

Introduction

French Reformed philosopher Jean Brun used to say that humans were the only beings to have a history. He was right. We are not only creatures living in time, as all created beings do, but we also look back to times long past. We write histories. We ponder our personal and collective histories. Whether we are conscious of it or not, we are deeply historical beings, for whom our past is constitutive of our present. This is not only true for our biological roots, but also for everything that makes up human life. Societies are anchored in history, as are our ideas and technologies. This is also true of our faith: its source and truth are dependent on an historical event, the birth, death and resurrection of Christ. Our theology also has a history that we cannot easily dismiss.

During the past fifteen years I (Yannick) have been teaching a brief annual course on the English Reformation. I have been struck, again and again, by the lack of interest in the history of the church—and the history of theology. This lack of interest has many roots. We have sometimes thought of theology as an autonomous task, involving only the individual, their Bible, and a few important theological works that we have read without much thought for their context. At other times, we have easily dismissed the history of theology as a history of errors and wanderings of other theological traditions. Protestants, thus, have had the tendency to look at our past as mostly compromised and tainted by Roman Catholic “heresies.” If history is mostly a succession of theological errors, its study may not be very necessary or important. There is also great complexity in the historical endeavour. We interact with ancient sources and languages, we attempt to understand the development of ideas

and concepts, all the while thinking and “doing” theology in our own context.

Through this process, we constantly look back at the ages which precede us, and we cast a positive or a critical eye on them. We label them, categorise them and learn from them. In the history of Europe certain periods are given names to help students and teachers alike identify an epoch. We can speak of “Antiquity” or “Late Antiquity”, the “Renaissance” or the “Reformation”. Some will have identifiable beginnings or endings. Others will lack that precision but gradually blend from one age into another. One stands out in the list of epochs not only because of its length but because of its name: “The Dark Ages”. It is more than a description. It is a condemnation.

Although without absolute certainty, the person to whom that particular expression is attributed is Petrarch. Francesco Petrarca lived in the fourteenth century and was a scholar and poet of the early Italian Renaissance. His rediscovery of the letters of Cicero may have been something of the catalyst for the Renaissance in the same way that the 95 Theses nailed to the door of All Saints Church in Wittenberg gives a start date for the Reformation. For some scholars the term applies to A.D. 500–1000. In a broader sense the Dark Ages are sometimes taken to stretch from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance, that is from A.D. 500–1300.

In calling this extended period of time “Dark” the historian or philosopher is actually making a judgement not only about the epoch but about what came before and after. A Renaissance writer might look back wistfully towards the days of Ancient Rome with a degree of reverence lamenting its demise. Rome stood as a symbol of civilisation eclipsed by the rampaging hordes who rushed in at its collapse to extinguish its light. When Rome fell, darkness engulfed the continent, relieved only by the return to classical studies that marked the Renaissance.

We should not, however, be too quick to simply use the nomenclature that passes judgement on this period without

examining some of the evidence. Though “the glory that was Rome” can certainly be inspiring and the examples of its architecture engage both head and heart even to this day, not all that was done in its name was laudable. It has been estimated that 20–30 per cent of the population of Roman society were enslaved. Entertainment included spectating as one man tried, and often succeeded, to kill another. Unwanted children were simply abandoned. The sick were thought to be under the curse of the gods and were left to either recover or simply die.

The fêted eighteenth-century scholar and classicist, Edward Gibbon, may have blamed the Church for the demise of the Roman Empire, but it was Christians who rescued abandoned infants, contrary to the law of the Senate, and raised them as their own. It was the Christian Church that established hospitals to look after the sick and tend to their needs. Up until very recently senior nurses in British hospitals were referred to as “sisters.” They fulfilled the same role that nuns in hospitals had performed for a millennium and more.

