

CSCH Presidential Address 2003

A Usable Past: Church Historians as Engaged Scholars Who Serve the Common Good

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In her October 2002 Killam lecture, “Building a Civil Society: A New Role for the Human Sciences,” Dr. Martha Piper, President of the University of British Columbia, cited a study put out by the Brookings Institution that shows that “in order to have an innovative economy, you must first have a civil society, one that is tolerant, culturally diverse and humane, that in turn provides the stimulus for creativity and innovation.”¹ We cannot produce a truly civil society, argued Piper, without “the deep, extensive knowledge” that comes from research in the humanities and social sciences, scholarship that enables us to better understand ourselves, that helps define our Canadian identity, that guides public policy:

. . . poetry, and philosophy, and history, and all of the other human sciences, are critical to our ability as individuals to reflect on our mores, values and heritage . . . From the study of past civilizations and the history of ideas . . . we derive a sense of value and tradition, and of our own place in the continuum of human history.²

She concluded by calling for undergraduate programs in the humanities and social sciences in Canadian universities to address social values and issues of civic responsibility; she also called for the government to improve SSHRC research funding.

Historical Papers 2003: Canadian Society of Church History

Dr. Piper's words have struck a chord with many in Canadian academia, especially the part about increased funding! My purpose in this paper is to consider her call for scholars in the humanities and social sciences, notably history, to fill the role of public intellectuals who nurture community life. I especially want to reflect upon the implications of this call for those of us who practise church history, and the role our discipline can play in helping Christians, churches and Canadians generally to reflect upon our religious values, heritage and freedom. As church historians our discipline is somewhat unique within the historical profession for the ready-made audience that we have in the churches, one that, in my experience, is often ready and willing to benefit from our research insights. The challenge for us is to make the connection.

This discussion has a special interest for me. Four years ago I assumed the Chair of Christian Thought at the University of Calgary. Besides the normal duties of teaching and research, the chair is expected to act as a bridge from the academy to the community. Each year I organize academic lectures and events, usually held in Calgary churches, in which leading Christian scholars bring their expertise to bear on issues of interest to the Christian community.³ In preparing and delivering some of these lectures myself, I have been forced to consider how my academic work might serve a larger audience than just fellow historians.⁴

Today I begin with some recent observations by historians on the matter of our role and function in society. I will highlight the exemplary work of four church historians whose scholarship addresses both academic and popular audiences, and performs both scholarly and socially useful functions. I will consider especially how four contemporary historians are contributing to a larger public conversation and are serving the common good, and will argue that as engaged scholars church historians have much to offer a non-academic audience. We can play a liberating role in providing Christians with self-understanding and responsible choice, in critiquing "myth-making" and the abuse of history, and in contributing to a discussion of contemporary issues in our society. In these ways our discipline addresses Piper's call for scholars to help individuals better understand themselves, and to help define our collective Canadian identity and even shape public policy.

I. Recent Reflections on the Civic Role of the Humanities and Social Sciences, especially History

1. William J. Bouwsma

Reflection on their social role is not new for historians. William J. Bouwsma entitled his 1990 collected essays, *A Usable Past*, and explained the choice of title with this observation:

History is not the private preserve of professional historians, just as divinity, law, and medicine do not “belong” to clergymen, lawyers, and physicians. Like other professional groups, historians are properly the servants of a public that needs historical perspective to understand itself and its values, and perhaps also to acknowledge its limitations and its guilt. Historians have an obligation, I believe, to meet public needs of this kind.⁵

Bouwsma appealed to Nietzsche and Goethe and their conviction that history must serve the “life and action” of society. History has a social function, such as providing “explanations of events.”⁶

As a young man Bouwsma discovered a personal aspect to the usefulness of historical study. He decided that the inner confusion he wrestled with as the child of second-generation Dutch Calvinist immigrants might be reduced if he knew “where the various pieces of intellectual baggage [he] carried about had come from.” He would sort these out “according to their origins,” and decide which he was committed to and which to discard. Like psychoanalysis, history could identify the “inconvenient legacies” of the past and liberate the conscious mind from them⁷

Bouwsma has spent much of his career doing a similar thing in his writing and teaching, trying to “sort out” the various elements and impulses in Western culture. He has found it helpful to consider the European past in terms of polarities, contradictions, and “ideal types,” noting for example the classical and biblical “strains” in our culture, or the enlightenment and Christian streams within it. By seeking out these historical antitheses, we are able to become more conscious of ourselves and our world, and to make informed choices.⁸ In summary, one sees that for Bouwsma the social function of the historian includes providing a popular audience with self-understanding as a basis for informed choice.

2. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob

In their book, *Telling the Truth about History*, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob observe, “rarely has history been such a subject of controversy” as it is in our world today. Events such as the dismantling of the Berlin wall, growing multiculturalism in North America, and of course the events of 9-11, invite a host of historical questions and a rewriting of historical accounts. “History and historical evidence are crucial to a people’s sense of identity.” In such times one must ask, what are the “purposes and responsibilities” of history?⁹ The authors criticize the profession for a reluctance to consider such questions.

