

Towards an adequate methodology for church and theological historiography: in conversation with Paul Ricoeur

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Abstract

This article aims to reflect on and contribute to the methodology of church and theological historiography from the presupposition that it exists in relation to and is influenced by the developments of historiography in general. However, a church and theological historiography should be governed by a critical theological reflection on developing methodologies and historical hermeneutics. First, a few brief comments are made about methodological sensitivity in South African church historical circles. Then the development of historiography in the Western intellectual tradition is traced in such a way that the limitations of both the modern and postmodern approach to history are stressed. The work of the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, is then suggested as an example of good historiographical methodology by way of reference to Ricoeur's concept of variations in scale.

Introduction

Why do we study history? This perplexing question confronts us with a divergent range of possible answers. Some people might do it for interest's sake. The spectrum of events from the past is indeed wide and fascinating. Others study history because they believe that the past should be honoured, and that some sort of tribute is owed to those who suffered injustices in the past. Others still are convinced that by studying the past we may learn lessons that will help us to live in the present and the future. Or to state it somewhat differently as Beverly Southgate (2007:18) does: "from the earliest times historians have assumed that the past provided clues as to the nature of the future". Southgate implies that we do not merely learn lessons from the past that may influence the present and the future; the study of the past might even determine the present and the future. The practice of history, and the motivation for it, is not a straightforward, simple, or clearly defined endeavour. It is a complex discipline that has developed over the course of time.

In his article "History, historiography and reformed hermeneutics at Stellenbosch" (2007), Bernard Latagan provides one possible answer to the question asked above. He writes that "the goal of history is not to understand bygone days, but to understand what remains from those times and what is still present today" (Latagan 2007:169). The past is present in the present and in the future, and for this very reason we should make an effort to articulate the "why?" that motivates our historical inquiries. However, Latagan also argues that history is an act of sense-making. The past itself does not carry any inherent meaning. We attach certain meanings to certain events; others may attach opposing meanings to those same events. The meaning derived from past events is influenced by the methodologies applied when doing history.

When we reflect on the past in any way, we make use of certain methodologies, whether or not we are conscious of those methodologies. This implies that the "why?" question of history is also connected to a "how?" question. The way in which we do history (the methodologies that we use) impacts on history in the same way that our motivation for doing history influences the history that is produced.

This article aims to reflect on and contribute to the methodology of church and theological historiography from the presupposition that it exists in relation to and is influenced by the developments of historiography in general. However, a church and theological historiography should be governed by a critical theological reflection on developing methodologies and historical hermeneutics. First, a few brief comments are made about methodological sensitivity in South African church historical circles. Then the development of historiography in the Western intellectual tradition is traced in such a way that the limitations of both the modern and postmodern approach to history are stressed. The work of the French philosopher, Paul Ricoeur, is then suggested as an example of good historiographical methodology.

Methodological issues in South African church historiography

Steve de Gruchy demonstrates a sense of methodological sensitivity to historiography in the postscript to the third edition of John de Gruchy's book, *The church struggle in South Africa* (2004). This book is an authoritative contribution to the field of theological and church history and one of very few studies that deals with recent South African church and theological history in a comprehensive and theological interpretative way. Steve de Gruchy locates this work in the wider church historiography in South Africa. In the postscript he responds to three major criticisms levelled at the book. These criticisms are important to mention here because they also point to general critiques against historiography.

The first of these critiques has to do with gaps in the telling of the story. Regarding *The church struggle in South Africa* De Gruchy (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004:xxvii) admits that reviewers correctly pointed out "that important parts of the history of the church's struggle are missing". The notion of gaps in history is important to take note of in general. The idea of a comprehensive history is, after all, incomprehensible. No matter how thorough our accounts of events of the past are, something will always be left out. We constantly make choices about what to tell and what to leave out in our historical narratives. We should therefore allow for alternative and even competing accounts of history.