Perhaps the light of civilisation did not burn as brightly as some of the classicists or some moderns would have us believe. Contrariwise, perhaps the descent into gloom was not as comprehensive or as deep as one might suppose. The Early Middle Ages, or the start of the so-called “Dark Ages”, saw a number of significant advances: the heavy plough, the horse collar, and metal horseshoes. Charlemagne (748–814), or Charles the Great, truly deserved the title. It was he who standardised written script, introducing the Carolingian minuscule.

In theology we witness similar lights starting to rise above the horizon. Some of them, like Boethius, Anselm, or Wycliffe, will be the subject of this book. Others, like Thomas Aquinas or Bradwardine will not, though they stand as giants in our theological past. The former do not simply stand as lights in the darkness, but as figures contesting the label itself. When we discover them, we realise that they are the witnesses of an age that was far from dark. Labelling an age “dark” is often a way

to cover our own ignorance. Darkness does at times cover the earth, though not in a strictly temporal manner, and not always where we think it does.

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Our concern in this book is with the Protestant evangelical reading of Church history, or to be more specific, with the appreciation of our theological past. Protestants often have the intuitive tendency to identify the history of the Church by its theological errors. We are prone to see first and foremost the problems, dangers, and unfaithfulness and completely miss out the benefits, the perseverance and the other faithful credal affirmations. We see the heterodoxy and miss the orthodoxy, and we pride ourselves with being on the right side of the medieval age. In doing so, we do not listen to the Christian wisdom of those who preceded us.

It serves no purpose, however, to accumulate guilt upon guilt. Whilst we have often seen the darkness in history instead of seeing the light through the centuries, the said history is not a simple “black” and “white” set of theological affirmations or heretical deviations. Let us leave culpability behind and move towards a better and more balanced appreciation of our heritage. To do so, however, we must also be conscious of the complex developmental nature of theology throughout the ages.

The great Reformed theologian, Francis Turretin, helpfully distinguishes between the “substance of the faith” and the “corrupting accidents in doctrine and worship”. Maybe it is time we do so in our own personal theological endeavours, in our church life, and in our theological education as well. We should also train ourselves to look for the “unexpected” truth, contrary to what we might initially think. We should train our theological minds to see the best first, instead of the worst. We should live out the principle of charity: assume the faithful and orthodox interpretation, be aware that no theology is perfect, be appreciative of the Church’s struggle for orthodoxy.

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This is our goal in this book: we want to show that there has always been a thread running through history, including through the medieval age. This thread is the constant struggle for an orthodox, faithful, and glorifying theology: one that gives God due honour, that takes Scripture as the principal authority over life and faith, and that nourishes our wonder and worship. The Middle Ages also were brightened by the light of the Gospel, the same light that shines every time we remain faithful to Scripture's "good deposit".

This is easier said than done, however. Or rather, it can be done the simple way, or the better way. After all, it is easy (or relatively so) to go back in time, pick up a few good things here and there: one of Bernard of Clairvaux's sermons on the love of God, one of Augustine's treatises on the primacy of grace, or a quote from Thomas Aquinas on the nature of faith. It is more difficult to strive to *recover* the history of our Christian theology. To do so, we must not pick and choose a few "affirmative" moments of the Church but see how theology has developed through an historical process. We should learn to listen to what the theologians are concerned about, which challenges they try to answer, and with whom they interact.

Our goal is thus not to suggest that the theologians we will present were perfect, nor that they had a pure theology. Of course not. Incidentally, neither is ours. No theology is without stain, approximations, and can even lead to relative misunderstandings. That is inherent to the theological task. Nor is our goal to paint these theologians as pre-reformers, as if the Reformations of the sixteenth century were the only lens through which to read Church history. We must learn to read the theologians of the Medieval Church for themselves. We must read them for who they were and what they wrote—without labelling them as orthodox or heretics.

