

**CSCH Presidential Address 1996**

**Texts and Contexts: Meaning and Methodology  
in Church History**

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As a student at the University of Chicago, I took a seminar with Martin Marty entitled, "Teaching the History of Christianity." Although I learned little in this course about specific teaching methods, how to write a lecture, or how to put together a survey course in the history of Christianity, and the reading list included no histories of Christianity, I think it was the most helpful course I took at Chicago. While it did not focus on how to be a teacher, as the title had led me to expect, it did something more fundamental: it focused on how to be an historian. The reading list for the course included theories and methodologies of history by Wilhelm Dilthey, Kenneth Burke, Marc Bloch, R.G. Collingwood, Edward Gibbon, Jacob Burckhardt, Johan Huizinga, Jose Ortega y Gasset, and Benedetto Croce. In writing my dissertation, and reading the work of various historians and church historians, and as I struggle with my own project, I am frequently reminded of the issues raised in that class.

Although the issues of meaning and methodology raised by the above authors were not presented in the context of the study of church history, they have particular relevance to our discipline. The empirical study of religion, relies in large part, on human experience as sources of historical knowledge as opposed to, for example, revelation. This presents us, as scholars, with some problems. It is generally acknowledged that

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these sources cannot merely be taken at face value but must be examined critically. Selecting, interpreting and evaluating experiential sources are complex processes, with some basic prerequisites. To ask the appropriate questions of our sources, we must first ask appropriate questions of our discipline: How do we approach the past? What is the goal of this particular study? Why study church history?

These basic questions are important because to many outside our discipline, our subject is either misunderstood as primarily confessional (i.e., in the service of our own religious experiences), or considered to be politically incorrect, based on their own negative experiences with religion. Two members of this society, Ruth Compton Brouwer and Randi Warne, have written papers chronicling what has been called “the unacknowledged quarantine” on religion in women’s studies and women’s history in Canada.<sup>1</sup> Escaping that quarantine involves not only a demonstration of the relevance of our discipline to the larger fields of history and the study of human behaviour, as Randi and Ruth have done, but also the more basic assertion that the study of church history is, as much as any other type of history, a valid, empirical study, not a defence of faith. To uphold the validity of our historical studies we must be vigilant in maintaining a careful empirical methodology. We must formulate thoughtfully and methodically the questions we bring to our sources, while attempting to discover and acknowledge exactly what role our own experiences do play in the formulation of those questions.

How do we approach the past? In his *Meditations on Quixote*, the Spanish philosopher Jose Ortega y Gasset wrote of reality, “I am myself plus my circumstances.”<sup>2</sup> The relationship between the self and its context is one of the first issues the historian must face in interpreting historical sources, not just for assessment of their accuracy or reliability but also for evaluation of their meaning. The “self” here refers not only to the historical self who has provided the historical source, but the self of the historian. What presuppositions does the historian bring to the source, and how does the historian’s own context affect his or her interpretation? Nineteenth-century historian Wilhelm Dilthey described the relationship between the text and its interpreter as a hermeneutic circle. He pointed out the impossibility of finding a pure starting point for empirical knowledge, because any starting point has its own presuppositions.<sup>3</sup> Thinking, analysing, judging and inferring are only possible if the validity of thought processes for ascertaining facts is presupposed. We cannot pinpoint the

precise meaning of a word without reading its context in a sentence or paragraph, but we cannot know what the sentence means either unless we first understand individual words. Thus all knowledge is necessarily circular. As presuppositions cannot be escaped we, as historians, need to acknowledge clearly the ideas and questions we bring to the text, recognizing that they are products of our time and location in history, just as our subjects are products of their time and location in history. A consciousness of our own context can help us to avoid the commonly-encountered interpretational hazards of presentism and ethnomorphism.

While presentism represents an unconsciousness of, or lack of attention to, the temporal gap between the historian and the historical subjects, ethnomorphism ignores the cultural distance which may exist. This interpretational hazard consists in the conceptualization of the characteristics of another group in terms of one's own experience, usually by making one's own customs, manners and opinions the standards of right and wrong, of true and false. This applies not just in cases of moral judgments: perhaps the best illustration I can think of concerns a behavioral understanding, or misunderstanding. Historian David Hackett Fischer tells the story of how Native Americans, who were observing the Puritans settling in Massachusetts, concluded that the English must have burned up all the firewood in the old country and had moved to find more. This was frequently a reason for their own migration, which they then projected onto the English settlers.<sup>4</sup> To avoid this pitfall we must employ what Dilthey referred to as the "double-focus principle" which says, in part, that any interpretation of history must take into account both the point of view of the interpreter and the point of view of the subject.<sup>5</sup> The historian acts as an interpreter of the subject's own interpretation.

