

Historical consciousness and theological imagination: in appreciation of Philippe Denis

John W de Gruchy
Emeritus Professor of Christian Studies,
University of Cape Town, Cape Town, South Africa

Abstract

The article reflects on key issues relating to Denis' work as a church historian at the interface of theology, ecclesiastical and social history, and theological formation. The importance of the development of an historical consciousness is a necessary element for doing theology, and therefore in the formation of theologians understood broadly. The article stresses the role of interactive memory and imagination in doing theology in correlation with historical construction. Denis is an exemplary practitioner of the art within the South African context.

Introduction

Reading history has been one of my passions, as is reading biographies. The latter passion was first stimulated when I read Albert Luthuli's *Let my people go!* in 1962 followed shortly after by Alan Paton's *Hofmeyr*. History is often written on a macro-scale as in *The rise and fall of the Roman Empire* or the *Oxford history of South Africa*, but many texts are more focused on a small piece of the larger picture. Biographies tell a more intimate story, but often locate them in the grander narrative of which they are a part. By reading Luthuli's story told in his own words and Jan Hofmeyr's told by a master story teller, I gained an insight into South African history that I did not have before. Philippe Denis has helped many do the same with regard to the history of Christianity in South Africa by exploring local histories and biographies within the broader tapestry of the sub-continent.

Imagine the Bible bereft of all the stories embedded within it, an account of *Heilsgeschichte* painted in broad brushstrokes without the tales of the heroes of faith to which Hebrews chapter 11 refers. Imagine the gospel as *kerygma* without the stories of Jesus' healing and teaching, the meals he shared and the people he encountered, the details of the passion narrative, and the story of the Emmaus Road. Imagine church history as a chronicle of events and councils without the stories of saints and martyrs, of great theologians and humble people of faith, of particular congregations and monaste-

ries, some of them obscure within the grander scheme of things but no less important. Imagine telling the story of the struggle against apartheid without recounting tales of its villains and heroes. Denis is a master of his craft because he has been able to tell the stories of many people, famous and less so, with a fine eye for detail, while weaving them into the larger narratives of places and periods. And he has done so because he has not only recounted history “as it was” with as much accuracy as the technically proficient historian can muster, but also with theological imagination within the framework of social and political history. He is an exemplary historian with a social critic’s insight and a theologian’s soul. In what follows I will briefly comment on several topics relating to history and theology, each of which has been evoked by reflecting on Denis’ contribution to the academy, the ecumenical Church, theological education, and social engagement. While it is not my intention to make frequent reference to Denis’ work, those familiar with it will recognise the allusions; others less familiar may be encouraged to take up and read what he has written.

Historical consciousness

The fundamental importance of historical consciousness for doing theology and engaging in Christian ministry first dawned on me while studying theology at Rhodes University in the 1950s. While systematic theology was my first love, church history proved to be the most interesting. I recall in particular the lectures on South African church history by Leslie Hewson, an authority on the history of Christianity in the Eastern Cape. It was a gripping story as he wove social and church history into a meaningful pattern of events, people, and places that were central to the unfolding of colonial expansion and indigenous resistance. I learnt about land dispossession and migratory labour; about the clash of cultures and how Christianity was shaped by it; about the role of institutions such as Healdtown and Lovedale in the formation of leaders; and how this story spilled over into and affected the industrialisation of the Witwatersrand. But what really grasped my imagination in learning about the history of the church in South Africa, or the Reformation in Europe, or Congregationalism in Holland and England and later in South Africa through the work of the London Missionary Society, subjects that have recently attracted the scholarly attention of Denis, was not just the grand narrative or personal stories told, but how these connected to doing theology.