Our desire is to delve into our common Church history and be thankful witnesses of the continuing presence of true theology and faithfulness to the God of the Scriptures. In arguing so, we

do not want to overstate the differences between, for example, Thomas Aquinas and his contemporaries. Our goal is not to paint one theologian as the only repository of orthodoxy, over against all the other theologians of his age. The ten figures we offer here should not be seen as the only orthodox teachers of the Medieval Church, but as representatives of the continuity of faithful pilgrim theology (*theologia viatorum*). We present them as examples of a broader aim: discerning the continuing thread of faithful theology, done in an attitude of humble hearing, reading, and meditation on the Scriptures.

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Our modest attempt at reclaiming this millennium follows ten main figures of the Medieval Church. To do so, we will pay special attention to the world in which our theologians lived and wrote, as well as some biographical background. This book is not just about facts of the past however. It is also about the history of Christian theology. What we try to do is to encourage every one of us to look at the past as a living witness to God's providence. We can learn from the theologians of the past for there has always been faithful teaching. We propose to point to several aspects of medieval theology which remain as relevant and important for us today.

We submit these chapters as theologians interested in Church history. Yannick is first an apologist, earning his doctorate in Apologetics and teaching in that subject. Iain has served as a pastor for over forty years, and has found time to study for a doctorate in historical theology. We are students of the Scriptures, and of history. While not being professional church historians, we both love Church history deeply, because we love Christ's Church. We are drawn to the exercise of humility and reflection that is required by looking deeply into our past, for the past is a great part of who we are. Protestantism as we know it, and even that of the first decade of the Reformation, did not arise without antecedents at the beginning of the sixteenth century. It is one of the descendants of the Medieval Church,

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just as the Council of Trent subsequently codified Roman Catholic theology.

As Protestant believers we must wrestle with a humble reading of the past, taking the risk of being encouraged, edified, and even corrected, by these medieval theologians. Like these ten figures under review, we are still engaged in the process of reading, writing, and understanding theology after the Ecumenical Councils. Theological faithfulness is not merely something to be preserved after the Reformation, but to be wrestled with, and refined, until all is perfected in the coming of the kingdom. All theology is provisional, including Reformed theology, as was medieval theology. This conviction should accompany our current theological reflections. It is our hope that this contribution will be helpful in that task.

Leo the Great (400-461)

The struggle for Christ's divinity

At the time of the Reformation the two great antagonists were undoubtedly Martin Luther and the pope in Rome. It is hardly surprising, then, that Protestants have often regarded even the mention of a pope with much suspicion. Those suspicions are only fuelled by the historical record of what has come to be known as “The Pornocracy” of the tenth-century popes and the scurrilous record of John XXIII who was eventually deposed and officially classified as an antipope. His deposition by the Council of Constance did not hinder pope Martin V from appointing him a Cardinal, in which office he died. Of John XXIII, Edward Gibbon wrote in his magisterial work on the *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, “The more scandalous charges were suppressed; the vicar of Christ was accused only of piracy, rape, sodomy, murder and incest.” No doubt Gibbon, the Enlightenment scholar, was writing with more than a hint of irony, but the point is made: those who had ascended to the throne of St. Peter cannot be regarded universally as men of eminent holiness.

The consequence of a predisposition to view popes with suspicion inevitably asks for a degree of special pleading to place any name on our selective list of those who deserve not only our attention, but also our thanks for holding aloft a torch that still burns brightly after so many centuries. There were undoubtedly many rogues who held the highest ecclesiastical office, and yet there were also those who, in the opinion of the authors of this slim volume were, to coin a phrase, on the side

of the angels. One such person was Leo I, also known for good reason as Leo the Great.

Biographical sketch

The origins of Leo more than sixteen centuries ago, are difficult to trace and such details as we might have, are open to question. Some have asserted that he was a lawyer from Tuscany in the north of Italy. Others have claimed just as firmly that he was a Roman. If he was not, in fact, actually from Rome, then he had certainly imbibed its spirit in terms of his proud dignity and bearing. He distinguished himself under popes Celestine I and Sixtus III and obviously enjoyed not only their favour, but their confidence. Indeed, it was while he was absent in Gaul, serving as an archdeacon and legate, that he was unanimously elected pope.