The second critique concerns the primary analytical tool that De Gruchy uses in his book. Critics point to the fact that the book uses "race" rather than "class" as its primary analytical tool. For this reason the historical focus is on the response of the church to issues of racism and apartheid and not to colonialism and capitalism, for example. Steve de Gruchy states that what is implied here is that the relationship between blacks and whites receives attention in this account of history while the relationship between the rich and the poor is neglected. If we see history as an act of sense-making, the analytical tool being used is of utmost importance as it influences the meaning we derive from the past. De Gruchy (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004: xxviii) states that

precisely because the way we understand our history is shaped by that very history, and because we choose to tell certain things in certain ways and not other things in other ways, the *writing* of history is as shot through with politics, passion and prejudice as the subject matter itself.

The analytical tool that we use is therefore not obvious (something inherent in the events of the past itself), but a choice that the historian makes. When we choose one tool it means that we also choose against another. An awareness of the politics, ideologies, and prejudices that inform our choice of analytical tool is important.

The third criticism has to do with the notion of meta-narrative as opposed to micro-narratives. The meta-narrative of *The church struggle in South Africa* is concerned with the "grand and glorious struggle against apartheid" (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004:xxix). Because of the focus on the meta-narrative the critique states that it "cannot possibly do justice to the thousands of micro-narratives that make up the story" (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004:xxix). These micro-narratives include

the ambiguities of those caught in the middle, the voices of the silent and silenced (such as women and the rural poor), the contribution of the laity ... the failures of witness, the incredible sacrifices of ordinary people, the personality clashes, the financial and sexual scandals, the acts of compassion and integrity, the textures of sights and sounds that are uppermost in the minds of those who happened "to be there" (De Gruchy & De Gruchy 2004:xxiv).

Connected to the notion of meta-narratives versus micro-narratives is that of "history from above" and "history from below". Those who argue for the necessity of a "history from below" argue that power relations have a considerable impact on the way history is told.

These criticisms are, to a certain degree, also reflected in an article by Philippe Denis, "From church history to religious history: strengths and weaknesses of South African religious historiography" (1997), in which he highlights the limitations of South African religious historiography despite its abundance. Denis (1997:85) points to the fragmentation of South African church history: "[it] is an isolated discipline, almost completely cut off from the social sciences and from secular history in particular". He considers it to be ecclesiocentric, with an Afrikaner and Dutch Reformed character (Denis 1997:85). With regard to the academic world, Denis (1997:85) claims that "church history appears as an isolated entity, inward-looking and insufficiently related to other disciplines which dealt with related subjects or with the same subjects but with different methodologies".

Furthermore, Denis points to the denominational bias of religious historiography. This is linked to the fragmentation of historiography. Because of the vast number of denominations and missionary societies in South Africa there is some kind of a competition in which historians “tend to place more emphasis on the theological and ecclesiastical identity of their denominations” (Denis 1997:87) than on others. This is moreover characterised by a predominantly white disposition. It is mainly white voices that are heard in South African church or religious history, and it is also predominantly white documentation that feeds the archive from which history will develop in the future.

Church and theological historiography have come quite a way during the last thirteen years (since the publication of Denis’ article) but much work still remains to be done, especially on the inclusiveness of history and the continuous development of analytical tools to be used in history. In this regard much can be learned from neighbouring disciplines.

We therefore now turn to the development of history in the Western intellectual tradition since the nineteenth century.

The development of historiography in the Western intellectual tradition

The Western intellectual tradition has an ambivalent relationship with the study of history (Rae 2005:4). Rae, drawing on the work of Colin Gunton (*The one, the three and the many*), states that the Western mind has become disengaged from history. He distinguishes between the different approaches to history found in modernity and postmodernity when explaining disengagement. On the one hand there is a propensity to treat the world instrumentally “as a mere means of realising our will and not as in some way integral to our being” (Rae 2005:1). On the other hand there is a tendency that does not “seek in the world for what is true and good and beautiful” but creates truth and values for itself (Rae 2005:1). Modernity, relying on reason, expected that such a creative way of engaging with the world would produce consensus among all people. Postmodernity, however, is by no means concerned with consensus, and easily accepts the relativity of truth and value. When it comes to history, the fact remains that, whether the appeal is to the reason of modernity or the personal experience and intuition of postmodernity, “the quest for truth and value repudiates tradition and refuses to accord authority to that which has taken place in the past” (Rae 2005:2). This stance presents a problem for history, Rae (2005:4) argues, as it does not expect or aim to find truth, meaning and purpose of life disclosed through the particularities of human history.