The interpretation of a source must also consider the context of: a) its historical period; and b) the totality of the historical figure's work to evaluate its accuracy, reliability and meaning. This seems basic but, surprisingly, many scholars engage in only a partial analysis of context. They will consider context in terms of the reliability or accuracy of a source, but evaluate meaning in terms of present-day context, falling into the interpretational hazard of presentism. Certainly studies which devalue the contributions of early feminists such as Nellie McClung as a conservative, bourgeois "maternal" feminist commit this sin of omission. Those have been amply documented and discussed by Randi Warne and others, and a corrective has begun to occur in women's studies with regard to evaluating

the early feminists.<sup>6</sup> An incident from my personal experience will serve as another example. When I first began my research on J.S. Woodsworth I went to the Pratt Library at Victoria University and checked out a stack of books. The student working at the check-out desk noticed that all the books were by or about Woodsworth and said, “J.S. Woodsworth. He was a terrible racist, eh?” I was taken aback. Having recently written a paper on the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s, J.S. Woodsworth, by comparison, did not immediately occur to me as a candidate for the title of “terrible racist.” I asked the student why it was that he saw Woodsworth as a racist, and he told me that he had read Woodsworth’s *Strangers Within Our Gates* and that the person who wrote the introduction agreed with him. I tried to explain something about the purpose of the book (to inform already-settled Canadians about the background of newcomers to their community) and that while Woodsworth might have used language and categories that we do not consider appropriate today, his dedication to the immigrants with whom he worked in North Winnipeg, made it difficult for me to consider him a racist. I do not think I satisfied the student, and I know I did not satisfy myself, so I rushed off to re-read the introduction to *Strangers Within Our Gates*.<sup>7</sup> Marilyn Barber does not call Woodsworth a “terrible racist” but does point out that certainly *Strangers Within Our Gates* divides people up into ethnic groups and make generalizations about them, both positive and negative. It is worth noting, however, that Woodsworth, if he is being “racist,” lets his “racism” fall equally upon people who share his own ethnic heritage and those who do not. I suspect, however, that the interpretation of a single word may have played a large part in condemning Woodsworth for my library acquaintance – namely, assimilation.

Interpreted in a late-twentieth-century context, “assimilation” has many negative connotations, such as enforced religious conversions, devaluation of ethnic heritage, and implied superiority of the assimilating group. A historian must, however, to try to discover what Woodsworth and his contemporaries understood the term to mean. This is difficult to do because such assumptions about the meaning and value attached to a commonly understood term are frequently unstated until some crisis in the collective understanding occurs. However, the question of original meaning may be partially answered, at least, by asking a series of questions based on the meaning we attach to the term, and attempting to determine whether Woodsworth shared our understanding. For example, what did Woodsworth say about proselytizing? Did he require church attendance for

those who wished to use the educational, health, recreational, and other services of All Peoples' Mission? What was Woodsworth's attitude toward the customs and culture of the different ethnic groups settling in the North End of Winnipeg? Did he encourage or discourage their preservation? Did he regard Canadian culture as superior?

The answers to these questions indicate that there are some points of difference between our understanding of "assimilation" and Woodsworth's. For example, Woodsworth rejected outright the notion of attempting to turn Catholic immigrants into Methodists, but supported the idea that "we must help them to work out their salvation"<sup>8</sup> through teaching them to think for themselves, and establishing Independent churches. But church attendance at the mission, the Independent church or anywhere else was never mandatory for the use of All Peoples' facilities. Regarding cultural heritage, *Strangers Within Our Gates* demonstrates some sensitivity to the ethnic pride of the various peoples described, highlighting events in their national histories, and achievements in the arts, but has no tolerance for celebrations and feasts that include drunkenness. Substandard levels of cleanliness are described bluntly, if not critically. More information on the question of ethnic identity and heritage surfaces when we turn to the greater body of J.S. Woodsworth's work, where we find that he instituted regular monthly meetings at which immigrants could share the culture of their homeland with others through lectures, exhibits and performances.<sup>9</sup> Thus, we can conclude that his understanding of assimilation allowed for cultural preservation.

