

# ***Recovered Memories: A Comparison of Ancient and Modern Church Histories***

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This article compares the epistemologies, writing styles, subject matters, methodologies, sources, and interests of ancient and modern historians of the Catholic Church. Ancient historians reviewed include Eusebius, Theodoret, Socrates, Sozomen, and the Venerable Bede. Modern Church histories critiqued include those of Dwyer and Bokenkotter. The credulity of ancient histories and the skepticism of modern histories on matters supernatural, miraculous and metaphysical is contrasted. Modern church histories are found to be less open to a wide range of sources and more chained to materialist or naturalist assumptions, and thus less rich and edifying than their ancient precursors, who retained a lively sense of divine providence.

## ***Ancient and Modern Attitudes about Church History***

The writing of church history at a very basic level confronts a fundamental series of questions. Does God, as the Bible asserts, intervene in human history? Is there a providential aspect to human history? Or is man alone in the universe, a simple product of elementary material forces?

A comparison of ancient and modern Church histories offers us an opportunity to see how such questions have been variously addressed. The ancient church historians addressed in this essay, such as Eusebius, the Venerable Bede, Socrates, Sozomen and Theodoret offer us one approach. Modern historians, such as Thomas Bokenkotter and John Dwyer, among others, represent a very different approach. One can, of course, write history, even church history, without any self-conscious attempt to wrestle with these seemingly metaphysical and ahistorical questions. Many moderns do just that.<sup>1</sup> But how and whether one addresses such questions affects the kind of history one writes, and what events in history are worthy of remembering or forgetting. The history of history writing shows that for centuries most historians did assume the existence of God as well as some notion of providence in history. In the early dawn of history the idea that human beings interacted only among themselves without regard to the supernatural would have been incomprehensible. There were of course prominent exceptions to this general pattern, such as Thucydides, but in the main historians were mindful of the celestial spheres until sometime in the eighteenth or nineteenth century. In those days,

God's demise was stoutly proclaimed by some. Now he is largely ignored. Today, human history is exalted as the realm of purely human self-description and a record of human glory, and the idea that God, as anything other than a human phantasmagoria, might have anything to do with history is heresy. In the early dawn of history, when the prophets of Israel and Judah critiqued the history of their nation and the policy of their princes, God *spoke* to his people. Revelation, as Voegelin argued in *Order and History*, gave meaning to human events.<sup>2</sup> Revelation *was* history: the process of man finding God and of God seeking man. This understanding of history was shared by the early Church historians. However, as if taking their primary cues from the secular movement of the modern age, most contemporary church historians are much more diffident in asserting the intervention of God into human history, and indeed, there is a decided tendency to treat Revelation itself as a strictly human project and God, at best, as a *deus abscondus*.

For the ancient Church historian, history had meaning and purpose. It was not simply a concatenation of unrelated events. Nor was it merely, as eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth century historians asserted, a kind of dialectical and ideological process.<sup>3</sup> Rather it was a record on one hand of the follies and crimes of humanity, and on the other, of the redeeming sense of a moral obligation to fellow human beings.

Whether ancient or modern, the historian needs to take a stand and declare a position. Is history simply a human undertaking, as most moderns assert a priori? If so, certain consequences follow for one's historical narrative. There will be no need, for instance, to give credence to miracles, visions, prophecy or other "superstitious" claims and sources. All explanations of the extraordinary, after scientific inspection, will be found to have their roots in the very ordinary. Conclusions do follow from assumptions such as these, and so does the historian's manner of treating evidence and sources.

On the other hand, if one assumes that a Supreme Intelligence gave birth to and takes an interest in the human project, this also will color one's reading and recording of history. Under this assumption, the range of possibilities for explaining the extraordinary is substantially broadened rather than narrowed. One's range of sources is multiplied. Operating under assumptions that readmit the supernatural, one is free to review the deeds not only of the powerful, but also to take seriously the beliefs, hopes and aspirations of peons, peasants, and proletarians, the little people whose credulity about things supernatural and spiritual is otherwise routinely ignored by modern historians. But if we are really serious, as many modern historians claim to be, about the history of little people who don't make history, their manifold testimonies to the miraculous in their ordinary lives perhaps should not be so readily dismissed. In the kind of history that really includes the little people in all their integrity, the possible answers to questions of causality in human events moves beyond the purely

mundane and material to anticipate at least the potential relevance of the supernatural.