This causes a divorce between history and theology that, according to Rae (2005:4), takes two forms:

The first seeks to protect theology from the alleged vagaries of history, while the second seeks to protect history from the allegedly ephemeral and speculative claims of theology. Both strategies are premised on the conviction that history and divine action are mutually exclusive categories and that it is improper, therefore ... to speak of God’s participation in the unfolding nexus of historical life. The first form supposes, therefore, that attention to the contingent realm of history is of little or no value in humanity’s quest for truth ... The second form ... proceeds under the assumption that both the integrity of historical enquiry, and the legitimacy of our claims to historical knowledge, must be safeguarded by resisting the utilization of theological categories in our accounts of what has taken place.

This separation between history and theology is understandable when we consider the main characteristics of the modern and postmodern approaches to history.

The modern approach to history

For modernism the aim of history is to discover the past “as it really was”. In his book *History: what and why?*, Beverley Southgate (2001:13) argues that this approach implies that the “historian just has to clear away the darkness and confusion, behind which the past sometimes regrettably takes refuge, so that it can be seen in all its proper light and clarity”. In order to do so, the historian must be sure to do away with all prejudices, differentiate clearly between facts and opinions, choose witnesses carefully so as to use only the impartial ones, critically analyse the different accounts, and uphold objectivity every way. This is what is necessary to give a meticulously accurate account of the past; a true account of the past “as it was”.

It is from Leopold von Ranke, a prominent figure in the development of history as a science, that we borrow the phrase “the past as it really happened” (*wie es eigentlich gewesen*). It had a big

influence on the unquestioned assumption of the possibility of objectivity that would govern historiography. Ranke was obsessed with primary sources from which an objective, factual historical narrative could be constructed.

History as described above argues that for history to be regarded as a respectable science it needs a subject matter – an external natural reality “which may be grasped with the use of appropriate techniques” (Southgate 2001:14), or as Georg Iggers (1997:2) puts it in his book *Historiography in the twentieth century*, “historians shared the optimism of the professionalised sciences generally that methodologically controlled research makes objective knowledge possible”. The past is regarded as the subject matter of history that can be known through scientific methodology.

Concern for the scientific status of history developed in the nineteenth century with its emergence as a professional discipline. However, many of the assumptions on which the scientific rigor rested “go back to the beginnings of a continuous tradition of Western historiography and Classical antiquity” (Iggers 1997:1). Iggers (1997:3) argues that the scientific orientation of history shared three basic assumptions with earlier historiographical traditions: Firstly, “[t]hey accepted a correspondence theory of truth holding that history portrays people who really existed and actions that really took place”. Secondly, “[t]hey presupposed that human actions mirror the intentions of the actors and that it is the task of the historian to comprehend these intentions in order to construct a coherent historical story”. And thirdly, “[t]hey operated with a one-dimensional, diachronical conception of time, in which later events follow earlier ones in a coherent sequence”.

However, the belief that there is truth in the past and that the historian’s only task was to discover it, was soon debunked. It appeared that the past itself was not something to be understood on its own and untouched by the predisposition of the present. The past cannot be safely put in a cage for the historian to look at. The historian and the past are in the same cage.

The modernist approach to history reflects a lack of consciousness regarding epistemological issues. What we know (also and especially about the past) is not that straightforward. The remains of the past are fragmentary and therefore we can only know it partially. All written records about the past, including documents in archives, are conveyed by means of language. These and other problems would be the stimulus for the direction that the development of historiography took in the twentieth century.