The question of implied superiority also yields a yes and no answer. The question that recurs throughout *Strangers Within Our Gates* is, how can we Canadians help these people adapt to Canadian life? The implications of such a question are: a) that the Canadians are in a position to give help, i.e., a superior position; and b) that the immigrants should adapt to Canadian life, suggesting that this is the superior lifestyle. Yet, Woodsworth criticizes Canadians who demonstrate patronizing attitudes toward immigrants<sup>10</sup> and emphasizes that as far as he is concerned assimilation is a two-way process, involving the education of established Canadians in addition to that of the immigrant.

In Canada we fail to understand the foreigners, or we despise them. They meet with this attitude at every turn. They live in this atmosphere. With what result? They soon come to accept our rating. They

despise themselves and everything associated with that hated word “foreigner” . . . So, in the zeal to become Canadians, everything of the old world is thrown aside. Becoming head shawls give place to ugly, cheap hats of the prevailing fashion. Exquisitely-worked garments are discarded for ill-fitting cheap quality “store” clothes.

An arts and crafts society recently sought my assistance in their effort to revive lace-making and handicrafts among the immigrants. Their thought was to educate the foreigners. I pointed out that their task was a much more difficult one – that of educating our own Canadians to an appreciation of the beautiful. So soon as we come to value beautiful work bearing the stamp of personality, just as soon will the immigrant find it easy, not to gain, but to retain his inherited standards of the beautiful.<sup>11</sup>

Woodsworth takes pains to point out that “Canadian” includes people who have immigrated from all over the world, not just from the British Isles, but it is clear that the dominant culture of Canada, for Woodsworth, is British. French Canada merits barely a mention. Yet, Woodsworth’s assumptions of English Canadian superiority are undercut by the frequent criticisms levelled at both Canadians and the English immigrants.

Another fruitful approach not pursued in this brief discussion of the question of what “assimilation” meant in Woodsworth’s historical context would be to consider the interpretation of those whom Woodsworth was assimilating? How did they understand the term? Did they perceive Woodsworth as respecting them? Did they consider Woodsworth’s attitude to be one of cultural superiority?

Our brief examination of Woodsworth’s understanding of assimilation suggests that it differs from our own in certain important respects. To say that Woodsworth believed in assimilation, as he understood it, does not demonstrate him to be a “terrible racist.” There certainly are shared elements in our definitions, and one cannot argue that Woodsworth’s attitude towards assimilation would meet the standards of political correctness today. But is that appropriate to ask of an historical figure who lived in a different time and place? Are we like the assimilating group *vis a vis* the text, assuming our own superiority and setting the standards? Do we have all the answers? This teleological understanding of history, the notion that we are progressing towards some great end, or that we are already there looking back at the more primitive stages presents some problems. Nineteenth-century cultural historian Jacob Burckhardt criticized this view of

history because he believed that it allowed a shallow ethical relativism which justified anything and everything as a necessary stage in the process. He argued that everything should be interpreted in its immediate relation to God, or whatever the people of that time saw as God, to see the decisions that were made from the perspective of those who made them. The goal of our study then, to answer our second question, should be to understand the past *on its own terms*. Furthermore, Burckhardt argued, we cannot now see what was *really* happening in a past age any more clearly than could those who lived at that time. We can see how a given event may have worked itself out, but as to exactly why or whether it was a good thing we can have only guesses or fragmentary knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

Just as the temporal gap between historian and subject presents challenges for historical study, so do culture, gender and economics present similar gaps. In fact, there is a prominent school of thought today which argues that these experiential gaps cannot be bridged. In 1988 the Toronto Women's Press, the oldest feminist press in Canada, split into two separate presses over the issue of the acceptability of fiction-writing projects which were written by authors who were not members of the ethnic group they were writing about.<sup>13</sup> Another example of this argument surfaces in the debate over whether men can or should teach women's history. Ruth Roach Pierson pointed out the double-bind that the argument that they cannot or should not places on male historians. They have been castigated for excluding women's experience, or the experience of some other marginalized group from history; yet, if they try to include it, they are criticized.<sup>14</sup> While one can understand from the perspective of power politics these arguments against the dominant group trying to appropriate the voice of the marginalized group and thus maintain or assert their dominance, it has certain logical difficulties and certain difficult implications for historians. If we accept that a man cannot write about women's history because he is a man, and therefore has had a different experience in the world, or that I cannot write about the experience of working-class immigrants because I come from a middle-class family who has been in Canada for seven generations, then it logically follows that none of us can write, for example, medieval European church history because we are products of twentieth-century North America. Few, if any, of us were sent from our homes as youngsters to live and be educated in a monastery without heat, electricity or printed books. Few, if any, of us have lived in a society without modern standards of public sanitation or have had

