet the religious wellsprings of the American nation. It

goes without saying that students of the Great Awakening ought to be fully conversant with the intellectual histories of Perry Miller and Alan Heimert, and the religious studies of E. S. Gaustad and C. C. Goen.¹⁰ Similarly it is necessary to come to terms with the social history of Rhys Isaac, the psycho-social issues raised by Richard Bushman, and the demographic studies of Kenneth Lockridge.¹¹ Soon it will be necessary to take account also of Harry Stout's reconstruction of the rhetoric of the Awakening.¹² Having brought all these points of view to bear on his or her work, however, the Christian historian still must hold to at least the possibility that forces were at work in the revival which resist explanation by naturalistic methodologies. The Christian historian might confess in prefaces and personal conversation that he regards these irreducible forces as divine. In the work itself the Christian historian may very well offer alternate explanations for these unexplained elements which include the possibility of transcendent influence. If theoretical homework has been done, the Christian historian of the Great Awakening should be able to make these kinds of statements without becoming an apologist or a polemicist. But to make them in the marketplace of ideas will require thorough exploitation of the best research from the newer methodologies as well as sophisticated consideration of theoretical issues in historical explanation.

The same kind of approach would, I think, yield similar results in other areas. The sophistication of Puritan studies is certainly at a level where this kind of theoretical-cum-particular work is appropriate. (It is noteworthy, in passing, that with the exception of Keith Sprunger, CFH members are not particularly active in Puritan studies, which would seemingly be a "natural" for people with our commitments.) Other areas of research may prove more difficult to work toward a Christian logic of historical explanation: colonial social patterns, the military history of the War for Independence, slavery, nineteenth-century reform movements, ante-bellum sectionalism, the impact of the Civil War, and the immensely complicated subject of modernization. In each of these, however, the agenda would be the same:

- (1) to make thorough use of new and old methodologies;
- (2) to pursue carefully defined projects of primary source research;
- (3) to get inside the internal structure of currently popular ways of explaining the events of early American history;

- (4) to pursue the implications of what it means for people and events to be ruled by the creator of heaven and earth.

Certainly not every Christian historian is going to be equally active in pursuing this overall task, or even one part of it. But when writing our articles for popular audiences in religious periodicals, no less than in preparing technical discussions of particular topics for our professional peers, it would be well to remember our overarching goal—to be not only good historians, but good Christian historians.

When we look at the intellectual vitality of the study of American history today, we are challenged not to rest until our questions about the past are as wide and as deep as the past itself—which means of course that we will never rest in our own research and in reading the research of others. When we consider what it means to be Christians involved in the study of American history, we are challenged not to rest until our historical explanations are brought into the circle of Christian explanation—until, that is, our historical sensitivity to God's work in the world is as vital as our affirmation that he is indeed active among men.

NOTES

1. *Fides et Historia* through volume IX, number 2 (Spring 1977); newsletters of May 1975, November 1975, May 1976, November 1976, and May 1977.

2. Robert G. Clouse, "Brethren in a Revolutionary Era," *Brethren History and Life* (Winter 1977); Mark A. Noll, "Tory Believers: Which Higher Loyalty?" *Christianity Today*, July 2, 1976.

3. Robert P. Swierenga, "The Ethnic Voter and the First Lincoln Election," *Beyond the Civil War Synthesis*, ed. Robert P. Swierenga (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1975); "Computers and American History: The Impact of the 'New' Generation," *Journal of American History*, 60 (March 1974): 1045-1070.

4. For example, Harry S. Stout, "Ethnicity: The Vital Center of Religion in America," *Ethnicity*, 2 (1975): 204-224; "University Men in New England 1620-1660: A Demographic Analysis," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4 (Winter 1974): 375-400.

5. Stout, "Culture Structure, and the 'New' History: A Critique and an Agenda," *Computers and the Humanities*, 9 (1975): 213-230.

6. Jacques Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors: Psycho-History, Quanto-History, and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974) presents a scathing denunciation of the newer methodologies.

7. Edwin Van Kley, "History as a Social Science: A Christian Response," *A Christian View of History?* eds George Marsden and Frank Roberts (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975).

8. Keith Sprunger, *The Learned Doctor William Ames: Dutch Backgrounds of English and American Puritanism* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1972); Richard K. MacMaster, with Pamela C. Copeland, *The Five*

George Masons: Patriots and Planters of Virginia and Maryland (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975); Nathan O. Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977); George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970); Timothy L. Smith, *Called Unto Holiness: The Story of the Nazarenes; the Formative Years* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1962).

9. Such questions find sensitive treatment in the recent anthology by C. T. McIntire, *God, History, and Historians: Modern Christian Views of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

10. For example, Perry Miller, "From the Covenant to the Revival," *The Shaping of American Religion*, eds. J. W. Smith and A. L. Jamison (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966); Edwin Scott Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (Chicago: Quadrangle, 1968); C. C. Goen, *Revivalism and Separatism in New England, 1740-1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

11. Rhys Isaac, "Dramatizing the Ideology of Revolution: Popular Mobilization in Virginia, 1774 to 1776," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 33 (July 1976): 357-385; "Evangelical Revolt: The Nature of the Baptists' Challenge to the Traditional Order in Virginia, 1765 to 1775," *ibid.*, 31 (July 1974): 345-368; Kenneth A. Lockridge, *Literacy in Colonial New England: An Inquiry into the Social Context of Literacy in the Early Modern West* (New York: Norton, 1974); Richard L. Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967).

12. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 34 (October 1977): 519-541.



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