Professional historians have been so successfully socialized by demands to publish that we have little time or inclination to participate in general debates about the meaning of our work. Questions about the relevance of scientific models to the search for historical truth or the role of history in shaping national identity . . . are often dismissed by historians as irrelevant to their work, which they define as researching in archives and writing scholarly books and articles.¹⁰

Appleby, Hunt and Jacob present a bold claim for the important role that the historical profession can and should play in our society: “What historians do best is to make connections with the past in order to illuminate the problems of the present and the potential of the future.” Historians can shed light on a “complex array of questions about the human experience.”¹¹ In summary, for these three authors the social function of history includes helping define our collective identity, illuminating present experience and contemporary issues, as well as liberating us from intrusive authorities and outworn beliefs.

3. Eric Hobsbawm

Eric Hobsbawm, long-time professor of history at Birkbeck College, University of London, brings a Marxist perspective to the discipline.¹² Hobsbawm laments that history has often played a key role in glorifying nationalist, ethnic and religious fundamentalist ideologies. This abuse of the past places historians in a situation of great social responsibility.

The past is an essential element, perhaps *the* essential element, in these ideologies. If there is no suitable past, it can always be invented.

Indeed, in the nature of things there is usually no entirely suitable past, because the phenomenon these ideologies claim to justify is not ancient or eternal but historically novel. This applies to both religious fundamentalism in its current versions and to contemporary nationalism. The past legitimizes. The past gives a more glorious background to a present that doesn't have much to celebrate . . . In this situation historians find themselves in the unexpected role of political actors. I used to think that the profession of history, unlike that of, say, nuclear physics, could at least do no harm. Now I know it can. Our studies can turn into bomb factories . . .¹³

Hobsbawm identified a two-fold response that historians must bring in this situation. "We have a responsibility to historical facts in general, and for criticizing the politico-ideological abuse of history" by ideologies and fundamentalisms.¹⁴ Historians must oppose all efforts to "replace history by myth and invention," and rise above the passions of "identity politics."¹⁵ In summary, the social function of historians, according to Hobsbawm, is to critique the abuse of history by faithfully representing the collective memory of the past in our society,¹⁶ and providing perspective, "removing the blindfolds" that obscure the vision of contemporary society.¹⁷

4. Margaret Miles

Margaret Miles, professor of historical theology at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, CA, entitled her 1999 AAR Presidential Address, "Becoming Answerable for What We See."¹⁸ This title aptly summarizes the point she wants to make. She calls on all scholars of religion to integrate critical scholarship and passionate engagement. Miles suggests that scholars of religion, in this case of Christianity, have at least three audiences to whom they are responsible: the public sphere, the churches, and the university disciplines. While scholars may vary in their public of emphasis, Miles calls on historians to be more ready to address the wider world. We should contribute, for example, to conversations in our culture about social and ethical issues and national policy.

In relation to faith communities, scholarship has a prophetic imperative to "challenge, unsettle, and discomfit religious people as well as to affirm and educate."¹⁹ "As historians we can identify the concrete social, political and institutional circumstances in which doctrinal and practical decisions were made as a basis for asking whether those

decisions need to be revised in our [new] circumstances.”²⁰ Our academic work can also serve faith communities by studying religion for pitfalls as well as for insights.

In a religiously plural society religious studies [including the history of Christianity or church history] still bears the traditional responsibility of representing religion as providing accessible and fruitful proposals for living a richly human life. But it also has responsibility for critical scrutiny of the social effects of religious beliefs and practices . . . Their *effects*, not merely their intentions, must be acknowledged and examined.²¹

Miles recalls the liberating experience of realizing that “the oppressive fundamentalism of my childhood could not simply be labelled ‘Christianity.’” “Demonstrating the ability to be self-critical and to acknowledge the abuses perpetrated by some forms of religion can attract as many thinking people as will be turned off and turned away.”²² In summary, Miles challenges church historians to consider how our critical historical work can challenge and educate the church, revealing the abusive effects of religion and liberating believers from its oppressive forms, such as fundamentalism. We should be ready to contribute our training in analytical and critical thinking “to public discussions on issues central to the common good.”²³

These scholars challenge historians to serve a larger audience and the common good in several ways: by identifying the influence of past legacies as an aid to self-understanding, by revealing the negative personal and social effects of religious beliefs and practices, by liberating believers from oppressive forms of religion, by preserving collective memory and shaping a positive collective identity, by critiquing myth-making and abuse of history in service to religious and political ideologies, by illuminating public discussion of contemporary issues and problems, and, finally, by freeing believers from intrusive authorities.

II. Four Church Historians Who Address Both Academic and Non-Academic Audiences, and Serve the Common Good

I will now examine four contemporary church historians who as engaged scholars address both academic and popular audiences, and demonstrate a readiness to serve a non-academic public. These four include: Mark Noll who speaks to American evangelicals; Craig Atwood

who speaks to American Moravians' Marguerite Van Die who speaks to current Canadian policy issues; and Arnold Snyder who speaks to Canadian Mennonites. Some of these people may be well known to some of you; together they illustrate the way in which scholars in various fields of church history are seeking to serve the common good.