Now, admittedly, even the church historian inclined to leave open the prospect of miraculous and supernatural events operates along a continuum of credulity. Just as one may assume that there is no case whatsoever in which supernatural evidence may be admissible in the court of historical judgment, so one can slip over into a kind of supernatural determinism in which no freedom whatsoever is allowed to human agency. In between these poles of extreme skepticism and extreme fatalism lies a wide range of territory for the church historian to stake out an historical methodology. It is the mark of the modern to hug the skeptical end of the spectrum, and of the early Church historian to incline toward the more providential end of the scale. What is clear, however, is that to have any notion of history at all, the human being must be viewed as having a degree of choice. History, then, is not accidentally a product of the rational tradition of the west. The mysticism of the east was not fertile ground for the emergence of the historical instinct. Hegel was surely right enough in this observation.<sup>4</sup> And the early Church historian, however credulous in modern eyes, was no fatalist. To him, humanity was free and responsible: Free to choose, and responsible for choice.

Father George Rutler has observed that “. . . history is neither a chronicle nor an autonomous dialectic; it is a conversation, indeed a song, between Perfect Love and his imperfect but perfectible object.”<sup>5</sup> Eusebius and his fellow ancients, whom we will soon consult, would be at home with Father Rutler’s view of history, for it was in the main their view of history too, even as they described and chronicled the mundane and tawdry. But for the modern historian, even for modern church historians such as Dwyer and Bokenkotter, who are Catholic historians of Catholic Church history, such a view of history is simply unscientific and thus inadmissible before the bar of modern historical judgment. In this view, the notion that history might be art, or song, or even a duet between the terrestrial and celestial spheres is purely romantic fantasy or a species of psychological pathology.

In comparing several ancient writers, such as Eusebius, Theodoret, Socrates, Sozomen, and Bede, with a few modern ones, including Dwyer and Bokenkotter, one sees both similarity and contrast.<sup>6</sup> In both substance and style, the ancient histories bear some resemblance to their more recent counterparts, but the contrasts between them are striking and also rich with evidence about what the authors think history is, and about how it should be remembered.

### *The Early Church Historians*

Eusebius, Theodoret, Socrates, Sozomen and Bede lived and wrote in a world that was unembarrassedly, one might even say joyously, alive to the presence of God in history. They professed openly a belief in God and in an

afterlife. They accepted the possibility, even the manifest reality, of miracles. This did not mean that as historians they abandoned their critical faculties, gave every reputed miracle credence, or that they were hidebound to Scripture as the only meaningful source of historical inspiration and information. In the broadest sense, truth for these early Church historians was a broad and capacious thing that excited the reason and embraced faith. Truth was not merely, nor even mostly a function of factum or datum, though these were not ignored. Rather it was a larger all-embracing thing. History was a record of God's action in the world and of man's reaction to God. History was a grand intercourse between the heavens and the earth. Flowing from these attitudes and assumptions they found it necessary to consult a wide range of sources to enrich their histories. Among these was Scripture itself, which was taken not merely as a kind of allegorical literature devoid of historical value (as is so often asserted by many devotees of modern historical criticism), but rather in its own way as a reliable source for historical information. To be sure, none viewed the Scriptures simply or even most importantly as an historical record. They were alive to the allegorical possibilities in Scripture and to the moral and normative dimensions that make the Scriptures such unique examples of literature. But they believed that Scripture was something far more than mere literature. It was Revelation, the very Word of God transmitted to men through the agency of human writers.

