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New Quests for Old: One Historian's Observations on a Bad Bargain

Paul Merkley

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Historians have been drawn of late to the scene of theological discussion by the noises attending something called 'The New Quest for the Historical Jesus.' There had been a Quest before this one, we recall; and in those dear, dead days the theologians were full of grave regard for 'the historical method' and insisted that it was the standing practice of their profession to wait for the 'scientific' assessment of scriptural documents by the historians before preaching upon them. While flattering, this attitude did not necessarily engage the support of the historical fraternity generally. The authors of the theological surveys, however, are unanimous in believing that it did, and like to tell the story of how the dialectical theologians, beginning with Barth, overthrew the 'tyranny of historicism' (a word to which they give a rather different meaning than it has among the historians) in the name of the autonomy of theology. Now suddenly there is a new generation agonizing in the theological journals about 'the historical method'—but with some astonishing differences.

I am assuming that my present readers are familiar with the outlines at least of the arguments of the New Questers—Käsemann, Ebeling, Pannenberg, Bornkamm, Robinson, and the others—and would find no profit in an amateur synopsis of them. This essay is written, rather, with the simple object of placing on record one historian's disappointment after a reasonably conscientious study of this new literature. Many of us are indebted, for insights into the method and meaning of our own work as historians, to theologians of the generation now passing away—to Tillich, to Bultmann, and to the Niebuhr brothers, for example. The work of Karl Löwith¹ demonstrates the possibilities for historical theory contained in many of the concepts of the dialectical theologians. It is difficult to see how any such constructive work could be built upon the discoveries of the New Questers.

In the first place, much reading of the New Quest literature is not likely to sharpen an historian's appreciation of theology as an intellectual discipline. Where these writers derive their vocabulary from the dialectical theology, they have confused established terminology by inconsistency and evasion. For example, I once thought that I understood the distinction which the dialectical theologians made between *Historie* and *Geschichte*, and respected the didactic purpose behind it. But the New Questers, taking them all in all, have squandered the real capital which that distinction gave to theology. They have imposed upon the original distinction (a distinction between mere recorded fact and fact in the context of interpretation) all sorts of other distinctions—some

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of them having epistemological bearing, some moral, some psychological, and so on—and have obscured the purposes of the older theology without giving us anything in return.

¹ Cf. Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949).

Not only do the New Questers fail the historian-as-amateur-of-theology, but they fail him even more utterly on the side of his interests as an historian. The conclusions which the New Questers offer us regarding the problem of the historical Jesus are quickly found to have no bearing upon either the reading or the writing of history in general. (I doubt that they have much bearing upon the problem of the historical Jesus either—but I leave that matter to others.) Lest anyone retort that an historian ought not to have expected lessons about history from theologians, then he should know that the New Questers have called the attention of the historians to themselves proclaiming that their goal is 'the formulation of a systematic theological interpretation of the whole realm of secular history.'² In what follows, therefore, I am trying to assess their significance on their own terms—not mine.

The key to the New Questers' confidence in recovering the historical Jesus appears to be their argument that, in the interim between Quests, a new and more adequate view of the science of history has been worked out by theorists and generally endorsed by the historians. This new view, we are told, abandons as hopeless and irrelevant the programme of 'objective' knowledge of the past (the programme of Leopold von Ranke), and replaces it with a programme requiring a frankly 'subjective' method.

...the positivistic understanding of history as consisting of brute facts gave way to an understanding of history centring in the profound intentions, stances, and concepts of existence held by persons in the past, as the well-springs of their outward actions. Historical methodology shifted accordingly from a primary concern for recording the past 'wie es eigentlich gewesen,' i.e. cataloguing with objective detachment facts in sequence and with proper casual [*sic*] relationships. Instead, the historian's task was seen to consist in understanding those deep-lying intentions of the past, by involving one's selfhood in an encounter in which one's own intentions and views of existence are put in question, and perhaps altered or even radically reversed.³

It would require a thick volume to detail the ways in which the New Questers have exploited this concept of a seamless contemporary philosophy of history, a concept which sedulously neglects wide diversities of approach and a wide range of practical conclusions. Interestingly, one contemporary Philosopher of history is invariably singled out for honorable mention as being at once the most typical and the best—namely, R. G. Collingwood. Perhaps

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we might profitably examine Collingwood's treatment at their hands as an Collingwood's of their general approach.

The New Questers are right in believing in the magic of the name of Collingwood. For English-speaking historians, at least, discussion of historical epistemology still revolves around the propositions which he developed.⁴ The New Questers are mistaken, however, in summoning Collingwood to their aid. None of them has written anything like a full-dress critical examination of his philosophy of history, but all of them have dipped into his work to

² William Hamilton, 'The Character of Pannenberg's Theology,' in James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb, Jr., eds., *New Frontiers in Theology*, vol. III: *Theology as History* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), p. 177.

³ James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1959), p.39.