In the front piece to his book *What is history?*, EH Carr quotes a passage from Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* where Catherine Morland remarks about history: “I often think it odd that it should be so dull, for a great deal of it must be invention.” I have already declared my hand that for me history is not dull, at least not the kind of history that I enjoy reading, but

now let me insist with Carr that much we call history is an invention. Carr makes three observations about history which are commonplace but are often forgotten, especially by those who think there is something infallible yet exceedingly boring about their old school text books. The first is that “the facts of history never come to us pure, since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder.” For this reason, Carr recommends that we should study the historian before we begin to study what he or she has written.¹ History is not the facts, but an interpretation of the facts. It cannot be otherwise. This leads to Carr’s second observation, namely that the historian needs imagination for understanding what and who he or she writes about. Historians have to get into the mind of those they write about and imagine themselves in their context.² Carr’s third observation is that “we can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present.”³ The historian does not write history simply to recount what he or she has found out or imagined happened, but to understand its significance and what it might mean today. This is what I mean by historical consciousness, and the ability to imagine and invent history as written record.

All of this may suggest to the cynical that the writing of history is a process bordering on what neuropsychologists label confabulation, that is, the fanciful creation of myths to help us deal with reality. But that is not how the trained historian goes to work, though it does reflect how historical consciousness develops in the brain. Memory, or the recalling of data as faithfully as possible, and imagination, the processing of the data today, interact with each other. Without this interaction we could not live, let alone do so meaningfully. We certainly could not write or invent history. Even so, there is no way that all the events that occurred at a particular time can be recalled and recounted, even on one day of the chosen period or at one place of the chosen location, anymore than the role of every person involved could be described and examined. The historian of necessity has to be selective, and that means that he or she writes from a particular perspective, even if not a closed ideological one, and for a particular purpose, even if not propagandist. The way out of the dilemma of trying to be fully objective but inevitably being selective is, as Karl Popper tells us, “to be clear about the necessity of adopting a point of view; to state this point of view plainly, and always to remain conscious that it is one among many, and that even if it should amount to a theory, it may not be testable.”⁴ This is important when we try to understand that somewhat peculiar form of history we call “ecclesiastical” and to appreciate how it relates to doing theology within a particular histo-

¹ EH Carr, *What is history?* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 22-23.

² *What is history?*, 24.

³ *What is history?*, 24.

⁴ Karl Popper, *The poverty of historicism* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 152.

rical context. The challenge in writing history as in doing theology is to say something with justifiable conviction without denying one's own predilections, indulging in too many qualifications, or allowing the imagination to run riot. A well developed critical historical consciousness is the pre-requisite for such a task.

Ecclesiastical history

Peter Hinchliff, the first Professor of Ecclesiastical History at Rhodes, always insisted there was no such thing as "ecclesiastical" history – there was only history. He was, I submit, quite correct. But then all history writing is only a slice of the whole loaf. Ecclesiastical history is that slice of "ordinary" history, if I may call it that, which has a particular focus, not dissimilar to the history of philosophy, of theology or economics, of sport or war, of medicine or science. Ecclesiastical history is not necessarily written from the perspective of Christian faith, and sometimes decidedly not. When militant atheists, like Gibbon of a previous age or Richard Dawkins today, draw material from the history of Christianity it is with the aim of debunking its claims and beliefs, not substantiating them in any way. In doing so they are very selective and, for the same reason, effective for those who are less well informed. But ecclesiastical history, even when written by Christians who are sympathetic to the story, is not to be confused with a theological interpretation of history such as we find in St. Augustine's *The city of God*. In describing the "two cities" Augustine was not writing history, ecclesiastical or otherwise; he was doing theology while imaginatively reflecting on history.

My *Church struggle in South Africa* is, at one level, ecclesiastical history in the sense that it tells part of the story of the Christian Church in South Africa, and it does so using the required tools of historiography. But it also does so from a distinctly theological perspective and with a clear purpose in mind. In fact, the concluding chapter in the first two editions was intentionally theological in character, and while omitted in the third edition for economic reasons and replaced by Steve de Gruchy's important chapter on contemporary church struggles,⁵ some feel that the omission was a mistake, for the book as a whole is not "ecclesiastical history" in a narrow sense anymore than the Venerable Bede's *The ecclesiastical history of the English people* written in the seventh century is simply "ecclesiastical" in character. Bede set out to tell the story of the English nation, the first to do so, but his selected sources were ecclesiastical in character, largely because that was all he had to hand, and his aim in large measure was theological.