For each of these scholars I will identify and discuss briefly: (1) their two audiences, i.e., their academic and social-ecclesiastical settings; (2) their academic field of scholarship; (3) their popular scholarly efforts to reach a non-academic audience; and (4) and how they have played a "liberating role" in providing believers today with self-understanding and responsible choice, in revealing the negative effects of religious beliefs and practices, in critiquing myth-making, and in contributing to discussion of contemporary issues.

1. Mark Noll's Complex Audience in Writing about Evangelical Identity and American Religion

Mark Noll is McManis Professor of Christian Thought and professor of history at Wheaton College, a leading evangelical liberal arts college in Illinois. Noll has enjoyed a prolific career in the academy as an historian in the field of American religion, specifically evangelical religion. Noll's career is also noteworthy for the way he has consistently sought to address issues facing evangelical Christians today by writing sometimes biting "tracts for the times." As an "observer of evangelicalism," Noll is a fine example of a scholar writing for a dual audience.

Noll's numerous scholarly books include: *Christians in the American Revolution* (1977); *Between Faith and Criticism: Evangelicals, Scholarship and the Bible in America* (1986); *Princeton and the Republic, 1798-1822* (1989); *Religion and American Politics from the Colonial Period to the 1980s* (1990); *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (1992); *God and Mammon: Protestants, Money and the Market, 1790-1860* (2001); and most recently, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (2002).

America's God was the focus of a panel discussion at the American Society of Church History in Chicago last January (2003), where it received high praise from his colleagues in the field. The book has clearly positioned him as the premier interpreter of American religion in our day. Noll argues in this work that between 1740 and 1790 a surprising synthesis took place in American thought; a synthesis of evangelicalism, republican-

ism and common sense “was created from the crucible of the revolution.” Patterns of thought “almost inconceivable in Europe” became commonplace because of American circumstances, “particularly the circumstance of war.”²⁴

In noting Noll’s popular scholarly efforts, one begins not with a publication, but with an organization. In 1983 Noll established the Institute for the Study of American Evangelicals (ISAE), whose stated aim is “to deepen evangelicals’ understanding of themselves and enrich others’ assessment of evangelicals’ historical significance and contemporary role.” Four times a year the Institute publishes the *Evangelical Studies Bulletin*, as well as awarding grants to young evangelical scholars and sponsoring academic conferences that expose a larger public to scholarly debate. The ISAE serves as an impressive link between the academy and the evangelical world, keeping that world in touch with the latest scholarship on the movement, and serving to revise the collective evangelical historical identity. Throughout his career Noll has played this bridging role between the academy and the community of believers.

Probably Noll’s best-known work is *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (1994), where he argued that “fidelity to Jesus Christ demands from evangelicals a more responsible intellectual existence than we have practised throughout much of our history.”²⁵ Noll frankly stated that the book “is not a thoroughly intellectual volume”; “it is rather a historical meditation in which sermonizing and the making of hypotheses vie with more ordinary exposition.” This is a book for a popular audience, written more to incite than inform.²⁶ Noll’s book illumines various dimensions of this scandal and explains why American evangelicals experience such intellectual poverty. Noll focussed on evangelicals and politics, and evangelicals and science as two areas that have suffered “not so much for evangelical anti-intellectualism as for the wrong kind of intellectual attention.”²⁷ Noll’s purpose was to affirm the “ultimate significance” of the life of the mind, to inspire evangelical scholars and academic institutions to “work at it,” realizing that “an alteration of attitudes is the key to promoting a Christian life of the mind.”²⁸

The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind reveals the negative effects of religious beliefs and practices in fundamentalism today, and provides today’s believers with self-understanding and responsible choice. Noll observed that American evangelicals “are not exemplary for their thinking, and they have not been so for several generations.” He attributed this situation to American fundamentalism, dispensational premillennialism,

the Higher Life movement, and Pentecostalism, movements that arose in response to the “religious crises” of the nineteenth century, but together “were a disaster for the life of the mind.” They encouraged a pragmatic, activist approach to life that resulted in simplistic answers to such questions as the politics of the middle-east, and biological evolution.²⁹

Noll demonstrated how enlightened nineteenth-century conservative scholars looked to science to “solve difficulties contained in Scripture.”³⁰ Charles Hodge represented a broad cross-section of evangelical leaders in his day with his advice on ways of “letting science inform the study of Scripture.” Together these evangelicals achieved impressive results in their thinking about science and religion.³¹ This respect for the conclusions of the day’s “best science” is evident in James McCosh and B.B. Warfield of Princeton who affirmed evolution “within the boundaries of historic Christian doctrines.”³² This readiness to learn from the best science has been lost in the creation science of modern day evangelicals.

Creation science has damaged evangelicalism by making it much more difficult to think clearly about human origins, the age of the earth, and mechanisms of geological or biological change. But it has done more profound damage by undermining the ability to look at the world God has made and to understand what we see when we do look.³³

Creationists are guilty of pushing science-religion negotiations “toward the brink of battle.”