surgery or dentistry practised on us by barbers without benefit of anaesthetic. We come from a different place, a different time, a different educational system; we have different assumptions about the world. We have different knowledge about the world and a different way of thinking. Yet does this mean we cannot study medieval history, because we do not know the medieval experience? Of course not. We find ways to bridge that temporal experiential gap, such as asking the types of questions outlined in the Woodsworth example. First we must examine our own understandings of the questions we bring to the text. Are they appropriate questions? Would our subject understand them in the same way we do? What can we glean about their understanding of their own situation, or of the questions we ask? What assumptions do we make about the experiences of our subject? Are they assumptions our subject would make? What can we discover about how our subject sees the world that might be helpful in interpreting his or her interpretation of the experience? I believe that the same logic applies to the task of bridging cultural, economic and even gender gaps. We can also bring our own experience to this task. Most of us, however temporarily, have at some time or another been in a setting where we experienced a feeling of “otherness” or powerlessness. While it may not open wide a window into the world of those whose experiences are “other” to us, it at least allows us to peer through a crack between the curtains, and catch a glimpse of that world. It provides at least a starting point for understanding the experience of those who are “other” to our group. Of course, we can never achieve anything approaching a full historical understanding or knowledge of any person, place or time. “A historian cannot know what *really* happened, but he [sic] has a duty to try.”<sup>15</sup>

This brings to our third, and final, question. If our knowledge of history can be only partial and non-objective then why study it? For subjective reasons, by which I mean for purposes relevant to ourselves. History can help us to clarify contexts in which contemporary problems exist, not by a presentist method of projecting our own ideas into the past but by conducting an empirical examination into the past with as much objectivity as possible. Our understanding of contemporary problems is enhanced by a knowledge of how they have developed over time. History can also be useful for what it suggests about the future, when trends and directions can be established. Finally, history can help us to learn about ourselves. Many scholars have pointed to similarities between the narrative process in history and the narrative method in Freudian psychoanalysis.<sup>16</sup> We learn

about ourselves through the stories we tell. But even more perhaps we learn about ourselves as historical study forces us to examine our own presuppositions and values that we bring to the historical text.

### ***Endnotes***

1. Ruth Compton Brouwer, "Transcending the 'Unacknowledged Quarantine': Putting Religion into English-Canadian Women's History," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 27, No. 3 (Fall 1992): 47-61; and Randi R. Warne, "Further Reflections on the 'Unacknowledged Quarantine': Feminism and Religious Studies," in *Changing Methods: Feminists Transforming Practice* (Toronto: Broadview Press, 1995).
2. Jose Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, trans. Evelyn Rugg and Diego Marin (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1961), 45.
3. Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History: Thoughts on History and Society*, ed. H.P. Rickman (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1961), 67, 73-4.
4. David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970), 225.
5. Dilthey, 129-31.
6. Veronica Strong-Boag, "'Ever a Crusader: Nellie McClung, First-Wave Feminist,'" in *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History*, ed. Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman (Toronto: Copp Clark Pittman, 1986; and Randi R. Warne, *Literature as Pulpit: The Christian Social Activism of Nellie L. McClung* (Waterloo: Canadian Corporation for Studies in Religion, 1993), Chapter IV.
7. J.S. Woodsworth, *Strangers Within Our Gates* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972).
8. Woodsworth, *Strangers within Our Gates*, 256.
9. J.S. Woodsworth, *My Neighbour* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1972), 208; J.S. Woodsworth, "Canadians of Tomorrow, VI – Wanted, Social Interpreters," *The Christian Guardian* LXXXVI, 28 (14 July 1915): 12.
10. J.S. Woodsworth, "Canadians of Tomorrow, III – The Assets which the Immigrant Brings," *The Christian Guardian* LXXXVI, 22 (2 June 1915): 12.
11. J.S. Woodsworth, "Canadians of Tomorrow, V – How to Make True Canadians," *The Christian Guardian* LXXXVI, 24 (16 June 1915): 13.

12. Jacob Burckhardt, *Reflections on History* (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1979), 33-34, 103-104, 323-324, 327-328.
13. Ruth Roach Pierson, "Experience, Difference, Dominance and Voice in the Writing of Canadian Women's History," in *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, eds. Karen Offen, Ruth Roach Pierson and Jane Rendall (Indianapolis: Indiana Univ. Press, 1991), 89-90.
14. Pierson, 86.
15. Fischer, 43.
16. Fischer, 315-316.