⁵ See Steve de Gruchy, "Locating *The church struggle in South Africa* in the Wider Historiography of the Church in South Africa," Postscript to the Third Edition, John W. de Gruchy with Steve de Gruchy, *The church struggle in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), xxvii-xxx, 223-260

Nonetheless, he went ahead with his task, as he tells us, “in accordance with the principles of true history” so that even though he was selective and imaginative in his use of sources, he was also careful to be as accurate as possible.⁶ We might say that while historical scholarship keeps theology concrete, theological imagination makes history interesting.

Carr was skeptical about those who, like Augustine and Bede, write history from the perspective of faith in a God who is active in history while at the same time seek to “maintain the autonomous status of history.”⁷ And for good reason, though not in a way that automatically discredits the work of Christian historians or the perspective from which they interpret the story they tell. After all, to insist that the meaning of history lies solely within history itself does not mean that it cannot or does not have any meaning beyond itself, or that we should not try to unlock it with some key manufactured in the imaginative factory of our minds. Consider all the philosophies of history that have evolved over the centuries, especially since the invention of the discipline during the European Enlightenment.⁸ Liberal, Marxist, Positivist, and Post-colonial are descriptions that immediately come to mind, so it is in fact non-sense to say that history is neutral. Few would today argue to the contrary. The fact that Lord Nelson won the battle of Trafalgar or the Boers defeated the Zulus at Blood River can be dated and located, but the history of those two battles can only be told through oral tradition or recorded in essays and books from various standpoints.

History is constructed by the victors, which was certainly true of the colonial history in South Africa which I learnt in school. The “bare facts” might have been reasonably accurate, but the interpretation of what happened is a very different story. Post-colonial historiography seeks to redress this interpretation of our colonial past from the perspective of those who were on the losing side. It is part of the process whereby the defeated regain their dignity and rights. In the process historical reconstruction becomes a strategic resource in the struggle for liberation and justice. This is also true of those ecclesiastical historians like Denis who challenge the dominant history of the Church and seek to retell it from the perspective of those too often regarded as peripheral: African indigenous pastors for example, or those labeled heretics like Bishop Colenso, or sectarians like the Dissenters in seventeenth century England. However theologically correct Irenaeus might have been in his anti-Gnostic writings, much of what we knew about Gnosticism in the early centuries of Christianity was shaped by his apologetic intentions rather than by the Gnostics themselves. The same was true of Bengt Sundkler’s early work on African indigenous churches, though his pioneering efforts

⁶ See the Introduction and Preface to Bede, *The ecclesiastical history of the English people* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

⁷ *What is history?*, 75.

⁸ Karl Löwith, *Meaning in history* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

began to change perceptions as well as discourse on the subject.⁹ The truth is, time and again ecclesiastical history has been told and taught by those serving the interests of the ruling party or dominant Church. Denis is an example of an ecclesiastical historian who refuses to function within the box and propagate the official line. After all, why should a Catholic historian take an interest in Congregational Church history in the first place, and, in the second, approach the subject with such positive intent? The reason is not that he is less a Catholic historian, but because he is an historian whose interests are catholic as is his passion for the truth.

Theological imagination

One of those criticised by Carr for trying to write history as a technically adept historian should, and yet also from the perspective of Christian faith, was fellow historian Herbert Butterfield. Butterfield's *Christianity and history*, first published in 1949, helped me understand well before studying theology that Christianity is an historical religion. This does not simply mean that Christianity has an history, for that is true of all religions, nor does it only mean that it is grounded in specific historical events, places and people. When we speak of Christianity as an historical religion, so Butterfield tells us, we mean that certain historical events are intrinsic to the essence of Christian faith.¹⁰ So much is this the case that Christians confess that Jesus was "crucified under Pontius Pilate," that is, at a specific time within the chronicles of the time, and they do so for good reason. "Salvation history" or *Heilsgeschichte* is rooted in the secular or worldly, not in some religious or spiritual realm. It is reality-based.