The postmodern approach to history

In the twentieth century the world had become a different place – a place where, some argue, we had reached “the end of history”. While history during the nineteenth century focused on finding and describing the past “as it was”, the core idea of postmodern theory of historiography, Iggers (1997:118) argues, “is the denial that historical writing refers to an actual historical past”, or as Gertrude Himmelfarb (in Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:72) states, postmodernism in history is “a denial of the fixity of the past, of the reality of the past apart from what the historian chooses to make of it, and thus of any objective truth about the past”. However, Himmelfarb does not seem to be convinced that what postmodernism professes to have discovered is in fact anything new. She claims that ancient and modern historians have all along been aware of the fact that history is vulnerable on three accounts: “the fallibility and deficiency of the historical record on which it is based; the fallibility and selectivity inherent in the writing of history; and the fallibility and subjectivity of the historian” (Himmelfarb in Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:73). She explains further:

As long as historians have reflected on their craft, they have known that the past cannot be recaptured in its entirety, if only because the remains of the past itself is, in this sense, irredeemably present. They have also known that the writing of history necessarily entails selection and interpretation, that there is inevitable distortion in the very attempt to present a coherent account of an often inchoate past, that, therefore, every historical work is necessarily imperfect, tentative, and partial (in both senses of the word) (Himmelfarb in Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:73).

In her article “History in a Postmodern World” Elizabeth Fox-Genovese summarises postmodernism as a project aimed at destabilising epistemology and ontology – “the nature of our ability to know and the nature of being” (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:46). Postmodernism resists tidy definitions and is known for “its emphasis on relativism, for the rejection of binary categories, and for its emphasis on the role of language and discourse in the ‘construction’ of reality” (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn

1999:46).¹ Iggers (1997:118), argues that the basic idea of postmodern theory of historiography “is the denial that historical writing refers to an actual historical past”. According to postmodern theory of historiography the reality of the past, as written in historical documents, has no reference to an external reality but is only contained within the text. Furthermore, history as a text is also seen independently of its author. The focus is primarily and exclusively on the text, not the context in which it originated.

The presumption of postmodernism, according to Himmelfarb (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:74), is “that all of history is fatally flawed, and that because there is no absolute, total truth, there can be no partial, contingent truths. More important still is the presumption that because it is impossible to attain such truths, it is not only futile but positively baneful to aspire to them”. Such an approach abandons all belief in the meaningfulness of life in the present, the past and the future. Fox-Genovese (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:41) states that the main aim of postmodernist historiography is to discredit history as a distinct intellectual practice as it developed during the nineteenth century.

However, the irony is that the difference between modernism and postmodernism is not that big. Himmelfarb (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:74) argues that

modernism anticipated and tried to forestall the absolutistic relativism of postmodernism by creating a discipline of history. Conscious of the deficiencies both of the historian and the historical record, acutely aware of the ambiguous relationship between past and present, the profession created a discipline of checks and controls designed to compensate for these deficiencies.

She describes the difference between modernism and postmodernism (“the old relativistic relativism ... and the new absolutistic version”) as follows:

Where modernism tolerates relativism, postmodernism celebrates it. Where modernism regards the obstacles in the way of objectivity as a challenge and makes a strenuous effort to attain as much objectivity and unbiased truth as possible, postmodernism takes the rejection of absolute truth as a deliverance from all truth and from the obligation to maintain any degree of objectivity (Himmelfarb in Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:74).

Another important point made by Fox-Genovese (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:48) about postmodernist approaches to history is the obsession with “deconstructing history (understood as what has been *written* in or about the past)” as opposed to an attempt to “reconstruct history (understood as what *happened* in the past)”. She explains the problem it presents as follows:

The new cohort of postmodernist historians is campaigning against efforts to identify clear historical facts of any kind, arguing that our knowledge of the past depend entirely upon the records in which the knowledge has been preserved. They point out that such records inevitably suffer from the same ideological biases that corrupt all written texts and, accordingly, should not be trusted. In their view, it necessarily follows that any claim of historical objectivity adheres to the principles of logocentrism that have distorted all previous forms and theories of knowledge. Their position thus combines the reasonable claim that no historical source should uncritically be taken at face value with the unreasonable claim that no historians are capable of surmounting their own – and possibly their sources’ – biases in order to present an honest, disinterested interpretation that adheres to the highest standards of their craft (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:47-48).