Noll has critiqued the posture of current evangelicals in relation to modern science and politics, and shown that their tradition contains other possibilities. In revealing the negative effects of creationist beliefs and practices, and by editing and republishing works by Hodge and Warfield that deal with scientific issues, Noll provides evangelical believers today with an enriched self-understanding and an alternative worldview in approaching contemporary issues.

2. Craig Atwood’s Complex Audience in Writing about Moravian Identity and Ethics

Craig Atwood is a young Moravian scholar who lives comfortably in both the academic and non-academic worlds. His scholarly work contributes in impressive ways to the field of Moravian history, especially the story of Moravian life in America. From 1997 to 2002 he was

Professor of Religion at Salem College, Winston-Salem, NC. In 2002 Atwood was appointed Theologian in Residence at Moravian Church, Winston-Salem. In this role he not only pursues academic research and writing in the field of Moravian history, but teaches Moravian history and theology to lay persons.

In 1995 Atwood completed his Ph.D. dissertation at Princeton Seminary.³⁴ He has written a survey textbook of church history, *Always Reforming: The History of Christianity Since 1300* (2001). Atwood edited a collection of Zinzendorf's sermons, *Zinzendorf's Pennsylvania Sermons*, tr. Julie Weber (2001), and edited a festschrift volume entitled, *The Distinctiveness of Moravian Culture* (2003).

Atwood's dissertation pointed to the scholarly neglect of Moravian history in America.

Much of the writing on American colonial history and culture, especially religion, tells a story of immigration from the British Isles and the influence of English-speaking Protestant churches on America . . . But there are other stories, voices, and influences that should be considered, particularly the story of the 100,000 German speakers who came to the American colonies, especially Pennsylvania.³⁵

Only recently has the city of Bethlehem, PA begun to receive the attention it deserves from scholars who work in colonial history and American religious history.³⁶ In contrast to historical and sociological studies that have examined Bethlehem's unique social structure, demographics and economy, Atwood's concern was "the heart and soul of the community," namely, Zinzendorf's theology and its impact upon the community's structure and rituals.³⁷

[Zinzendorf's] blood and wounds theology, with all of its graphic descriptions of the torture and abuse of Jesus and its eroticisation of his wounds, served to help the residents of Bethlehem sublimate community-destroying impulses. Christ became their scapegoat, not just theologically, but sociologically and psychologically as well. As long as Zinzendorf remained the creative source and inspiration for the *Brüdergemeinde*, the communal enterprise thrived. Bethlehem needed the paradoxical imagery of the wounded Saviour-God in order to deal with the contradictions of living in heaven on earth.³⁸

Atwood's study argued that "the adoration of the wounds of Christ was essential to the success of the Bethlehem communal system."³⁹

As Theologian in Residence at Moravian Church, Winston-Salem, Atwood's popular scholarship includes teaching Moravian history and theology to lay persons, and writing study guides for Moravians on their history and thought. He holds workshops for clergy, provides white papers for his church denomination on pressing theological matters, and trains the guides of Old Salem in aspects of Moravian history, thought and culture to prepare them to act as interpreters of the Moravian heritage to visiting tourists. Atwood has contributed study guides for use in the Moravian church on such issues as "Why a Doctrinal Statement in the Moravian Church?" and "A Moravian Understanding of Jesus as Saviour." He has written a commentary, including discussion questions, on "The Moravian Covenant for Christian Living," part of the Book of Order of the Moravian Church in America.

Atwood's liberating role in serving the common good lies in providing Moravians with greater understanding of their heritage, and in addressing contemporary issues that Moravians face. At a clergy retreat in February of this year, Atwood led his fellow clergy in a discussion of "The Ground of the Unity," the Moravian doctrinal statement, reflecting on its historical context, and how it can continue to serve as "a living and vital document rather than an historical relic."⁴⁰ Atwood showed how the Moravian church is different from confessional churches that have a single confession that defines them over against other churches. The Moravians reflect a German Pietist view that is suspicious of confessionalism and doctrinal rigidity and values experience over doctrinal statements.⁴¹ Atwood spoke of the Unity Synod of 1957 in Germany and the postwar ecumenical context in which that took place. "The Ground of the Unity" document was influenced by the holocaust and the need to fight racism; it was influenced by the Barmen Declaration and its assertion of the church's autonomy over against the state; it was influenced by Dietrich Bonhoeffer and his affirmation of the world and religions outside of the church; and it was influenced by Karl Barth and his affirmation that "in Christ the world is already reconciled to God and all people, no matter what religion, are saved."⁴² This statement, Atwood suggested, can aid the church today in addressing ethical issues and in standing against forces of greed, violence, opposition and hatred.

In response to some criticism of the church in the local media, Atwood recently applied the Ground of Unity to the issues of homosexual-

ity and same-sex marriage in an Op-Ed piece for the local newspaper in Winston-Salem. He began the piece, "Since I serve as Theologian in Residence at Home Moravian Church, perhaps I can clarify some things about the Moravian Church's teaching on certain controversial issues where there has been more heat than light."⁴³ Here one sees the church historian as "engaged scholar." Atwood cited the Ground of Unity in explaining that Moravians were obligated to "strive to remove violence and hatred" from their lives and the world. While the church does not presently perform marriages for same gender couples, "we continually examine our doctrine as our understanding of Scripture deepens." As for homosexuals and salvation, Moravians believe that "Christ has redeemed us with the whole of humanity."