The distinction which Oscar Cullmann made between *Historie* and *Heilsgeschichte* in his book *Christ and time* was axiomatic when I studied theology,¹¹ and remains pertinent for our discussion whatever its problems.¹² In his Introduction, Cullmann discusses the odd fact that while history is now almost universally dated in relation to the birth of Christ, this holds no significance for the secular historian. For the Christian the event is the fulcrum of history; for the secular historian it is a reflection of the power of the Catholic Church to regulate the calendar. So, Cullmann asks: "What does the historian, who seeks to be only a historian, have to say to this New Testament judgment on the history that he investigates?" Clearly he or she cannot accept such an absolute judgment as the basis for his or her task, or for that matter any philosophy of history which passes final judgment on historical events.

⁹ Bengt G.M. Sundkler, *Bantu prophets in South Africa* (London: Lutterworth, 1948).

¹⁰ Herbert Butterfield, *Christianity and history* (London: Collins Fontana, 1957), 156.

¹¹ Oscar Cullmann, *Christ and time* (London: SCM, 1962).

¹² Cullmann responded to the main challenges to this distinction in Oscar Cullmann, *Salvation in history* (London: SCM, 1967).

But why, Cullmann asks, are historians more inclined towards allowing some philosophical or ideological position to influence their work rather than to give any credence to the Christian interpretation? This, he says, comes “from the fact that the Christian absolute norm *is itself also history* and is not, as is the philosophical norm, a transcendent datum that lies beyond all history.”¹³ Without its historical specificity Christianity would become a philosophy of religion; it would no longer be what Christians claim it to be, namely, history interpreting itself in a redemptive, reality-based and hopeful way. In other words, salvation happens in and through history, not apart from it in some merely existential manner as Rudolf Bultmann proposed.

The complexity of the problem has often been examined since the nineteenth century when historical consciousness became fine-tuned, not least by those engaged in the “search for the historical Jesus” within and behind the biblical text.¹⁴ As Van Harvey says in the opening passages of his own study of the problem, *The historian and the believer*, the “shadow of Ernst Troeltsch” hangs heavily over all theological discourse that reflects seriously on the impact of historical biblical criticism.¹⁵ The problem, simply stated, is that historical criticism, which is of the essence of the historical method, has raised serious questions about the historicity of those “facts” upon which Christianity claims to be based. If Christianity were only a philosophy of religion that could exist independent of history, like Buddhism for example, this would not be a problem. You should, as some Buddhist teachers have insisted, “kill the Buddha if you meet him on the road.” But historical facts do matter for Christians because the Bible is rooted in a particular set of narratives that claim to be historical, but are clearly more than history understood as fact. This does not make them less historical. As Karl Barth observed: “Even accounts which by the standards of modern scholarship have to be accounted saga or legend and not history – because their content cannot be grasped historically – may still speak of a happening which, though it cannot be grasped historically, is still actual and objective in time and space.”¹⁶ The narratives of the virgin birth, for example, may appear to be historical, but they are in fact legendary renderings of the theological assumption of the Incarnation. For this reason some scholars speak of the “myth of God incarnate”.

What, then, about myth? Is it mere confabulation, or could it be a reasonable, even legitimate and necessary imaginative attempt to interpret

¹³ *Christ and time*, 21.

¹⁴ See e.g. Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the whirlwind: A Christian interpretation of history* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1976).

¹⁵ A. Van Harvey, *The historian and the believer* (Ontario, Canada: Collier-Macmillan, 1969), 3-9.

¹⁶ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics: The doctrine of reconciliation*, Church Dogmatics, vol. IV/1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 336.

historical event, legend and saga? “Primitive Christian writers,” to quote Cullmann, placed “history and myth together upon one common line of development *in time*.”¹⁷ We can no longer do this. But the solution, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer insisted, does not lie in the demythologisation of the biblical story, as Bultmann claimed when he tried to express the meaning of myth in existentialist terms, but in recognising the character and importance of myth as myth for Christian faith. Writing from prison, Bonhoeffer told his friend Eberhard Bethge that his view was that “the New Testament is not a mythological dressing up of a universal truth, but this mythology (resurrection and so forth) is the thing itself!” By this Bonhoeffer did not mean that the myth had to be taken literally as fundamentalists usually do, but neither should it be understood in a way that makes religion “the condition for faith” as presupposed by the liberal theology of Bonhoeffer’s day.¹⁸ We have to find another language, a non-religious language, to express the meaning of faith in relation to the biblical narrative. That is the task of the theological interpretation in which the imagination plays a key role. Imagination in this regard is not the fanciful creation of absent meaning, but as David Tracy insisted with reference to a work of art, “imagination *is* the correlative intensification power which produces in language the meaning which the work expresses.”¹⁹ Theological imagination seeks to uncover the meaning *in* the event in terms of its historical location, not place a meaning *on* it derived from elsewhere or wishful thinking.