Still, ancient church historians found it necessary to consult a variety of sources including personal interviews, documents, correspondence, archival material and the writings of previous scholars, theologians, and churchmen--the stuff, in other words, that any modern historian would employ. Thus, although Eusebius makes hundreds of explicit or implicit references to the Scriptures in his ecclesiastical history, he also consults the Jewish historian Josephus extensively. The list of other notables is lengthy, including among others the works of Hegesippus, Justin, Irenaeus, Ignatius, Pamphilius, Dionysius of Alexandria, Polycarp, Clement of Rome, Tertullian, Philo, Justin Martyr, Papias and the Roman historian Tacitus. Reputed to be one of the most erudite men of his own day, he was widely read and had extensive personal experience, as well as access to state archives and to the great libraries at Jerusalem and Caesarea. Eusebius also used anonymous documents and other materials collected from far and wide, though his principal interest and ken concerned the progress of Greek Christianity in the East. What we have in Eusebius' history then, is a remarkable summary of vast stores of information. Indeed, apart from the *Acts of the Apostles*, which was the first Church history, what Eusebius accomplished was without parallel. He was, as he notes at the beginning of the work, embarking on an ambitious project: "I am the first to venture on such a project and to set out on a lonely and untrod path; but I pray that I may have God to guide me and the power of the Lord to assist me."<sup>7</sup> Following this he discusses the nature of his sources and the sublimity of his subject.

Socrates, Theodoret, and Sozomen, the next generation of church historians who followed and emulated Eusebius, have their own distinctive styles and degrees of credulity. Socrates more than any of the authors quotes extensively from actual letters, synodal documents, and decrees. Theodoret and Sozomen do so as well, but at less length and with less frequency. All three rely on the accounts of eye witnesses; Socrates, being the one most inclined to relate, test and sift varying accounts. The earliest of the three histories is provided by Socrates, and Sozomen doubtless used Socrates' history in composing his own. Socrates adheres to the facts of an event, and examines all sides of a controversy. His matter-of-fact introduction contains no rhetorical flourish, not even a request for God's blessing on his work; otherwise a common practice in ancient church histories. Furthermore, Socrates frequently asks his readers to consider variable and contradictory facts, and reminds us of what his task as historian requires. At Chapter 22 of Book I, he reminds us that the role and motivations of divine action in the world are "a difficult question, and not relevant to the present discussion. For our object is neither to examine the soundness of doctrinal views, nor to analyze the mysterious reasons for the providence and judgments of God; but to detail as faithfully as possible the history of transactions which have taken place in the churches." He goes further here than either Theodoret or Sozomen in refraining from divining God's motivations and workings in history. However, even Socrates chronicles miracles and testifies to their existence, for which his late nineteenth century editors take him to task, although they commend him for being less credulous than his contemporaries.

Indeed, Theodoret, who was a bishop, and Sozomen are far more credulous than either Socrates or Eusebius in reporting miraculous and prodigious events. Still, Sozomen lamented the difficulties of sorting through the contradictory accounts of the Arian controversy. He states: ". . . still, as it is requisite, in order to maintain historical accuracy, to pay the strictest attention to the means of eliciting truth, I felt myself bound to examine all writings of this class according to my ability (Bk. I, chapter 1)." In his next breath Sozomen declares the doctrines of the Catholic Church to be "the most genuine, since it has been tested frequently by the plots of opposing thinkers; yet, the disposal of the lot being of God, the Catholic Church has maintained its own ascendancy. . . . and has led all the churches and the people to the reception of its own truth." Confessions such as these are not uncommon in ancient Church histories. They reflect an honest belief in the notion that the Holy Spirit guides church teaching, even as controversy bedevils and divides its human and sinful members. Sozomen and Theodoret alike, without embarrassment, call upon God's assistance as they commence their works. But after all this is said and done, Sozomen and Theodoret rely on an impressive array of material in composing their histories, including acts of synods, imperial and clerical letters, laws established concerning religion, authors, hymnal materials, biographies,

personal apologies, church canons, speeches, philosophical discourses, statistical information, martyrologies, eyewitness testimony, and hearsay and second-hand accounts.

Bede, too, writing at a distance of two centuries from the second generation of ancient church historians, is aware of his need as historian to explain for the reader the nature of his sources.<sup>8</sup> He does this in his Preface to the history, which reads like a modern set of acknowledgments to those upon whom he relied for information. It is clear that Bede engaged in wide correspondence, relied on archival material from the papacy of Gregory II, and interviewed bishops and abbots and “countless faithful witnesses” throughout Britain. Then in a bit of a disclaimer he adds: “Should the reader discover any inaccuracies in what I have written, I humbly beg that he will not impute them to me, because, as the laws of history require, I have laboured honestly to transmit whatever I could ascertain from common report for the instruction of posterity.” He then calls upon his readers to remember him in their prayers and to ask God’s mercy for any of his failures. Even in dealing with a mundane matter such as sources and methods ancient historians ask for God’s blessings. Perhaps this was a mere literary convention, or more probably a deep religious sentiment. It is instructive to note that modern church historians refrain from such usages, rarely feeling compelled, at least in print, to thank God or to ask his blessings on their endeavors. Today we prefer to thank our human collaborators.