⁴ The principal source is *The Idea of History*, published posthumously from Collingwood's manuscripts, ed. by T. M. Knox (London: Oxford University Press, 1946).

the extent, at least, of discovering helpful passages which permit them to conclude that his method boils down to this: '...that history does not consist in external facts but in the purposes and meanings of selves... In their acts persons reveal who they are, and it is the task of the new historiography not to chronicle actions but to "lay hold of the self-hood which is therein revealed."'”⁵ The New Questers' enthusiasm for Collingwood is based upon an egregious misinterpretation of his famous distinction between the 'inside' and 'outside' of 'events'—which distinction is, admittedly, the key to his proposed methodology for historians, and which is the one sample of Collingwood's very special vocabulary which seems to get into every one of the New Questers' books. The natural sciences (according to Collingwood) deal strictly with 'the outside of events,' and their ways with events are, of necessity, unemotional, dispassionate, objective. The human sciences, however, deal with human agents—and when this material is in question, merely external observation is inadequate. Human will, the capacity of individuals to intrude their own decisions into the whole cluster of forces that act upon them, removes human activity from the scope of the method of the natural sciences. And history is the model for all the human sciences:

The historian, investigating any event in the past, makes a distinction between what may be called the outside and the inside of an event. By the outside of the event I mean everything belonging to it which can be described in terms of bodies and their movements: the passage of Caesar, accompanied by certain men, across a river called the Rubicon at one date, or the spilling of his blood on the floor of the senate-house at another. By the inside of the event I mean that in it which can only be described in terms of thought: Caesar's defiance of Republican law, or the clash of constitutional policy between himself and his assassins. The historian is never concerned with either of these to the exclusion of the other. He is investigating not mere events (where by an event I mean one which has only an outside and no inside) but actions, and an action is the unity of the outside and inside of an event ... His work may begin by discovering the outside of an event,

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but it can never end there; he must always remember that the event was an action, and that his main task is to think himself into this action, to discern the thought of its agent.⁶

Collingwood's methodology is basically easy to retail; but, like all such programmes that have come out of systematic philosophy, it depends for its forte upon a carefully developed critique of alternative programmes, which in this case runs over some two hundred pages of Collingwood's *Idea of History*, and does not admit of condensation. I have offered the above Précis of the first principle of Collingwood's method, therefore, not in the expectation that it carries any persuasive value as a précis, but merely because I have to demonstrate how irrelevant it is to the historiographical faith of the New Questers.

Of course if we consider the dilemma of the New Questers, we shall quickly see how they might have rushed into their premature embrace of the Collingwood principle. Their starting

⁵ Van A. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer. The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), p. 170. This is Harvey's summary of the New Questers' view of Collingwood. The quotation is from James M. Robinson, *A New Quest of the Historical Jesus* (Naperville, Illinois: Allenson, 1959), p. 44.

⁶ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 213.

point is Bultmann⁷—whose starting-point was the collapse of the New Testament historians' confidence in the recoverability of the facts of Jesus' historic life. But, say the New Questers, Jesus Christ is more to us than a life lived out and recorded in such meagre biographical detail in the Gospels. (And what Christian would want to quarrel with that truism?) If the objective or external facts of Jesus' historic existence are unrecoverable—or too few to be of service for more than 'an historical novel'⁸—then it is essential to find one's way back to Jesus Christ by some inside route.⁹ And here is the most esteemed of modern philosophers of history, the key to whose argument is the magic phrase, 'the inside of events.' At the prospect of an 'inside' track to the historical Jesus the New Quester lets

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out a whoop like the schoolboy's cry of release at the end of term.¹⁰ To turn the *kerygmatic* key in the lock of the Gospels is obviously the same operation (say the New Questers) as getting on the 'inside' (or the thought-side) of what is happening in the life and in the death of the historical person called Jesus. This makes possible a 'total encounter with the person of Jesus, in which the self is put in radical decision.'¹¹

It must be noted that it is Collingwood's alleged emphasis upon the recovering of the historical 'self' which makes him useful to the New Questers. 'The point of departure for Robinson is the inability of the older objective historical methodology to grasp the inward existential reality of Jesus' life. He therefore takes up the new weapon [not an inappropriate word!] of modern historiography, handed on by W. Dilthey and more recently by R.G. Collingwood, as a means of access to the innermost being or selfhood of the historical Jesus.'¹² It is also worth noting that it is standard procedure for the New Questers to offer Collingwood's name as merely the most recent and prestigious of a school of philosophers offering a common 'existentialist' approach to the problem of history: Dilthey and

⁷ Perhaps the real explanation of the New Questers' enthusiasm for Collingwood is the very fact that they are, one and all, *epigoni* of Rudolf Bultmann, who (so far as I am able to make out) was the first major theologian to discover the uses of Collingwood. Their references to Collingwood have a certain uniformity about them and (to be blunt) a decidedly derivative flavour. Unlike the New Questers, however, Bultmann appreciated the limits of Collingwood's usefulness for a Christian-existentialist theology of history. Moreover, Bultmann avoided the New Questers' weakness for lumping Collingwood, Dilthey, Croce, *et al.*, into one monolithic 'existentialist' school, and indeed went to some length in his principal work on this subject to establish the difference between their various methods. Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *History and Eschatology* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1957). On Dilthey, see especially pp. 110f.; on Collingwood, pp. 130-7.