With this in mind, we return to the work of the “secular” historian and how this relates to the theological interpretation of history by reference to the classic already mentioned in passing, Gibbon’s *Rise and fall of the Roman Empire*. In his seminal study of the language of the Bible, *The great code*, Northrop Frye rightly remarks that the phrase “rise and fall” in the title of Gibbon’s work “indicates the narrative principle on which Gibbon selected and arranged his material: that is his *mythos*, and without such a *mythos* the book could have no shape.” Frye goes on to say:

The extent to which the Bible is historical in the same way is a more complicated matter, but not many would disagree with the statement that it tells a story; and for me the two statements “The Bible tells a story” and “The Bible is a myth” are essentially the same statement.²⁰

¹⁷ *Christ and time*, 95.

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and papers from prison*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, ed. John W. de Gruchy, vol. 8 (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 430.

¹⁹ David Tracy, *The analogical imagination: Christian theology and the culture of pluralism* (London: SCM, 1981), 128, 149, n. 96.

²⁰ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code: The Bible and literature* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), 32.

Understood in this way it is evident that myths are not fairy stories or folktales in the sense that they are “not really true”. What myth means is that these stories are “charged with a special seriousness and importance.” They are, says Frye, revelatory.²¹ But, I would add, they are revelatory in relation to the facts of history, not apart from them. This resonates with CS Lewis’ point that in the Jesus story the ancient myths of redemption become fact, yet they do so without ceasing to be myth.²²

The birth of Jesus certainly did occur at a certain time and place, but the doctrine of the Incarnation is not and cannot be, in terms of the norms of historiography, an historical fact that can be verified. So, too, when we speak theologically about creation we are not making a scientific statement, but giving theological significance to the evolutionary process. In this regard we may note how the Creed mixes history and myth into a seamless whole in a way that might not satisfy the mythologically-challenged skeptic or the positivist historian, but is doxologically appropriate – as originally intended – even for the most sophisticated believer from the first to the twenty-first century. We should not assume that all early-day Christians were naïve on such matters, though it is certainly true that many churchgoers over the years and today do not know how to distinguish between history and myth. As a result the repeating of the Creed often makes little sense to them and loses its doxological character at the same time.

The correlation of history and theology

There is one further important observation to be made in order to rescue the imagination from Romantic fancy. I have hinted at this by insisting that ecclesiastical history is part of “ordinary” history and that *Heilsgeschichte* is located *Historie*. But let me now take that a step further and suggest that Christianity is not only historical in the sense already indicated, but its theological interpretation of history correlates well with the data of history as described by the historian. As Langdon Gilkey, a theologian whose approach to the subject is amongst the most sophisticated, aptly said: “an understanding of history based on Scripture fits the contours of history as we know it.” There is, he adds, a “compatibility or correlation of history as experienced and comprehended with history as interpreted in Scripture.”²³

Such a statement taken at face-value might be unconvincing, but keep in mind that Gilkey is not referring to all biblical history, or to historical details, for there are many historical “facts” in the Bible that do not stand up

²¹ *The Great Code*, 33.

²² C. S. Lewis, *God in the dock* (London: Collins Fontana, 1979), 44.