What Fox-Genovese describes as postmodernism’s deconstruction of history (to the point that history can barely exist), Himmelfarb (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:76) describes as aesthetic and philosophical history where the only meaning or “reality” is “that which the historian chooses to give ... in accord with his [sic] own sensibility and disposition”. The “traditional” historian writes history about events that actually occurred in the past, while the postmodernist sees the past as “a ‘text’ that exists only in the present – a text to be parsed, glossed, construed, and interpreted by the historian, much as a poem or a novel by the critic. And, like any literary text, the historical text is indeterminate

¹ Because of the important role of language in historiography, the linguistic turn in philosophy during the twentieth century had a significant impact on history as a discipline.

and contradictory, paradoxical and ironic, rhetorical, and metaphoric” (Himmelfarb in Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:76).

Overall we can therefore agree with Himmelfarb that postmodernism has influenced history in the sense that, where the task of historians once was to be accurate and factual, they are now urged to be imaginative and inventive. “Instead of re-creating the past, they are told to create it; instead of reconstructing history, to construct or deconstruct it” (Himmelfarb in Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:80). Furthermore, it is argued that a postmodernist perspective on history destroys the *evil* “totalising”, “universalising”, “logocentric”, “phallogocentric” tendencies of modernity by substituting them with “aporia”, difference, discontinuity, disparity, contradiction, discord, ambiguity, irony, paradox, perversity, opacity, obscurity, anarchy, chaos (Himmelfarb in Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:85). Himmelfarb (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:85) quotes Hayden White saying that “we require a history that will educate us to discontinuity more than ever before; for discontinuity, disruption, and chaos is our lot”.

Nevertheless, Himmelfarb (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:89) responds positively to the *threats* of postmodernism by arguing that “[i]f we have survived the “death of God” and the “death of man”, we will surely survive the “death of history” – and of truth, reason, morality, society, reality, and all other verities we used to take for granted and that have been problematised and deconstructed. We will even survive the death of postmodernism”. However, it would be irresponsible to sit back and wait for the “death of postmodernism” without reflecting on and internalising its critique of a discipline as complex and important as history. As stated earlier, reflecting on the questions of history from a theological point of view also requires a specific type of reflection of us. Himmelfarb (Fox-Genovese & Lasch-Quinn 1999:89) states that “[t]o free man from the ‘burden’ of history is to free [them] from the burden of humanity”. Can we regard humanity as a burden and treat it as such in the histories that we write and the approaches that we take to that history? How seriously should theology take the reality of the historical past?²

In conversation with Ricoeur: variation in scales

Up to this point we have briefly traced the development of historiography since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and discussed the main characteristics and moments of modernism and postmodernism, and the influence they had/have on history. A somewhat confusing picture of what history is may have been painted up to this point. History is indeed a complex discipline, and it is therefore appropriate to take cognisance of the engagement with history of an influential contemporary thinker like Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur’s work is characterised by an exceptional ability to merge seemingly conflicting positions. His influential work, *Memory, history, forgetting* (2004), proved to be an authoritative contribution to the field of historiography as it illuminates the complexity of the phenomenological, epistemological and hermeneutical aspects of history.

In his book Ricoeur discusses history from a phenomenological, an epistemological, and a hermeneutical point of view. In all three of these endeavours he is concerned with the truthful representation of the past. Ricoeur’s work clarifies all aspects of historiography. However, here we will focus predominantly on Ricoeur’s argument about the way in which the *understanding* of history and the *explanation* of history are simultaneously at work in our writing of history.³ What concerns our discussion on methodology in particular is Ricoeur’s idea of variations in scale that should accompany all historiographical endeavours.