In relation to the Church itself, the ancient church writers display a general respect for the ecclesiastical hierarchy, and an abiding belief in the role of the Holy Spirit acting in the life of the Church. This is not to say that they are blind to clashes of personality, style or policy within the Church, nor to the weaknesses of ecclesiastical institutions. Bede, for instance, faithfully recounts the answers of an impatient Pope Gregory to the rather sophomoric questions of St. Augustine of Canterbury. Eusebius makes his opinion known of early Church figures, not hesitating, as in Polycarp’s case, to point out his limited intellectual capacities. Eusebius treads carefully on issues surrounding the Arian heresy, despite rather clear imprecations against other earlier brands of unorthodox teaching. But in dealing with the Church as the living embodiment of Christ’s work in the world, he, together with Bede and the others, usually demonstrates a large degree of reverence.

The ancient Church historians provide us with a rich tapestry of sources and historical evidence. They seem less pinched, somehow, than most of their modern counterparts, more innocent perhaps, or perhaps just closer to the Source of all being and matter. That Source has served as an inspiration for all manner of human literature, and one wonders when such inspiration will be reflected in the writings of our modern writers of Church history. Should they consult their forbears in the art of Church history, they might retrieve the idea that not everything admits, even in our own incredulous age, of material

explanation. Should this ever come to pass we will have recovered the memory of mystery, and history will be better for it.

### *Modern Church History Writing*

Commenting about modern church history writing does not mean to imply that there is but one modern genre. Indeed there are many. They range from serious scholarly works to popular and superficial ones. They range from impartial and empirically based studies relying on traditional sources to completely speculative ideological tracts. They range from expansive histories of the entire sweep of Christianity, to detailed studies of particular eras or particular themes. In other words, there is a great variety in modern Church history writing and there is a lot of writing. Historians must impose limits and order on the material they study and represent. Ancient historians were familiar with this reality, and modern historians face even more painful constraints in this regard than did the ancients, if only because there is now so much more history to describe, understand and explain, and because there is so much history being written under the pressure of academic survival. To put it simply, one cannot read or include everything.

Modern history also has available to it many techniques and methods unknown or at least poorly developed in the patristic period. Sciences such as sociology, anthropology, linguistics, psychology, textual and form criticism, not to mention archaeology, forensics, chemistry and computer sciences, enable historians to confront and analyze texts and data in ways unheard of until recently. But if modern history has advanced significantly in these regards, it suffers from a number of ills as well. In its headlong quest to attain status as a science, modern history writing too often loses its moorings, even its most essential quality, that is, its memory.

Such an astounding claim begs illustration. To do so, let me make some observations about how modern historians deal with the very period in Church history that our patristic historians chronicled, and with the ancient historians themselves, who were, in many cases, important historical figures in their own right. To put it bluntly, very few modern church histories (especially those written in the last several decades) make it their business to dwell on the development of the church in the first six or seven centuries. W.H.C. Frend, a very accomplished church historian and classicist, is a prominent exception. In his book, *The Rise of Christianity*, we find frequent mention of each of the classic church historians mentioned above, the value of their works and contributions, and their historical importance.<sup>9</sup> But perhaps Frend's most telling remark occurs in his Introduction where he laments that the study of ancient Christianity is itself in danger of extinction as a result of the "decline in the study of the classics in schools, [and] the lessening of the importance of the early church councils in theological education. . . . University faculty boards, anxious to save what can be saved of the study of ancient history or

medieval history, or to experiment in modern theology, have had no compunction in axing the early church from staff and syllabus alike.”<sup>10</sup> Frend writes to this purpose in his history of early Christianity: that is to keep alive the memory of that time, and he does so with considerable even-handedness, erudition, and a formidable command and understanding of scripture. One may quibble with him on an array of arguable matters, but Frend is exceptional. Few modern church historians rise to his level.