Atwood has played a liberating role in providing Moravians with greater understanding of their heritage, and in seeking to address contemporary ethical issues that Moravians face.

3. Marguerite Van Die's Complex Audience in Writing about Christian Participation in Public Life

Marguerite Van Die is Associate Professor of History of Christianity at Queen's Theological College and Associate Professor of History at Queen's University, Kingston. Her academic field of research is nineteenth-century North American Protestantism, "with a special interest in the interaction between socio-economic change, gender and religion."⁴⁴ Her current research projects focus on evangelical family life in Victorian Canada, 1835-1880, and religion and public life in the nineteenth century. Van Die is committed to using her scholarship to promote discussions related to public policy and the common good in Canada today.

Van Die has published *An Evangelical Mind: Nathanael Burwash and the Methodist Tradition in Canada, 1839-1918* (1989), and has edited three other books, *From Heaven Down to Earth: A Century of Chancellor's Lectures at Queen's Theological College* (1991), *Rethinking Church, State and Modernity: Canada Between Europe and the United States*, co-edited with David Lyon (2000), and *Religion and Public Life in Canada: Comparative and Historical Perspectives* (2001). She contributed six articles to the new *Oxford Companion to Canadian History and Literature*, ed. Gerald Hallowell (2002).

Van Die served as co-director of the Queen's University Project on Religion and Politics in Canada and the United States, a project funded by

the Pew Charitable Trusts to investigate the place of religion in Canadian public life, to examine “from a variety of critical perspectives the ways institutions and individuals have sought over time to bring religious faith to bear upon the public sphere at local, regional and national levels.” Following American political theorists, the project defined “public” as “the civic realm, a sphere of life connected to, yet distinct from, the private and semi-public worlds of the home and the religious community.” The public sphere in a liberal society is where its citizens “debate, deliberate, and engage in collective democratic will formation.”⁴⁵

Van Die’s scholarly work reaches outside the academic community. The series of conferences on religion and public life in Canada hosted at Queen’s University had more than an academic impact; they provided a setting for a non-academic audience, including business and media people, to hear Canadian scholars address issues of great importance to all faiths in Canada. These events, and the book that grew out of them, have potential to impact the thinking of political, civic and religious leaders in Canada.

More recently, in September 2002, Van Die addressed a capacity crowd at Scarboro United Church in Calgary on the subject, “The End of Christian Canada: Past Perspectives, Present Opportunities for Faith and Public Life.” She used the occasion to speak to Calgarians as an historian who has something to say on the following questions: What as Canadians is our heritage of faith and public life? Is religious faith a private matter or can it have a meaningful voice in the public life of a pluralistic society? What are the challenges and opportunities faced by faith groups today in making a contribution to public life in Canada?

As a Canadian historian, Van Die has played a part in promoting discussion of a pressing contemporary issue in Canadian society, namely, how Canada’s religious pluralism can become “a social asset.” She observed that as Canadians, “we have done relatively little reflection on such basic issues as the nature of democracy, public morality and civic virtue.”⁴⁶ But this is starting to change: “This groping towards a country which welcomes a lively religious pluralism in public life rather than seeking to privatize religion is happening on many fronts.”⁴⁷ Van Die herself has helped to advance discussion among Canadians of the contribution religion can make in practical ways to public policy.

In her public presentation in Calgary, Van Die showed the significant change in religion’s place in Canada that came about “very quickly” in the 1960s and 1970s as both Protestant and Catholic faiths lost their

social hegemony, culminating in the Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982. But she rejected the notion that in a secular society religion should be forced out of the public realm. Religion continues to have a necessary role in our “secular,” pluralist society.

The exercise of freedom inevitably erodes moral communal traditions and ultimately threatens the essential humanity of the individual. This happens if people are only seen as rights-bearers, and as individuals whose worth can be entirely enumerated and quantified. Religious traditions insist that people are also social by nature, and that there is ultimately a transcendent element to human dignity, which in most religions is directly connected to a divine Source. To flourish, an individual and a society need both faith and freedom . . .⁴⁸

Van Die envisioned a Canada where religious pluralism is recognized as a positive element in a healthy secular state, and faith is valued “as an important contributor to a robust public life.”⁴⁹ Canada’s religions have a voice that needs to be heard in Canadian public life in advancing the common good.