⁸ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. II (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 105.

⁹ Cf. Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 172: 'If the new historiography has opened up the possibility of a new quest, this also completely alters the contemporary theological situation, Robinson claims ... The new historiography has, as it were, opened up a "second avenue of access" to the historical Jesus in addition to the first avenue provided by the *kerygma*. This "second avenue" has not existed since the time of the original disciples who had both their Easter faith and their factual memory of Jesus.' (The quotations are from Robinson, *A New Quest*, p. 86.)

¹⁰ For the actual technique of applying Collingwood's 'inside/outside' terminology to the problem of the Resurrection (which, as we shall see, is the cornerstone of the new theology of history), see *inter alia*, John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing* (London: SCM Press, 1960), pp. 81-6; Carl E. Braaten, *New Directions in Theology Today*, vol. II: *History and Hermeneutics* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966), pp. 100-2.

¹¹ Robinson, *A New Quest*, p. 47.

¹² Hugh Anderson, *Jesus and Christian Origins: A Commentary on Modern Viewpoints* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 9.

Collingwood are apparently regarded as the hard core,¹³ but the company is often expanded to embrace Heidegger and Bultmann.¹⁴

But Collingwood, an idealist, and totally out of sympathy with anything the least redolent of existentialism, had no confidence whatever in the recoverability of historical 'selfhood'! In fact, he explicitly forbade his readers even to think about biography as a legitimate possibility for the historian:

Of everything other than thought, there can be no history. Thus a biography, for example, however much history it contains, is constructed on principles that are not only non-historical but anti-historical. Its limits are biological events, the birth and death of a human organism: its framework is thus a framework not of thought but of natural process. Through this framework—the bodily life of the man, with his childhood, maturity and senescence, his diseases and all the accidents of animal existence—the tides of thought, his own and others', flow cross-

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wise regardless of its structure, like sea-water through a stranded wreck. Many human emotions are bound up with the spectacle of such bodily life in its vicissitudes, and biography, as a form of literature feeds these emotions and may give them wholesome food; but this is not history. Again, the record of immediate experience with its flow of sensations and feelings, faithfully preserved in a diary or recalled in a memoir, is not history. At its best, it is poetry; at its worst, an obtrusive egotism; but history it can never be.¹⁵

How could anyone have read that passage, and then have concluded that Collingwood stood for a programme of historiography based upon the recovery of the 'selfhood' of historical persons? About all that can be said in extenuation of the New Questers is that the passage I have cited is Collingwood's only explicit reference to the problem of biography; so that the New Questers may easily have overlooked it. But there is no reason to think that Collingwood—had he lived to flesh out his incomplete manuscript—would have felt it necessary to expand this reference to biography and to develop his objections. From the point of view that he had so carefully developed over three-hundred-odd pages there is nothing whatever to be said in favour of biography. It is, as he clearly states, the one traditional approach to history which is impossible under his method and that because of a rigidly idealistic conception of psychology which should make his name anathema to existentialists.

Either the New Questers have not read Collingwood, or they have deliberately suppressed the key to his argument—which is as far removed from an endorsement of an existentialist approach to history as Bishop Berkeley's philosophy was from being an affirmation of materialism. The truth seems to be that the New Questers are so impatient to be done with anything which up to now has gone under the name of genuine historical work that they have clutched at every stray bit of wisdom bearing the name of a good contemporary historian or

¹³ Cf. Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologizing*, p. 81: 'These three show a certain affinity in their several approaches to the problems of history, and since this affinity centres on the relating of history to the historical existence of the historian himself, we find it convenient to speak of an "existentialist" approach to history'; Robinson, *A New Quest*, p. 67.

¹⁴ Cf., for example, Anderson, *Jesus and Christian Origins*, p.181.

¹⁵ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 304.

philosopher, in order to construct a new definition of historical method which, in effect, explodes the function of history altogether. The New Questers admit—in fact they glory in the admission—that all the evidence is in and that further research into the life of Jesus is out of the question. And while they talk grandly about proceeding from the present, longstanding New Testament evidence to establishing no less than 'a universal theory of history,'¹⁶ they have so far done nothing more than contemplate the ultimate product. In short, they seem a rather dreamy lot—a generation of sidewalk superintendents.

The claim of the New Questers, that they are rebuilding theology upon an improved philosophy of history, will not bear examination. Nowhere in the literature of the New Quest is there, to my knowledge, a full-gauged and criti-

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cal appraisal of the newer currents (or, for that matter, of the older currents) of philosophy of history—scholar by scholar, theme by theme. What we are invariably offered in place of such an analysis is at best a handful of generalizations, and at worst a list of prestigious names.

But what is more distressing to anyone looking for contributions to a philosophy of history is that, in their passion for contemporaneity, the New Questers have ruled out of consideration everything written before they got to graduate school. There seems to be some sort of competition in effect to determine which New Quester can dismiss the claims of the Old Questers in the fewest words.

Yet returning to the works of Albert Schweitzer, after a season with the New Questers is, for an historian, like returning from behind the Looking Glass. Again, I do not mean to offer to theologians an amateur synopsis of Schweitzer's hermeneutics. I am concerned only with that aspect of his work which raises questions for philosophy of history. On this score, at least three features of Schweitzer's work commend themselves to drop-outs from the New Quest.