Forgetfulness is a major flaw of modern history. In Thomas Bokenkoetter’s *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, otherwise a fairly comprehensive work, we find mention only of Eusebius. Bede, Socrates, Sozomen, Theodoret, and their works are unmentioned, while a host of moderns receive ample notice. One must pick and choose, surely, but is Eusebius the only early Church historian worthy of mention in a history of the Church? Are the Arian controversy, the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea, and the great tribulations in church-state relations of this period deserving of only a few pages, particularly given the persistence of neoArian heresies in theological speculation right down to our own times? When one loses one’s memory, one fails to see the connection between new versions of old ideas.

Too much modern church history, when it isn’t forgetful, is driven by a priori assumptions that are essentially ideological. In John Dwyer’s *Church History: Twenty Centuries of Catholic Christianity*, we have a species of this type of ideological and forgetful church history. Not one of the ancient Church historians is referred to or cited in Dwyer’s “history.” He confidently informs his readers in the forward that they needn’t bother with his sources, and that he is so well-read and studied that footnotes, after all, aren’t really necessary.<sup>11</sup> So much for scholarship. But as he weighs into the meaty history of the early church we find his forgetfulness of things matched by his Bultmannian prowess. We are told, reliably, that secular historians of his day give us “no information” about Jesus.<sup>12</sup> So much for Tacitus, Livy, and Seutonius, or for that matter Talmudic writers or Josephus. The Gospels, we are assured, were merely “religious propaganda,” largely worthless as real sources of historical information. They are the work of a political party, a group of idealistic lads with good intentions and really fine imaginations. No “objective events” are thus described in the gospels which are mainly stories and perhaps legends. The miracles of Jesus are not to be taken literally, but rather to be understood as retroactive imaginative devices of his followers.<sup>13</sup> One gets the picture, and one asks how Dwyer can be so certain about these “historical” judgments. Was he there? Did he walk with Jesus? Did he see that the miracles didn’t occur? How can he state with certainty that Jesus definitely didn’t say most of the things that are attributed to him in the Gospels? When historians make such assertions, they clearly go far beyond what the actual historical data allows them to assert with any confidence.

Dwyer's treatment of the Arian controversy is equally shoddy and polemical. Socrates, Theodoret and Sozomen would be greatly surprised to learn that "in practice, the dogmatic formulas of Nicaea, Ephesus and Chalcedon were taken more seriously than the text of the New Testament itself, and this was very harmful for the faith of later ages. . . . The real tragedy was theological in nature. Allegorical exegesis of the scripture was the rule at that time, and therefore the one factor, scripture, which was capable of judging and criticizing the appropriation of worldly values and standards was effectively neutralized."<sup>14</sup> Dwyer makes this astonishing claim despite the fact that he has already dismissed scripture as religious propaganda. Moreover, apart from being highly debatable and tendentious, this assertion is wrong. Indeed, the Arians did argue that proponents of Nicene orthodoxy were unscriptural in their insistence that the Father and the Son were "of one substance," and so in this sense Dwyer embraces an Arian argument. But what he forgets is that the Arians asserted a teaching about Jesus which misinterpreted Scripture, by claiming that he was not fully divine, and that there was a time when he was not, namely that Jesus was a creature of at best demi-god status but certainly not a full person of any divine trinity. Indeed, several of the church fathers, including our ancient historians, pointed out these unscriptural features in their critiques of the Arian teachings. As for Dwyer's assertion about the church fathers' lack of attention to scripture, this, too, is demonstrably false. Athanasius, the greatest defender of the Nicene doctrines in his critiques of Arian theology and in his defense of the Nicene Creed, freely cited and heavily relied on the Scriptures in both their literal and allegorical senses.<sup>15</sup> So, too, did Ambrose in his *Exposition of the Christian Faith* as well as many other defenders of orthodoxy at the time.<sup>16</sup> No one truly familiar with patristic writings could possibly make the kind of ahistorical inferences Dwyer so blithely, confidently, and erroneously asserts. One is led, charitably, to the conclusion that Dwyer has never learned or has forgotten the essential history of this critical juncture in the life of early Christianity. Poor memories, in turn, are wonderful assets in treating history as an ideological playground, and the result is something we used to call revisionism but increasingly praise as "critical" or "visionary."