Specifically, religious faiths in Canada provide a “counter-cultural voice” that contributes “an important dimension to public policy.” The prophetic tradition, such an important part of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, has been evident as religious groups have lobbied federal and provincial governments on matters of social justice.⁵⁰ The religious traditions need to speak with a clear, united voice on such issues as poverty, homelessness, the environment, and education. Van Die challenged all religious groups with the task of identifying the core beliefs of their faith tradition, to discover what their faith says about the meaning of life, and then to translate this into public policy.⁵¹

Van Die’s last word to her Calgary audience was one of affirmation of religion in public life: “As an historian, I am convinced that faith in its many forms is an inexhaustibly rich resource to help people live together.”⁵² “In a religiously pluralistic Canada, faith can help us formulate public policies and shape a society which honours the wisdom of the past and which recognizes the infinite worth of each individual, of nature and of all of life as God-given.” Every generation must face the task afresh of expressing the implications of their beliefs “in ways that enhance the common good.”⁵³

Van Die has played a liberating role in helping shape a Canadian sense of identity through reminding us of our heritage of faith and public

life, and in speaking to a pressing issue in Canadian life, the contribution of faith to public life in a pluralistic society. She has served the common good in Canada through advancing discussion among Canadians of the contribution religion can make in practical ways to public policy.

4. Arnold Snyder's Complex Audience in Writing about Mennonite Identity

Since 1985 Arnold Snyder has been Professor of History at Conrad Grebel College at the University of Waterloo, Ontario. He identifies himself as a Mennonite church historian; his main fields of academic research relate to sixteenth-century Anabaptist history and thought, and issues of spirituality and peace. The son of missionary parents in Latin America, and a practising Mennonite, Snyder has done much of his writing in service to both Liberation Theology communities in Latin America and Mennonite communities in North America.

Snyder's Ph.D. dissertation at McMaster University offered new background and a new interpretation to the life of Michael Sattler, the former Benedictine prior who was arrested and executed shortly after composing the first Anabaptist confession of faith, the *Schleitheim Articles* of February 1527. Snyder has published four books aimed at an academic audience including: *The Life and Thought of Michael Sattler* (1984); *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (1995); *Profiles of Anabaptist Women*, co-edited with Linda Hecht (1996); and a festschrift volume, *Commoners and Community: Essays in Honour of Werner O. Packull* (2002).

Snyder's early work contributed to a better, contextualized appreciation of Sattler and the *Schleitheim Articles* of 1527. Snyder found influences from Sattler's Benedictine piety in the *Schleitheim Articles*, such as the stress on separation from the world; he also found themes from the *Articles of the Black Forest peasants*, such as the call for appointment and discipline of pastors by local congregations.⁵⁴

Snyder's narrative history of the Anabaptist movement, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (1995), has been credited with providing "an impressive synthesis of recent scholarship."⁵⁵ Snyder himself stated: "this text is an attempt at a new synthesis and organization of the historical and theological material, and an attempt to integrate insights from different (and sometimes antagonistic) historical methodologies."⁵⁶ His history included insights from social, economic and political

historians as well as from those whose focus was religious ideas; he also incorporated the voices and stories of Anabaptist women.

Snyder has worked in several ways to make Anabaptist scholarship accessible to a non-academic audience. He has translated a volume of sixteenth-century German Anabaptist sources into Spanish, and written an article interpreting the Anabaptist movement in a way that might encourage liberation theology base communities in Latin America.⁵⁷ The Mennonite World Conference commissioned Snyder to write a book to stimulate discussion of Mennonite core beliefs and values within the global Mennonite community; the book appeared in 1999, *From Anabaptist Seed: The Historical Core of Anabaptist-Related Identity* (1999). The book's "user-friendly" features include side bars highlighting documentary sources and questions to facilitate discussion, practical application and "faithful living" among Mennonites today.

Especially noteworthy under popular scholarly efforts is Snyder's creation of Pandora Press, which he began in 1995 in his home on Pandora Avenue, Kitchener. His purpose was to make available to the public, at reasonable cost, "shorts runs of books dealing with Anabaptist, Mennonite, Hutterite, and Believers Church topics, both historical and theological." The press's specialty is "custom printing and binding of short run books and pamphlets of all sorts," giving a voice to those that larger publishers pass over. The vision is to serve Mennonite, Christian and general readers. Independently owned and operated, the press uses desktop technology and a cottage industry approach to the publishing business. Snyder's publishing efforts have been so successful that his press has been copied in the United States by Pandora Press, now called Cascadia Publishing House. He has also created an online bookshop featuring titles from a variety of publishers.

The first production of the new press was Snyder's book, already mentioned, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction*. This is more than a book for scholars.

From the start I intended this book to be accessible to university students. I also hoped that this telling of the Anabaptist story would have something to say to people in the churches, and especially to those interested in the Anabaptist roots (historical and theological) of the Believers' Church tradition. All the same, the effort was made to incorporate scholarly advances in Anabaptist studies into the narrative itself, which of course complicated the narrative.⁵⁸

To make the book “accessible,” two versions of the text were printed: a full-text edition with more complete discussion of issues and extensive scholarly documentation and bibliography, and an Abridged Student Edition “for use in the classroom and in other settings where a more concise narrative would be more helpful.” “Every attempt has been made to incorporate the best of the research into an accessible story.”⁵⁹ The book is complemented by six maps and dozens of illustrations courtesy of the Mennonite Historical Library in Goshen, Indiana.

In the book’s Introduction Snyder indicated that he wrote *Anabaptist History and Theology* in the hope that it would promote self-understanding among Mennonites, and contribute to discussion of contemporary issues that face Mennonites today. Herein lies Snyder’s liberating role in serving believers today.