There are two matters for which Leo stands out, and which have rightly earned him the title “the Great”. The only other pope to be accorded such a title was Gregory I. The first matter was theological, in that he gave to the Church what has become known as *Leo's Tome*, which became a foundational document for the Second Council of Ephesus in 449, and was even more significant for the Council of Chalcedon (451). What makes the life of Leo even more remarkable was that just three years later, the theologian went out to meet the notorious Attila the Hun face-to-face. The Emperor had removed himself to Constantinople as the new political centre of the Roman world, leaving the pope, by default, to become something of a leading citizen if not *the* leading citizen. United in one person were both a capacity for substantial scholarship and a strength of character that would not shy away from meeting with the most formidable warrior of his age, as he stood poised to destroy Rome itself.

Socio-political and theological context

We will come to the theological significance of Leo shortly but first we should set his pontifical reign in its historical

context. Constantine had moved his capital away from Rome to Constantinople (modern-day Istanbul) in 330. No longer the political centre of the “known” world, it fell to the pope to effectively become Rome’s leading citizen. Leo ascended the papal throne in 440 at the age of forty. Twelve years later Rome faced the greatest crisis of that generation: Attila the Hun descended on Italy threatening to sack the ancient imperial capital. Attila the Hun is one of the few names of the leaders of the Barbarian hordes to have gone down in history. He was noted for his ferocity and the threat of his approach was more than sufficient to galvanise local leaders into action. It was thus that Leo set out to meet Attila in an effort to dissuade him from destroying Rome. They met on the southern shores of Lake Garda in northern Italy. Shortly after their meeting Attila retreated and the city was saved. There are multiple explanations for this. It is more than possible that Leo carried with him a substantial amount of gold with which he bribed Attila to proceed no further. Other explanations include insufficient food for Attila’s soldiers, disease amongst the ranks, and a growing army arriving on the eastern coast of Italy from the Emperor in the East. Most likely each of these played a part in persuading Attila to retreat from Italy. Whatever the cause, it was Leo who was given credit for persuading the invader to turn around and head north. In doing so he greatly enhanced not only his own reputation but the prestige of the papacy.

Though the rise of the papacy is far outside the remit of this work, it has to be admitted that Leo the Great was not unwilling to assert the primacy of the See of Rome over the other centres of Christianity: Constantinople, Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria. Later Jerusalem, Antioch and Alexandria would fall to Islam, and Constantinople owed its significance solely to its political importance and had no historical links to the Apostles or to the churches they founded. Those concerns were in the future. In Leo’s day, Rome claimed primacy on the grounds of its connections with Paul and especially Peter, whom it viewed

as the first pope. This was not coincidental to how Leo dealt with theological divisions. Though we may not be supportive of his claim to be the senior, even sole, custodian of Christian theology, we can at least be thankful that his contribution was on the side of Biblical truth.

Leo's theological contribution

We can now turn to the theological point at issue and examine Leo's contribution and commitment to Biblical orthodoxy particularly as affirmed in the Council of Chalcedon (451). Chalcedon did much to clarify our understanding and define our Christology. At the heart of the debate was the relationship of the human to the divine. Arius (256-336) denied outright the divinity of Christ and therefore the Trinity. His theological successors are with us to this day as Jehovah's Witnesses. If the divinity of Christ is to be maintained, how are we to understand the relationship of the second person of the Trinity to the humanity of Christ? Over the years the church was tugged first in one direction and then in another: at one time emphasising the divinity of Christ at the expense of His humanity, and then as the pendulum would swing in the other direction, emphasising the humanity of Christ at the expense of His divinity. The inclination to go in one direction or the other is understandable. A Jesus who is simply another man, albeit on a significantly elevated level, poses no real intellectual challenge. A Jesus who is simply divine, though this too was to be challenged in the age of the Enlightenment, is relatively easy to digest. When we have a Christology that asserts that Jesus is the unique "*theanthropos*," God-man, then work needs to be done to understand the nature of the union of those two natures—human and divine—in the one person.