First, Albert Schweitzer was no sidewalk superintendent. He was an historian of the Rankean mould, who rolled up his sleeves and did new things with old documents. He was completely in earnest about recovering the facts of Jesus' historical life—and he was uncomplicated enough to believe that these, when recovered, would prove to be the sort of things that the New Questers disdain as 'mere' or (preciously) 'brute' facts.¹⁷ They would, in other words, be facts of the same order as facts about Napoleon, or no facts at all.¹⁸ There was no question in Schweitzer's mind, from beginning to end of the ambitious project which he undertook as a New Testament scholar, of our ability to write an authentic history of the public ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. This has to be stated clearly at the outset, for there is a widely held misconception on this matter. Schweitzer is often portrayed as, first, demonstrating the failure of all the previous attempts to recover a reliable portrait of the historical Jesus; then, as trying once more with a new key of his own; then failing, as the others had done, falling back defeated, and quitting the field of historical research for ever, his parting message being that

¹⁶ Cf. Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'The Revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth,' and 'Response to the Discussion,' in Robinson and Cobb, eds., *Theology and History*, pp. 101-33, 221-76.

¹⁷ Robinson, *A New Quest*, p. 40.

¹⁸ See Schweitzer's brief defence of 'critical objectivity' in historical science in his *Philosophy of Civilization*, vol. 1 is *The Decay and Restoration of Civilization*, 2d ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1932), pp. 44-8.

only a mystical approach to Jesus Christ remains open.¹⁹ On the contrary, an honest reading of *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*²⁰ makes it clear that Schweitzer believed he had succeeded in establishing an irresistibly authoritative portrait of Jesus' public ministry. It is true that he eventually quit the field of historical research

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—not because he had failed, however, but because he had succeeded. There was no need for him to agonize further about the problem. A correct approach had delivered up unimpeachable results: 'genuine history' had made it possible for preachers and theologians 'to leave the individual man alone with the sayings of Jesus.'²¹

Schweitzer admitted no room for question about our ability to recover an authentic picture of the historical Jesus. In the preface to the first of his published works on this problem,²² Schweitzer promised that, before he was done with his New Testament writing, he would demonstrate principles by which honest historical science could sift out the authentic from the inauthentic in the Gospels. Using these principles, he would demonstrate that the very passages which his predecessors had rejected as historically suspect would prove authentic: 'Jesus did actually speak to his Disciples in these words about his future.'²³ Though the remainder of historically authentic material would prove small,²⁴ it would serve to establish a picture of Jesus of Nazareth so authentic that he would speak to us as directly as he spoke to his disciples.²⁵

One consequence of the authenticity of the picture which Schweitzer drew was that the man and the context proved inseparable: 'As an historical figure He refuses to be detached from his own time. He has no answer for the question, "Tell us Thy name in our speech and for our day."²⁶ It is plain that such a view does not lend itself to any existentialist leaping across the centuries for the sake of 'total encounter' with a total 'selfhood.' And that is why the New Questers are uninterested in Schweitzer. That, of course, is their privilege—as theologians. But the New Questers profess to be vitally concerned with historical purity as well as theological integrity; and to this end they profess to have searched out the best of contemporary philosophy of history. If the New Questers have a genuine interest in seeing R.G. Collingwood's method at work on a practical historical problem—and if they could get over that fixation of theirs about some radical gulf separating the new historiography from the historiography of the nineteenth-century fuddy-duddies, someone ought to redirect their attention to the 'Epilegomena' of Collingwood's *Idea of History*, and then back to the *Quest of the Historical Jesus*—where they will find, *mirabile dictu*, an example of the Collingwood method in practice!

¹⁹ Cf., for example, Richard Reinhold Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason* (New York: Scribner's, 1957), pp. 10f.

²⁰ Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, 3d Engl. ed. (London: A. & C. Black, 1954).

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 398f.

²² Albert Schweitzer, *The Mystery of the Kingdom of God* (London: A. & C. Black, 1914), pp. 3-10.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁴ Cf. Schweitzer, *Quest*, p. 6: 'When we have once made up our minds that we have not the materials for a complete life of Jesus, but only for a picture of His public ministry, it must be admitted that there are few characters of antiquity about whom we possess so much indubitable historical information.'

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 396-401.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 310f.