### *The Matter of Miracles*

It is perhaps a forgivable feature of modern history, as we have already noted, to ignore the miraculous. Even in the best of modern histories, the issue is mostly passed in silence. When miracles are mentioned, one discusses simply the "superstitious" or "credulous" nature of the age in which the people reporting or purporting them lived. One might, as Paul Johnson does in his masterful study *A History of Christianity*, describe the debates about the end of the miraculous age that occurred even as early as imperial times.<sup>17</sup> One might observe how the belief in relics affected the life of the laity or clergy or even

how they spawned black market behaviors and underground economies. But, on the whole, this class of historian sees himself as engaging in sociological or anthropological analysis, not in a serious discussion about the reality of the miraculous. Frend treats of the miraculous in a similar fashion, as a kind of belief system that affected peoples' lives. One might even occasionally observe that the effect of such beliefs was sometimes salutary and not always pathological. Even a Leopold von Ranke, considered the father of modern historiography, in his *History of the Papacy* is willing to observe from time to time, despite his Lutheran sympathies, that the survival of the papacy and of the Church bears the mark of providential agency in its capacity for renewal and regeneration after periods of corruption and degeneracy.<sup>18</sup> But as an historian, one wasn't obliged to directly confront the question whether miracles might actually explain specific historical events.

This is one modern approach to church history writing. Another is simply to assert that miracles are superstitious relics of the unscientific mind. In this view, nothing in history is miraculous, because miracles defy a naturalist and materialist understanding of the universe. But materialism is first and foremost a philosophical assumption, rather than an empirically proven fact. And naturalism might in its own fashion be a close relative of something called superstition. In any case, there can be little doubt that one's attitude toward what constitutes history, and whether history is a purely human phenomenon or one that also reflects God's providence, greatly affects how one writes history, treats sources, and conducts historical analysis.

I take as an example of this the case of a miraculous story adverted to by Socrates, Theodoret and Sozomen. All three of these writers, in varying degrees of detail and with some minor variations, describe the finding in Jerusalem of the true cross by Emperor Constantine's mother, Helena. Attached to this story is the recounting of a healing miracle. As related by the historians, once the crosses had been dug up no one knew which one of the timbers belonged to the cross of Christ. So the crosses were taken to the house of a dying or, in some versions, a dead woman, who was touched by two of the crosses without effect. The touch of the third cross brought immediate recovery and revealed the identity of the true cross. The story has many other variable details in the three accounts offered. Clearly for early church historians, this event was important and real. Such events strike deep into the hearts of the faithful. They are the stuff of popular discussion. And so, according to the modern historical instinct, they are the stuff of myth and legend. Popular stories and beliefs are thus often simply dismissed or ignored. But Socrates, Theodoret and Sozomen did not ignore it. What, then, is the duty of the modern historian in treating such a question as the historicity of the finding of the true cross and the healing miracle that accompanied it? For many, the approach is simply to pass over it in utter silence, as do Frend, Johnson, Dwyer, and

Bokenkotter. To the modern fraternity of scholars, one is not required to directly confront the issue of the veracity of such incredible stories.

Now, there is a good deal of older scholarship, much dating back to the late nineteenth century, which explored the veracity of this story. Mostly that scholarship concludes that the story is legend, and so Socrates, Theodoret and Sozomen are discounted along with their accounts of the event. Why? There are good reasons, it turns out, for doubting the veracity of this miraculous tale. Eusebius, in his *Life of Constantine*, although describing in some detail the trip Helena made to Jerusalem, including her discovery of the Holy Sepulcher, makes no mention at all of the finding of the cross. Given the rather newsworthy nature of such a discovery, Eusebius's silence on the matter is taken by secular and church historians alike as strong evidence that we are dealing with a legend rather than an actual event. The magisterial Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* sarcastically derides the tradition and in a snide footnote acknowledges that while Baronius and Tillemont, noted historians in their own right, championed it, "the silence of Eusebius . . . satisfies those who think [and] perplexes those who believe."<sup>23</sup>