Arius' solution did at least have the merit of simplicity. He denied that Jesus possessed absolute divinity. He was opposed by Apollinaris (A.D. 382) who was Bishop of Laodicea. In his desire to maintain the divinity of Christ, he denied the fullness

of His humanity. In Apollinaris' view, the divine Logos took the place of the human spirit; the human spirit was the source of sin so by replacing the human spirit with the divine Logos, he sought not only to defend the divinity of Christ but to maintain His sinlessness. The fatal weakness of this line of argument is that the humanity that Apollinaris is proposing is a humanity without a rational dimension. A Jesus without a human rational element is not human as we know it. The implication for our doctrine of salvation, our soteriology, is catastrophic. In an effort to safeguard the divinity of Christ Apollinaris left us with a Saviour who is unable to renew humanity in the totality of its being. He was affirming the divinity of Christ to the detriment of His humanity. Thus, the Alexandrian school came to assert Mary as the "*theotokos*"—as God-bearer. Additionally, it is difficult to escape the Docetic element in Apollinaris' formulation. The origin of the word "Docetism" lies in the Greek word, *dokeo*, meaning "to seem." According to this error, Jesus only "seemed" to be a man but in fact was not fully man as we are. It was in response to this that the Synod of Alexandria (362) used the word "soul" in respect of Christ to include the rational element.

Opposing the Alexandrian view was Theodore of Antioch, often referred to as Theodore of Mopsuestia, who represented Antioch. He denied the essential indwelling of the divine to the extent that the connection of the divine in the person of Christ was not substantively different to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the believer. It can be seen by this that while Apollinaris played down the humanity, Theodore was playing down the divinity. Antiochan theology was developed further by Nestorius (386–450) who denied that Mary was the "*theotokos*". He had concluded she bore only the humanity of Christ. Though it seemingly solved one problem, it raised another: how can Mary have brought forth God? It created an even greater problem as it separated the humanity from the Godhead giving rise to a doctrine of God having assumed the body of Jesus rather than

being fully united. Nestorius did not explicitly state this as his position, but his followers were less reluctant to embrace the conclusion.

The Alexandrian School was then represented by Cyril (376–444). Cyril claimed that the logical conclusion of Nestorius' position is that if Mary is not "*theotokos*" then the person to whom she gave birth is not divine. If He is not divine, then God has not become incarnate and in its place we have to talk of the divine assumption of humanity. That changes the nature of Christ's relationship to humanity.

It was not just the singularity of the person of Christ that had to be maintained, it was also the nature of the relationship of the two natures. It was in this latter aspect that Nestorianism failed. While it recognised the two natures—an advance on the Arian heresy—it failed to deal with the nature of the union of the two natures adequately. The separation of the two natures was such that the man, Christ, became no more than a God-bearer and is worthy of worship not because He is God but because God is in Him. Cyril's contribution to Christology was his emphasis on the unity of the Person of Christ. For him the two natures were in indissoluble union while remaining distinct.

A contemporary of Cyril, Eutyches (380–456) sought to define further the doctrine of the two natures by a formula of which Cyril would not have approved. While holding to Christ having two natures, in his opinion the human nature of Christ had been absorbed into the divine. By this fusion a new nature had been created rendering the humanity of Christ no longer consubstantial with our own. In that sense Jesus was not truly human in the proper use of the word. The result was that Eutyches was deposed and excommunicated by the so-called "Robber Council" of Ephesus in 448. As a result, Eutyches appealed to the Bishop of Rome and it was in response to this that Leo wrote what is now referred to as his *Tome*.