Collingwood's principal operating rubric was 'that history is the re-enact-

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ment of past thought in the historian's own mind'²⁷—and that is exactly how Schweitzer describes himself as discovering what is authentic in the Gospels:

For the historical understanding of the life of Jesus, it is necessary to think out all the consequences of the fact that He did actually live in the eschatological Messianic thought world of late Judaism, and to try to comprehend His resolutions and actions not by means of considerations drawn from ordinary psychology, but psychology, solely by motives provided by His eschatological expectations. This consistently eschatological solution of the problems of the life of Jesus... is such as to make comprehensible so much in the thought, the discourse, and the actions of Jesus which has been incomprehensible hitherto, it establishes the genuineness of passages which, because unintelligible, were held to be unhistorical...²⁸

Applying a critical method identical with that which Collingwood lays out in that section of his 'Epilegomena' in which he uses the detective story as a model of historical problem-solving,²⁹ Schweitzer establishes the authenticity of statements by establishing the motives which the various witnesses are required to have by the logic of their situation vis-à-vis the subject-matter—the technique which Collingwood calls 'cross examination of witnesses.' He discovers that the best guarantee of the fact that the primitive church 'did not alter the main lines of the account, and above all that it did not "fabricate facts" in the life of Jesus [is the fact that] ... the early Church maintained an attitude of indifference towards the life of Jesus as such'³⁰ How Collingwood would have admired that logic! That is precisely what Collingwood meant by getting to the 'inside'—or thought-side, or motive-side—of events. And it has nothing to do with any existentialist leap.

Like Collingwood, Schweitzer believed that the key to the explanation of any historical event is the thought of the agent. Like Collingwood, he believed that the key to the agent's thought could remain lost for centuries, but could be recovered when some man's mind turned to that thought again.³¹ Like Collingwood, he conceived of long-dormant thought (in this case, the eschatological thesis) as reviving itself, after the passage of centuries, by a simultaneous reawakening at both ends of the time-continuum—the sender of the idea (so to speak) reaching after centuries a mind ready to reconsider the thought. Like Collingwood, he drew no metaphysical conclusions from this;

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idealistic philosophy covered the problem adequately for him, as for Collingwood.

²⁷ Collingwood, *Idea of History*, p. 215.

²⁸ Schweitzer, *Out of My Life and Thought* (New York: Mentor Books, 1953), p. 43.

²⁹ Cf. Collingwood, *Idea of History*, pp. 266f.

³⁰ Schweitzer, *Mystery*, p. 8.

³¹ See Schweitzer's comments on the simultaneous recovery by himself and W. Wrede of the 'thoroughgoing eschatological' key to the motivation of the historical Jesus (*Quest*, 328-32), and compare this passage with Collingwood, *Idea of History*, pp. 287, 300: 'One and the same act of thought may endure through a lapse of time and revive after a time when it has been in abeyance... It is capable of sustaining itself and being revived or repeated without loss of its identity.'

There was, therefore, no question for Schweitzer but that we can encounter Jesus of Nazareth by the honest pursuit of 'genuine history' (to use his phrase); but such an encounter cannot be total. Not even his disciples had that sort of encounter; for in some matters we have the advantage of knowing more of the import of what he said, and therefore of what he did than they had—despite the fact that we are dependent upon them for testimony as to what he said.³² But the disciples had the one inestimable advantage over us of being caught up in the same day-to-day world and the same thought-life. Jesus cannot mean to us what he meant to them; there is no common denominator, no irreducible core-experience that we can share—and thus the Bultmannian-existentialist solution is closed off. All the overtones of meaning are gone for us from those parts of his message which moved them—despite the fact that we can rethink the thought-side (which is, by the way, all that Collingwood admitted to be on the 'inside') of his message and life as efficiently as they, and in some ways more efficiently than they. We do not share their belief in the imminent end of things; and since this was the cornerstone of their entire life, we have to be honest with ourselves and admit that the historical experience of Jesus is almost totally irrelevant—authentic, but irrelevant.

The second of those features of Schweitzer's scholarship which will seem to historians to stand in commendable contrast to the ways of the New Questers is his concern for what Van A. Harvey has called 'the morality of historical knowledge.'³³ His scrupulous handling of the problems of New Testament hermeneutics is a model for those theologians concerned with the relative claims of faith and science in their work. It was Schweitzer's view that honest historical science required respect for all that natural science had vouchsafed about the regularity of the ways of nature. He was therefore uncompromising in his refection as historical matter of everything in the biblical narratives which required a suspension of our confidence in the known regularities of nature—in short, all 'miracles.'³⁴ The New Questers, of course recoil at this 'dogmatism.' They have persuaded themselves that 'the temper of our day'³⁵ requires a less 'absolutist' approach to questions of miracle, and in particular to the pivotal miracle: the Resurrection. To protect themselves against an

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honest decision for or against everything that has been done in descriptive science since Galileo, they have their precious principle of 'openness'—a catch-all phrase, standing empty and ready for every stray bit of contemporary science-talk which hints at 'randomness,' 'indeterminacy,' and a non-descriptive dimension of life. The New Questers have, either in ignorance or in mischief, entirely misrepresented the arguments of contemporary historical philosophy about this matter. They go on blithely about historical science's respect for 'perspective' and 'openness,' as though contemporary historical thought were now issuing

³² Schweitzer's confidence in historical method is greater than Paul Tillich's, for example. Tillich will not allow that historical method can give us anything more solid than 'an analogia imaginis, namely an analogy between the picture [as discovered by historical inquiry] and the actual personal life from which it [the "picture"] has arisen' (*Systematic Theology*, vol. II, p. 115). It is my impression that Tillich's view suits the contemporary theological mind better than Schweitzer's. Yet Schweitzer's view has a stronger appeal, I would guess, to historians. Certainly, it accords entirely with Collingwood's description of the reality that lies behind the statements which historians make.