²³ Langdon Gilkey, “Scripture, history and the quest for meaning,” in *History and historical understanding*, ed. C.T. McIntire and Ronald A. Wells (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1984), 4.

to historical criticism and, in that sense, are not “historically realistic”. Nor can he mean that there are no other ideological schemes that have some merit in interpreting history. What he is saying is that Christianity is an interpretation of the dramas of history, whether on the macro or personal level, shaped by historical experience but also by reasoned faith. The Bible may not always be historically accurate, but it is historically realistic. *This is how the world is*. The fact that it does so with reference to the transcendent does not alter the fact that its diagnosis of ills and its prognosis of the way forward is reality-centred, albeit embodied in stories or myths, legends and sagas, and finds expression in songs and rituals. Biblical myths of creation, fall and redemption are, I submit, at least more realistic than the myth of inevitable historical progress that attracted many in the nineteenth century, or than the myth of social Darwinism that seduced many in the twentieth with disastrous consequences. And these, so it was claimed, were based on “hard nosed science”.

Reinhold Niebuhr speaks to this when he writes about the “necessity of using a scheme of meaning for the correlation of the observed data of history, which is not the consequence but the presupposition of the empirical scrutiny of historical data.”²⁴ And the more the whole “panorama of history is brought into view, the more obvious it becomes that the meaning which is given to the whole is derived from an act of faith.”²⁵ By which Niebuhr meant faith in a source of meaning beyond history, for any event or value within history would result in a “premature and idolatrous centre of meaning.”²⁶ In saying this Niebuhr was rejecting, amongst others, all tribal and nationalist centres of meaning which judged history and pursued historical projects on the basis of self-interest rather than the global common good. This is closely connected to the prophetic trajectory in the Old Testament which provides a constant evaluation of the dramas of history in terms of social justice. This is also central to Jesus’ teaching about the reign of God in human life in the service of which Jesus was crucified.

None of this is meant to imply that the Biblical perspective of God providentially at work in history through which divine revelation takes place is not itself problematic, and for several reasons. One concerns the relationship of history and nature, a subject of immense importance, but beyond the scope of what I am trying to do here. Another is the problem of providence itself, a subject that has exercised theologians over the centuries and continues to do so. For if God is the God in whom Christians say we believe, the God who is in some meaningful sense sovereign over history, we then have to explain why the world is in such a dire condition, and why the innocent suffer as they do. But this much is already assumed in the Bible itself as is

²⁴ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The nature and destiny of man* (New York: Scribner, 1949), 134.

²⁵ *The nature and destiny of man*, 134.

²⁶ *The nature and destiny of man*, 134.

evident in the “myth of the Fall” (Genesis 3-11) which, for St. Augustine at any rate, seeks to provide an explanation of why things are as bad as they are. Belief that God is somehow in control of history, and that God’s purposes of love and redemption will not be thwarted in the end, is a statement of faith and theological imagination trying to make sense of experience. Yet it can lead to a quietism that withdraws from responsible action in the world or to a false optimism that is naïve and sometimes dangerously so. With this in mind, Bonhoeffer, reflecting back on ten years in which he was engaged in the German *Kirchenkampf* and Resistance, insists that God’s action in history requires human beings who act responsibly. “I believe,” Bonhoeffer writes, “that God is no timeless fate but waits for and responds to sincere prayer and responsible actions.”²⁷ An historian will not assume or depend on providence; a Christian historian will not stand aloof from history, but participate through acts of free responsibility in correspondence with reality.

A postscript on theological formation

As indicated at the outset I have reflected on a variety of interrelated topics around the theme of history and theology, each of which has come to mind as I have thought about the work of Philippe Denis. But there is one topic that has yet to be mentioned. Whatever else Denis has been in the course of his career, he has certainly been an extraordinary teacher. So in these closing remarks I want to acknowledge his contribution to theological formation through his work as a professor of church history, especially at the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal. In doing so, I wish to highlight the importance of the study of history in general and of ecclesiastical history in particular in theological education and formation.

I am not suggesting that every minister, priest and pastor should be a highly trained historian, but I am suggesting that to be a theologian, and that means to “do theology” not just study it, whether in the academy or in the parish, requires historical understanding and imagination. I hope this article has helped to make this clear. Of course, knowledge of church history in itself is important, as is knowledge of the historical context in which we live, and both of these need to be central to the curriculum. But I am pleading for something more than that, something exemplified in the work of Denis, namely the developing of historical consciousness as an essential tool for the task of doing theology in every generation in correlation with reality on the ground.

²⁷ *Letters and papers from prison*, 46.