But when we *think* about it, what *are* we to believe? Is believing tantamount to not thinking as Gibbon implies? Is the argument from the silence of Eusebius really so telling after all? It should be apparent to even an amateur historian or logician, that even Eusebius didn't include everything in his history. Are we to conclude that everything he left out didn't happen? Such a test would do considerable violence to what we can learn about the history of the time from all those other accounts. Shouldn't one give some credit to the many writings which affirm the tradition? Cyril of Jerusalem, writing only twenty-five years after the supposed event, attests that the "whole world has since been filled with pieces of the wood of the Cross."<sup>24</sup> Sulpitius Severus, writing in the early fifth century, attests to the general outlines of the story.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, his version is at variance with the other versions, each of which differs in turn in details. Are these variances in detail further evidence of the legendary character of the event? One need not assume this, although the skeptical historian is wont to seize upon this as further evidence against credulity. But we know for a fact that tales about historical events often accrue in variation. That Kennedy was assassinated no one doubts, but there are many versions of how and why it occurred, yet no one disbelieves the event itself. Indeed, the finding of the true cross was widely believed and accepted down to the advent of the Enlightenment and the general skepticism of the ages that followed. Nonetheless, against the skeptics, Cardinal Newman (in his *Two Essays on Biblical and on Ecclesiastical Miracles*) and others, have strongly contended in favor of giving credence to this tradition of the true cross. Since then, few historians have been inclined to touch the story. It has literally dropped off the radar screen of modern historical consciousness. Thus, Bokenkotter, though describing Helena's visit to Jerusalem, makes virtually no mention of the true

cross story. History, modern historians have determined, can forget that quaint memory.

Now this is not meant to be a broad condemnation of modern history. This reputed event and its accompanying miracle, even if historically true, are but one minor event in the massive tapestry of Christian history. The historian is not obliged, obviously, to include everything. Indeed, even pious church historians, such as Philip Hughes, pass over such business in silence, preferring to assess the wider political, social, and theological controversies of the age.<sup>22</sup> Christopher Dawson, the preeminent Catholic historian of the twentieth century, whose interest in and belief in the importance of the religious and spiritual dimensions of human history was legendary, was surely no miracle monger. All writers of history to a certain extent appeal to the instincts of their own age and look for themes and issues in history that strike responsive chords in the minds of contemporary readers. That most modern historians ignore the miraculous, then, is perhaps one of the characteristics of our time. It has become a matter of taste or style. It is a decision about what is most interesting and most important in the actual stuff of history, and about what is most likely to be instructive to the current or even subsequent generations. Now one might, like Dawson, find the most important stuff in history to be rooted in the stuff of religion, and deal systematically with the religious and spiritual dimensions of history, without recounting a single miraculous incident. Still, no one would charge that Dawson was at heart a secularist or materialist. An historian might truly believe in the providential nature of history without wearing it on his sleeve, or shoving it down his readers' throats. On the matter of the veracity of this or that miracle, the believer is free to believe and the skeptic to disbelieve. On the matter of miracles at large, whether they do or even can occur, we confront not only history, but philosophy and theology. History is replete with accounts of miracles, but not all accounts of history recount them.

As the writing of church history continues, one would hope that the ancient church historians will survive the onslaught of modern historical criticism and the forgetfulness of our own age. That they accepted and chronicled miracles is no reason to ignore their status as historians. As for modern church historians, they would do well to consult with their ancient forbears with forbearance. Their credulity should not evoke our skepticism as to their general worth. And insofar as the matters of the miraculous and the supernatural are concerned, future ages may view the skepticism of our own time as unduly harsh and slightly crabbed, when they compare today's historians to their ancient predecessors who were not embarrassed to recount miraculous events or to acknowledge God as the sovereign ruler of the universe and the ultimate judge of history.

## Notes

1. For a compelling analysis of the current fetish among historians to banish the supernatural from history and a critique of the materialist biases inherent in such a project see William H. Carroll, "Banning the Supernatural: Why Historians Must Not Rule Out the Action of God in History," *The Catholic Social Science Review* Vol. I (1996): 73-81.

2. Eric Voegelin, *Order and History: Israel and Revelation* Volume I, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1956).

3. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree translation (Chicago: Great Books, volume 46, 1952), 153-369. and Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (Chicago: Great Books, volume 50, 1952), 415-434.

4. Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, 207-258.

5. George W. Rutler, *Beyond Modernity: Reflections of a Post-Modern Catholic* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1987), 174.

6. Various translations are available for the works of Eusebius. For a recent translation see Eusebius, *The History of the Church* translated by G. A. Williamson (New York: Penguin Books, 1989). I also consulted the A. C. McGiffert translation of Eusebius's History of the Church found in Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, first published in 1890 and republished in 1994 by Hendrickson Publishers at Peabody, Massachusetts in 1994, pp. 1-403. For the histories of Sozomen, Socrates and Theodoret, I also consulted the Schaff and Wace series, volumes 2 and 3. Sozomen's *Church History from A.D. 323-425* was translated by Chester D. Hartranft. Socrates' *Church History from A.D. 305-439* was translated by A. C. Zenos. *The Ecclesiastical History* of Theodoret was translated by Blomfield Jackson. For Bede's History see: The Venerable Bede, *A History of the People and Church of England* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979). Among the moderns consulted extensively here see: John C. Dwyer, *Church History: Twenty Centuries of Catholic Christianity* (New York: Paulist Press, 1985) and Thomas Bokenkotter *A Concise History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Image Books, 1990).

7. Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* Book I.

8. For a useful study of Bede's use of the Bible, hagiography and miracles, see Benedicta Ward, SLG, *The Venerable Bede* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse Publishing, 1990), especially at 41-110.

9. W. H. C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

10. Ibid. 6.

11. Dwyer, 2.

12. Ibid. 6. For a fine analysis of the sources in secular history that speak to the historicity of Jesus, see Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for the Historical Jesus and the Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996).

13. Dwyer. 6-8.

14. Ibid. 123-124.

15. Athanasius was the most well-known defender of the trinitarian doctrine which Dwyer dismisses as unscriptural. Yet, when one reads virtually any work by Athanasius, we find it thoroughly laced with scriptural references, whether his apologetic works, such as his *Apologia de Fuga* (defense of his flight); or in his historical works such as the *History of the Arians*, or in his pastoral works, such as his

*Festal Letters* and *Episcopal Epistles*, or in his theological works, such as his *De Incarnatione Verbi Dei* (On the Incarnation of the Word), or even a biography, such as his *Life of Antony*. Most of Athanasius's works are compiled in volume 4 of Schaff and Wace's *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*.

16. See Ambrose, *Exposition on the Christian Faith*, in volume 10 of Schaff and Wace's *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 201-314. Ambrose and Athanasius are not alone in their reliance on scripture. Whether one consults Cyprian, Origen, Tertullian, Jerome, Augustine, Chrysostom, or virtually any patristic figure, a great love for and use of scripture is palpable.

17. Paul Johnson, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), especially at 162ff.

18. Early in Volume I of his three volume *tour de force*, Ranke expresses this qualified sense of providence thusly: "There are certain periods of history that tempt us to anxiously scrutinize, if we dare thus to express ourselves, the plans of God in his government of the world, and earnestly to examine the forces that are in action for the education of the human race." *The History of the Popes* (New York: Frederick Unger, 1966 republication of the 1901 reprinted edition), p. 24. This remark precedes his discussion of the fall of the secular power of the papacy to the nationalist impulse that was everywhere unleashed in the Protestant revolt. Moreover, after his lengthy analysis of the course of papal and hierarchical fortunes and its battles with the Protestant prince and principle alike, Ranke closes his work with the following line: "High above all conflict . . . there will yet arise from the ocean of error, the unity of a conviction, untroubled in its steadfast security--the pure and simple consciousness of the ever-during and all-pervading presence of God." Even an historian of modern bent might bow, then, before a higher power.

19. Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Chicago: The Great Books, volume 40, 1952). Gibbon's commentary on the discovery of the true cross is located at p. 353 and in note 65, p. 784.

20. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lecture IV*, Edwin Hamilton Gifford translation in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, volume 7, 21.

21. Sulpitius Severus, *The Sacred History*, Alexander Roberts translation in Schaff and Wace, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, volume 11, 113.

22. Philip Hughes, *A Popular History of the Catholic Church* (New York: Image Books, 1954).