The way Ricoeur uses the concept of scale is related to the way it is used in cartography and architecture. Let us start off with the way it functions in cartography. A map refers to an external referent; we can say that a map represents a specific area, and different maps represent the same area at different scales. The same area can thus be reduced to different scales. The scale that is used is usually indicated on the map. However, although different maps with different scales represent the same area, there is a difference in the information they present. The modern technology used in “Google earth” and “Google maps” has made us quite accustomed to a rapid change of scale that is at our fingertips. With the click of a button we zoom in or out, and we can literally see on the screen in front of us how information becomes less or more. A change in the level of organisation (the zoom percentage or scale) thus impacts the level of information (how much detail we can see of specific areas – zooming in – or how many different regions/areas we can see at once – zooming out).

In architecture we observe the same sort of gain or loss of information depending on the scale chosen. The difference between architecture and cartography is on the plane of what they represent. A

² Paul Ricoeur wrote an influential article with this title. *The reality of the historical past* (1984).

³ Cf Ricoeur, 2004: 182-233.

map represents something that already exists, whereas an architect's plan refers to a building or a town yet to be constructed. Moreover, the future building or town is, to varying degrees, in relation to the context in which it is to exist, including nature, the landscape, communication networks and the existing parts of town. Ricoeur (2004: 211) explains the similarities of architecture to the historiographical operation as follows:

These characteristics belonging to the notion of scale in architecture and in urban planning concern the historian inasmuch as the historiographical operation is in one sense an architectural one. Historical discourse has to be built up in the form of a set of works. Each work gets inserted into an already existing environment. Rereadings of the past are in this way reconstructions, at the price sometimes of costly demolitions: construct, deconstruct, reconstruct are familiar gestures to the historian.

Ricoeur uses an optical metaphor to express the same idea. He argues that history "functions as an eyepiece, a microscope, or a telescope" (2004:211). What makes the notion of scale different when used by the historian, however, is the fact that in the maps or the plans the historian creates, commensurability of dimensions is absent. The historian's scale is not indicated in her work as is the case in the work of the cartographer or the architect. It is much harder to observe the scale of the historian than it is to figure out what the scale of a specific map is. Furthermore, it might even be harder to change the scale at which the historian does his or her work. Unfortunately we do not have "Google history" with a zoom function yet ... The importance of recognising different scales in history is important. Ricoeur (2004:212) argues that "in changing scales, one does not see the same things as larger or smaller, in capital or lower case letters ... One sees different things".

It is difficult to imagine how different the things we see at different scales are when we think of maps of familiar areas or terrains. However, when we think of photos from outer space, for example, the significance of the level of organisation to the level of information is immense. The strangeness and the incomprehensiveness of the universe force us to continuously interpret the information that we receive. The way we perceive the universe and the way we make sense of our own existence in relation to the universe are constantly changing depending on the information that research provides. One photo of outer space will allow us to attach certain meanings and draw certain conclusions, but with every technological and scientific advance that allows us to take pictures at a higher resolution, our conclusions and sense-making efforts are entirely disrupted.

Comparing the past with outer space might be a bit extreme, I must admit. However, the point is that the past is a place and a time that is strange and removed from us – as strange and removed as outer space, perhaps. The meanings we derive from things of the past are neither given nor obvious. We may be accustomed to or comfortable with certain interpretations of the past, and it may be difficult to change our perspective, but if we take Ricoeur's idea of scales seriously, we have to search for new meaning continuously.

It is important to note that Ricoeur does not propose a specific scale that should be used in the writing of history, but argues for variation in scales. He explains that what is important in the play of scales is not so much the privilege granted to the choice of some scale "so much as the very principle of a variation in scale ..." (2004:218). A variety of effects can then be attributed to the exercising of these variations.

The idea of variation in scale presupposes that a specific scale is deliberately chosen, and that an alternative does exist. The historian has a choice to make with regard to the scale used, and with this choice comes liberties and constraints.