It is the author’s conviction that it is important, especially for those within Believers’ Churches, to understand and reflect upon the issues and the processes that by the end of the sixteenth century had led to the definition of the Anabaptist theological and ecclesial traditions . . . What survived was not necessarily “right” simply because it survived.⁶⁰

Snyder invited members of these churches today to “continue the dialogue begun in the sixteenth century.” He realized that such study could result in “conscious acceptance” of the inherited tradition, or in re-evaluation and conscious change and departure from it.⁶¹

Snyder observed, “it is currently out of fashion for historians to address openly the question of the possible meaning or relevance of their subjects of study.” Nevertheless, the final chapter of the book, entitled “The Continuing Conversation,” represents his attempt as a member of the Mennonite faith tradition to engage his readers and “to carry the historical conversations further.”⁶² Snyder suggested that those only interested in the history of the Anabaptist movement could simply omit reading this chapter entirely, adding, “Those who do pass over the concluding chapter will not lose any of the essential story of sixteenth-century Anabaptism, but they will miss a dandy sermon.”⁶³

In this final chapter, Snyder raised thirteen issues for discussion “framed by sixteenth-century Anabaptist conversations.” His approach is often quite provocative in encouraging a fresh engagement with old issues; a few examples will serve to illustrate this. On the issue of “Spirit and Letter,” Snyder observed that there are obvious “negative lessons” to be

learned from the movement's excesses at either extreme: on the one hand, the prophetic spiritualist Anabaptism of people such as Hans Hut and David Joris) with its visions, dreams and revelations led to abuse of freedom and weakened church order; on the other hand, the Biblical literalism of persons such as Menno Simons led to a new legalism. One lesson is the importance of humility concerning one's interpretations and experiences; another is the recognition that all readings of Scripture are tainted with "human tradition"; one cannot argue that the Anabaptist tradition is "purely biblical."⁶⁴ On the issue of Regeneration, Snyder noted that early Anabaptist "optimism" about the thoroughness of regeneration was not borne out in practice; the tradition did not take the persistence of sin seriously enough. The result was "perfectionist" expectations, severe discipline in dealing with failure, and hypocrisy. Snyder encouraged Mennonites today to rethink "the entire package of pastoral issues related to sin and regeneration" and to develop a more realistic understanding of the spiritual life as a journey and pilgrimage of growth, not one of perfect obedience.⁶⁵ Finally, on the issue of baptism, Snyder confronted the weaknesses of Anabaptist reasoning in defence of adult baptism. Mennonites today no longer sees the rite of baptism as an issue of salvation or damnation. A key issue they must address is, what do conversion and baptism mean to children who have been raised in the faith, and not converted as adults? Snyder concluded the discussion with another question: "How might the inner dimensions related to this powerful symbol of dying and rising in Christ be recaptured in churches long accustomed to fairly 'automatic' performances of the outward rite" by whole Sunday School classes?⁶⁶

Snyder has played a liberating role in encouraging Mennonites to engage in conversation with their own tradition in critical fashion. Much of his work is designed to facilitate discussion of contemporary issues that Mennonites face today.

III. Conclusion

Margaret Miles observed that our primary bond as scholars is our commitment to our work and to a socially responsible life, integrating both critical and passionately engaged scholarship.⁶⁷ My goal in this presidential address has been to provide a kind of pep talk to the CSCH to encourage us to be passionately engaged with contemporary issues among our Canadian churches and within Canadian society, and to find inspira-

tion in some exemplary colleagues in the field who show us what can be done. For Noll the historian's liberating role has been in the service of American evangelicals, for Atwood it is in the service of American Moravians, for Van Die it is in the service of Canadian society, and for Snyder in the service of North American Mennonites and Believers' Churches.

Canadian academic leaders such as Martha Piper are calling on us to contribute our knowledge and scholarship to building a civil society in Canada. I am convinced that, whatever field of church history we may be in, we can play a liberating role in providing believers and Canadians generally with self-understanding and responsible choice, in revealing the negative effects of religious beliefs and practices, in critiquing myth-making, and in contributing to discussion of contemporary issues in our society. The question is simply, will we make the effort to offer the public a usable past, and will we see ourselves as engaged scholars, called to serve the common good?

Endnotes

1. Martha C. Piper, "Building a Civil Society: A New Role for the Human Sciences" (Annual Killam Lecture, 24 October 2002), 5ff.
2. Piper, "Building a Civil Society," 8, 3.
3. Past lecturers have included Margaret Somerville from McGill on medical ethics, Paul Knitter from Xavier University on Interreligious Dialogue, John Polkinghorne from Cambridge University on science and religion, and Marguerite Van Die from Queen's University on religion and public life.
4. On 3 March 2003 I spoke at Good Shepherd Community Church (Moravian) on the subject, "A Church Ahead of its Time: The Eighteenth-Century Moravian Community on Gender, Worship and Ecumenism."
5. William J. Bouwsma, "Introduction," *A Usable Past* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), 1.
6. Bouwsma, *A Usable Past*, 3.
7. Bouwsma, *A Usable Past*, 8.
8. Bouwsma, *A Usable Past*, 8, 9. Bouwsma defined Western culture as "a series of efforts to constrain and control its internal conflicts" and anxieties. At some moments in history, these conflicting forces produce a crisis, such as during the Renaissance and Reformation.

9. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1994), 4ff.
10. Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 9.
11. Appleby, Hunt and Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History*, 10.
12. Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London: Abacus, 1997), viii. In the preface Hobsbawm explicitly joined authors Appleby, Hunt and Jacob in affirming the objective reality of the past, distinguishing historical statements based on evidence from those which are not, and denying the postmodern idea of the past as simply a construct.
13. Hobsbawm, *On History*, 6ff.
14. Hobsbawm, *On History*, 7.
15. Hobsbawm, *On History*, 9ff.
16. Hobsbawm, *On History*, 33.
17. Hobsbawm, *On History*, 47.
18. Margaret Miles, "Becoming Answerable for What We See," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 68, No. 3 (September 2000): 471-485.
19. Miles, "Becoming Answerable for What we See," 473.
20. Miles, "Religious Studies in a Religiously Plural Society," Lecture at University of Calgary (5 November 2002), 4.
21. Miles, "Becoming Answerable for What we See," 472ff.
22. Miles, "Becoming Answerable for What we See," 478.
23. Miles, "Religious Studies in a Religiously Plural Society," 4.
24. Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 17, 73.
25. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 27.
26. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, ix.
27. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 24.
28. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 249.
29. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 24.
30. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 182.

31. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 184.
32. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 180.
33. *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, 196.
34. Craig D. Atwood, "Blood, Sex and Death: Life and Liturgy in Zinzendorf's Bethlehem" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1995). The dissertation is forthcoming as *Wondrous Wounds: Life and Liturgy in Moravian Bethlehem* (Penn State University, 2004).
35. Atwood, "Introduction," 2.
36. Atwood, "Introduction," 5.
37. Atwood, "Blood, Sex and Death: Life and Liturgy in Zinzendorf's Bethlehem," 3.
38. Atwood, "Blood, Sex and Death: Life and Liturgy in Zinzendorf's Bethlehem," 2ff.
39. Atwood, "Abstract," "Blood, Sex and Death: Life and Liturgy in Zinzendorf's Bethlehem."
40. Craig Atwood, "Why a Doctrinal Statement in the Moravian Church?" (Clergy Retreat, February 2003), 2ff.
41. Craig Atwood, "Why a Doctrinal Statement in the Moravian Church?," 3ff.
42. Atwood, "Why a Doctrinal Statement in the Moravian Church?," 7ff.
43. Craig D. Atwood, "Op-Ed: Moravian Faith and Practice" (Winston-Salem).
44. See Van Die's website: www.queensu.ca/theology/L3Us-Faculty-Vandie.htm
45. Van Die, "The End of Christian Canada: Past Perspectives, Present Opportunities for Faith and Public Life" (Calgary: September 23, 2002), 6. For full text see the website of the Chair of Christian Thought at the University of Calgary: www.christchair.ucalgary.ca
46. Van Die, "Religion and Public Life in Canada and the United States: How Different Are We?," 20. For full text see the website of the Chair of Christian Thought at the University of Calgary: www.christchair.ucalgary.ca
47. Van Die, "Religion and Public Life in Canada and the United States: How Different Are We?" 21.
48. Van Die, "The End of Christian Canada," 19ff.
49. Van Die, "The End of Christian Canada," 18.

50. Van Die, "The End of Christian Canada," 21.
51. Van Die, "The End of Christian Canada," 23, 24.
52. Van Die, "The End of Christian Canada," 24.
53. Van Die, "The End of Christian Canada," 25.
54. C. Arnold Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction* (Kitchener: Pandora Press, 1995), 61. See also Snyder's articles: "The Monastic Origins of Swiss Anabaptist Sectarianism," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 52 (1983): 5-26; and "The Schleithem Articles in Light of the Revolution of the Common Man: Continuation or Departure?" *The Sixteenth-Century Journal* 16, No. 4 (1985): 419-430. In this last article Snyder argues that, "Schleithem represents a synthesis of several theological traditions--monastic, peasant, and Anabaptist" (428).
55. James Stayer, "Review of *Anabaptist History and Theology: An Introduction*, by C. Arnold Snyder," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 70 (October 1996): 473-482.
56. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 3.
57. C. Arnold Snyder, "The Relevance of Anabaptist Nonviolence for Nicaragua Today," *Conrad Grebel Review* 2, No. 2 (1984): 123-137.
58. Snyder, "Preface," *Anabaptist History and Theology*, vff.
59. Snyder, "Preface," *Anabaptist History and Theology*, vi.
60. Snyder, "Introduction," *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 8.
61. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 379.
62. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 8.
63. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 8.
64. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 381ff.
65. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 385ff.
66. Snyder, *Anabaptist History and Theology*, 392ff.
67. Miles, "Becoming Answerable for What we See," 483, 472.