³³ Cf. n. 5, above.

³⁴ Cf. Schweitzer, *Quest*, pp. 110f.

³⁵ Robinson, *A New Quest*, p. 47.

licenses to rainmakers. No contemporary philosopher of philosopher of history, to my knowledge, has argued that it is now time to cancel anything of what nineteenth-century historiography said about the historian's obligations to the integrity of the various fields of learning upon which historians depend for their categories of explanation. The New Questers, as a group, have shown the most subversive disregard for the partitions which separate the sciences from one another, and for the methods which generations of research have established as appropriate to the 'fields of explanation' encompassed by the different sciences. The threat that their slippery theology poses to the autonomy of history is too large an issue for me to do justice to it here. Fortunately, a brilliant critique of this side of the New Quest has been offered by Van Harvey—and it is cheering to note that it takes the better part of a three-hundred-page book to do it. However, something of the drift of Harvey's argument can be gained from the following passage, which opens with Harvey's echo of Marc Bloch's plea that historians (and, by extension, theologians who purport to be talking history) must be faithful to what Bloch called 'the idea of a natural order governed by immutable laws':

'We [the heirs of nineteenth-century historical science] have acquired [wrote Bloch] the right of disbelief, because we understand, better than in the past, when and why we ought to disbelieve.' It is difficult, therefore, to conceive, as some Christian apologists argue, of the new physics precipitating an agonizing reappraisal of reports of blood raining from heaven, or of sticks turning into snakes, or of animals speaking, or of men in chariots ascending bodily into heaven. Nature, to be sure, may be far more refractory to mathematic description at the subatomic level than hitherto believed, but this does not warrant a return to the credulity once characteristic of a majority of the human race. The new physics, however much it may raise questions about a mechanical model for the universe, can hardly be utilized by a religious apologist eager to find some small justification for believing in miracles; indeed, it could be argued that the new physics raises more problems in this connection than it solves.³⁶

When the New Questers call the existentialists to their side to make the point that meaning is established by 'putting the self in radical decision'³⁷ vis-

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à-vis some object of historical research, they seem to think they are making a point about scientific method. When it suits their purposes, they will argue that 'The kind of material which the "kerygmaticizing" process would leave *unaltered* is the kind of material which fits best the needs of research based upon the modern view of history and the self ...'³⁸—which, being translated, evidently means that if we proceed from the proposition that the early church's faith in the Resurrection of Jesus determined the contents of the historical documents called the Gospels, we shall be rewarded by discovering that the events which are witnessed to in those documents are precisely of the sort that would pass the test for admission into a biography of Napoleon, written by an up-to-date, card-carrying historian. The gospel proclaims that Jesus is known only in the 'total encounter with the person of Jesus, in which the self is put in radical decision...' Conveniently, 'the modern view of history and the self has become formally more analogous to the approach of the kerygma.'³⁹ This allegedly

³⁶ Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer*, p. 76. The citations of Bloch are from Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1954), pp. 135f.

³⁷ Robinson, *A New Quest*, p. 47.

³⁸ Robinson, *A New Quest*, p. 69.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

'existentialist' approach to history makes any reading of even the most troublesome problem in New Testament hermeneutics easy, because self-authenticating. In fact, the more troublesome the problem (from the point of view of critical reason), the more satisfactory the conclusion is bound to be—since we find that the most difficult problem of all (the matter of the Resurrection) is the most securely overlaid with faithful witness, and has thus the highest quotient of kerygmatic authority.⁴⁰

On some days of the week, the New Questers will put the heaviest possible weight upon the historical evidence for the faith:

The Christian faith must not be equated with a merely subjective conviction that would allegedly compensate for the uncertainty of our historical knowledge about Jesus. Such a conviction would only be self-delusion. For much too long a time faith has been misunderstood to be subjectivity's fortress into which Christianity could retreat from the attacks of scientific knowledge... Faith can breathe freely only when it can be certain, even in the field of scientific research, that its foundation is true.⁴¹

Yet, on other days of the week, the New Questers can be found arguing the exact opposite: that 'mere facticity'⁴² is of no great matter—hardly worth worrying our heads about at all: 'The scholars who responded to Käsemann's appeal for a renewed effort to grasp the historical Jesus are anxious to avoid the pitfalls in the old quest. They do not wish to fall back into the biographical approach, with its interest in chronology, topography, and psychology...'⁴³ The New Quester finds 'that he is not in a position to lay bare the facts of

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history to give a clean description of what actually happened'; but he is comforted by the consideration that 'Anyway that would be beside the point.'⁴⁴

...the kerygma calls for a total encounter with the person of Jesus, in which the self is put in radical decision. Therefore it can only regard as illegitimate a scholarly career which becomes in the long run no more than a distracting fascination with historical details about Jesus, details which may occupy the memory, move the emotions, prod the conscience; or stimulate the intellect, but fail to put the self in radical decision.⁴⁵

It is surely not difficult for anyone not yet carried beyond the point of no return by over-exposure to this sort of theological baffle-gab to see why such scholars might put little stock in anything that promises merely to 'prod the conscience, or stimulate the intellect.'