The most basic example of variation in scale that leads to the observation of different things is that of micro-history as opposed to macro-history. Ricoeur (2004:210) explains that the "key idea attached to the idea of a variation in scale is that, when we change scale, what becomes visible are not the same interconnections but rather connections that remained unperceived at the macro-historical scale". Later he adds that just as we see certain things on a minute scale that we do not see on a higher scale, there are also things on the small scale that we do not see and should not expect to see: for example, the lived experience of the protagonist. Micro-history is not macro-history torn to pieces. If we add different micro-histories together, the sum would not be equal to macro-history. This specific variation of scale thus requires us to move away from the need to generalise. Ricoeur (2004:216) states that a variation in scales invites us "simply to compare worldviews arising from different levels of scale, without these worldviews being totalised".

Conclusion

Historians can see the past as something that is over and done with, or as something that is yet to be discovered. I would like to argue that, for theological and church history, a balance between these two views would be necessary for the development of an adequate historiographical methodology. Although the past can never be repeated, the meaning we draw from the past can, and it can even change. The challenge for the historian is to have a high regard for the sense-making projects of other people and other times while endlessly searching for new meanings. Ricoeur's explanation of the role that scales play in history points us in a direction where we can search for these new meanings. Variation in scale does not imply that we broaden historical categories, but that we sharpen our methodologies. For example, if the critique is that South African church history is dominated by white voices or by Dutch Reformed scholars, merely adding black or African independent voices might not be what is needed. By doing so, we maintain the idea that South African church history is divided along the lines of race and denomination. Furthermore, we keep those dividing lines intact. By proposing alternative scales we do not imply that existing ones are wrong or irrelevant, but we recognise their limitations.

Questioning unquestioned assumptions of history would then mean that we reorganise groups and categories, that we form new ones, and that we do so without totalising any of them. In his article, *Memories into something new: histories for the future* (2007), Beverley Southgate (2007:192) states that

it is only by questioning our present selves, and the assumptions on which our identities seemingly depend, that we can ever be freed to make any improvements. So long as we simply accept, unthinkingly or with resignation, the status quo, we remain enslaved by that assumed "reality", and deprived of any alternatives.

Our ability to talk confidently of "reality", "necessity", or "truth" often builds on unquestioned assumptions, also in theology. Paul Ricoeur, being outright concerned with the truthful representation of the past, challenges our confidence in our presumed "realities", "necessities", and "truths", and challenges us to dare to click on the zoom button. Church and theological historians should take Ricoeur to heart because he consistently showed that he took life (and the lived reality of it) to heart. As theologians we approach history from the perspective that life's reality (in the past, present and future) is meaningful. This meaning is not superficial or obvious, and we are therefore challenged to search for it time and again.

From this we learn that Ricoeur is certainly not a postmodernist thinker, but in fact argues for the importance of historical past as something that is real, albeit a reality that requires us to continuously scrutinise our perceptions of it. Ricoeur does not settle for an approach to this reality under the sign of same or under the sign of other, but argues for the past under the sign of analogue.⁴ By this he implies that history (as a fictional narrative) is neither the same as the past (as proposed by modernist thinkers who advocated representing the past "as it was") nor is it void of all reference to a reality outside of the text (as postmodernism suggests). Instead he affirms the relation of similarity between the reality of the past and the narrative of history. The constituting of similarity between the past and the literary representation prompts the historian to invent and use strategies by which meaning is altered and different prefigurations are placed alongside each other. In this regard Ricoeur emphasises that history is not drawing a map of the past – we have no original given with which we can compare our historical model; and even if we want to use that metaphor, we have to conclude that maps using different scales in effect equip their readers in completely different ways.

We are compelled to admit along with Ricoeur (1984:36) that this approach to history "makes the master of plots into a servant of the memory of men". And above all, a servant of the God of reality.

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⁴ This is the main argument of *The reality of the historical past*.

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