Thus the New Questers oscillate wildly between moods of enthusiasm and scorn for the poetic value of history. Their announced purpose, let us remember, is to establish 'a systematic theological interpretation of the whole realm of secular history' upon a definitive, courageous,

⁴⁰ Pannenberg, 'The Revelation of God,' pp. 125f.; Anderson, *Jesus and Christian Origins*, ch. v; Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*, pp. 98-102.

⁴¹ Pannenberg, 'The Revelation of God,' p. 131.

⁴² Or 'happenedness' (R. R. Niebuhr, *Resurrection and Historical Reason*, p. 26)—a state of things apparently not the same as 'thrownness into existence' (ibid., p. 55).

⁴³ Braaten, *History and Hermeneutics*, p. 69.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 70.

⁴⁵ Robinson, *A New Quest*, p. 47.

'existentialist' reckoning with the facts of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. But when they think they hear voices expressing negative thoughts about the soundness of the historical material with which they have to deal, they simply throw a tantrum, raising their voices, because their logic is hopeless, to denounce the small-minded fact-grubbers who would bog them down in the 'distracting fascination with historical details about Jesus,' while out there in the real world (somewhere) there are 'radical decisions' to be made. There is grist here for the mills of all lovers of paradox: it is always the sidewalk-superintendents at the site of historical scholarship who have the grandest plans for history. Albert Schweitzer had a trained and practiced appreciation of the possibilities of historical science, and had accordingly been obliged by conscience to give some thought as well to the limas of historical science. His conclusions about the uses of history are therefore much more modest than those of the New Questers; but they will, I believe, win greater assent among practising, card-carrying historians than their inflated programme. This brings me to the third feature of Schweitzer's work with which I would like to deal.

I Pointed out near the outset of this paper that the theologians tend to remember the nineteenth-century historians as having been involved in a plot to swallow up theology in history's empire. This is almost entirely a figment of their overwrought imaginations. It is they—not the historians, past or present—who are the imperialists, with their schemes for a sanctified, 'existentialist' historiography. Historians who believe that they derive their credentials from the school of Leopold von Ranke have always fought tooth-and-nail against the programmes of each passing generation of sidewalk-superintendents. At one point, the latter were cheering for an historical science which would prove its usefulness by providing bricks and mortar for structures of generalized knowledge about the social nature of man: that was the fashion called

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'positivism.' In later generations, the fashion was to cheer for authentic discoveries about the dynamics of civilization: Spengler and Toynbee are the magic names here. And now we have the theologians, who want history to prove its usefulness by holding up to harried modern man a new repertoire of 'paradigmatic events' and 'eschatological moments,' and to wring 'existentialist decisions' out of the poor fellow.

We should make no mistake about it: history is use-less. History professors admittedly pay off their mortgages by capitalizing upon the popular superstition that their product is functional. The community pays them to provide materials for the generalizations of policy-makers, 'values' for citizens, and so on. But all of the celebrated exceptions aside, the rank-and-file of the profession do their work on the faith that history has a higher justification than its usefulness. They are committed to work which to workers in most other intellectual disciplines (and apparently to the current run of theologians) seems to be futility on wheels—the task of telling and retelling the past, incorporating new evidence into their narratives as it proves itself. To scientists, intellectual progress is to advance from approximation to exact description, and from there to the establishment of general laws. To the theologians, progress is to find, in each succeeding generation, a more authentic way to restate the mysteries of God's ways with man, and to impress these new ways upon preachers so that they may impress them upon their congregations. Historians, in contrast to both the scientists and the theologians, march on doggedly from approximation to approximation. They get downright panicky when the possibility of consensus seems to be shaping up; and

they immediately despatch new legions of graduate students to head off an impending consensus into more and more approximate approximations. If an historian suspects that he has hit any man's bull's-eye, he comes back under cover of darkness and shifts the target a little.

It is a curious thing that men go on with the work of history in this spirit. The case of Albert Schweitzer is a good illustration. As I pointed out earlier, there is a misconception amongst the theologians of this generation that Schweitzer withdrew from the field of historical work because of disappointment at failing to recover the historical Jesus—a disappointment apparently so overwhelming that he could not bring himself to admit his failure in plain words. The point would seem to be that the New Questers do not understand the game that is being played, and thus could hardly be expected to know the difference between victory and defeat.

Schweitzer's work on the historical Jesus came to an end when he had solved the problem posed by the New Testament sources. He had isolated what was knowable. That was not a bad deal. (It was, furthermore, not a picture which the theologians have altogether taken to their hearts; but that is neither here nor there for our present purposes.) With that, Schweitzer quit the field of historical research and turned to other things: namely, to a resumption of his work in musicology and to moral philosophy. What puzzles the New Questers and compels them to believe that he failed, is that Schweitzer was apparently unable to tell them what his discovery was good

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for, once discovered and announced. There should be no mistake about it—that is precisely what Schweitzer admits:

...In the very moment when we were coming nearer to the historical Jesus than men have ever come before, and were already stretching out our hands to draw Him into our own time, we have been obliged to give up the attempt [the attempt, that is, to draw him into our own time!] ... and acknowledge our failure in that paradoxical saying: 'If we have known Christ after the flesh yet henceforth know we him no more.' And further we must be prepared to find that the historical knowledge of the personality and life of Jesus will not be a help, but perhaps even an offence to religion.⁴⁶

In announcing that he was content, as an historian, to describe the little that could be described of the historical personality of Jesus of Nazareth, and then to leave that evidence embedded in the context of the first century, without doing anything further with it, Schweitzer was defending the autonomy of history. He believed, with Ranke, that the entire business of the historian was (in Pieter Geyl's paraphrase) to 'work on God's tracks.'⁴⁷ Geyl's observation on the spirit of Ranke could be applied equally to Schweitzer:

It was this indefinite, supple, character of his general vision [namely, that as an historian he was working humbly, and without seeking to vindicate some view of life of his own] which enabled him to give to the particular his unshackled attention and to interpret it in its own context. All the appearances of history equally belonged to God's Plan. He expressed this

⁴⁶ Schweitzer, *Quest*, p. 399.

⁴⁷ Pieter Geyl, *Debates with Historians* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), p. 16.

in a phrase of profound meaning: that every epoch is 'immediate to God'—that is to say, that it is due to every epoch that we should consider it for its own sake.⁴⁸

I rather doubt however, that Schweitzer would have agreed with Ranke that this work was an 'unutterable sweetness.'⁴⁹ Schweitzer seems not to have had quite the thorough-going fascination with detail that one expects to find in a full-time, professional historian; and to that extent he was, I suppose, an amateur. It seems rather that he undertook his historical work as a duty imposed upon him by what he thought was the universal mishandling of the problem by other full-time historians. Thus, he thought of himself as a reluctant historian.⁵⁰ Yet he admired the historical science which he had inherited from the school of Leopold van Ranke and was faithful to its code:

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The achievements of historical science reached by the nineteenth century do, indeed, deserve our admiration, but it is another question whether our generation, for all its possession of an historical science, possesses a true historical sense... It is not enough for us that what has been is present in its results in what now is; we want to have it always with us, and to feel ourselves determined by it... [and thus] we replace our normal relation to the past by an artificial one... Nothing is any longer past for us; nothing is done and finished with.⁵¹

There is something wrong with a theology which cannot accept the fact that anything human is past—that anything could be 'done and finished with.' History has to do with matters which are done and finished with. Of course, these matters still have their effects among us. But that is something altogether different from saying that we can appropriate the past—that we can possess it 'existentially' or 'stand in radical decision' before it.

What then of the present meaning of Jesus? What then of the present meaning of any personality who has (in Schweitzer's charming phrase) 'gone over to the majority'? That, said Schweitzer, is a matter of theology, not of history. The root of Schweitzer's own theology was mysticism. In order to believe in Jesus' living influence upon his own life, he did not need to resort to the notion of the Resurrection as a 'paradigmatic event' or to any 'existentialist' gambit. The knowledge of Jesus that led to action was not historical but ecstatic.

... it is not Jesus as historically known, but Jesus as spiritually arisen within men, who is significant for our time and can help it. Not the historical Jesus, but the spirit which goes forth from Him and in the spirits of men strives for new influence and rule, is that which overcomes the world... The abiding and eternal in Jesus is absolutely independent of

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

⁵⁰ In his encyclopedic study of Bach, Schweitzer had of course to record a good deal of historical matter. It seems that it was his proverbial sense of duty that sustained him in this, rather than the satisfactions of the work itself. As a clue to his attitude, there is an outburst of impatience at the conclusion of what must have been a painfully accumulated catalogue of references to the folk-song origins of certain of Bach's chorales: Only the shameless curiosity that characterizes our boasted historical sense can rejoice at these discoveries. The musician does not trouble himself about them, and forgets them as soon as they are told to him; for they tell him no more than what he already knew by instinct—that all true and deeply-felt music, whether secular or sacred, has its home on the heights where art and religion dwell. Happy are the chorales of whose origin nothing is known! Albert Schweitzer, *J. S. Bach* (London, A. & C. Black, 1908), vol. i, p. 20.

⁵¹ Schweitzer, *Philosophy of Civilization*, vol. i, pp. 44-48.

historical knowledge and can only be understood by contact with His spirit which is still at work in the world. In proportion as we have the Spirit of Jesus we have the true knowledge of Jesus.⁵²

Schweitzer believed that the spirit of Jesus was still at work in the world—that he (as a case in point) was literally commanded by the voice of Jesus to undertake his missionary work. It is the prerogative of mystics to believe such things. Historians, as historians, have no stake in these possibilities. And that is why Albert Schweitzer took off his historian's cap when he said them:

No personality of the past can be installed in the present by historical reflection or by affirmation about his authoritative significance. We get into relation with him only when we are brought together in the recognition of a common will, experience a clarification, enrichment and quickening of our will by his, and find ourselves again in him. In this sense, every deeper relationship between men is of a mystical sort.⁵³

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

⁵² Schweitzer, *Quest*, p. 399.

⁵³ Schweitzer, *Mystery*, pp. 55f.