The Predicament of the Christian Historian: A Case Study[1]

The purpose of a historical understanding is not so much to detect the Divine action in history as to understand the human action, that is, human activities, in the bewildering variety and confusion in which they appear to a human observer.

IN MY STUDY AT HOME, where I have written all of my books, there are on the walls—in addition to a seventeenth-century map of my ancestral Moravia by Jan Amos Komenskÿya, a bust of Goethe, a massive painting by Siegfried Reinhardt, and the icons of Christ, the Theotokos, the Three Cappadocians, Saints Cyril and Methodius, and Saint Jaroslav the Wise of Kiev—only two conventional portraits: Father Georges Vasilievich Florovsky, who was the last of my mentors and the one to whom I owe the most; and Adolf von Harnack, who, as the author of the greatest history of Christian doctrine ever written (completed in 1889, precisely one hundred years before I completed mine in 1989), has been my lifelong role model. In this lecture, therefore, I am juxtaposing those two portraits by appropriating the title of Father Florovsky's essay of 1959, "The Predicament of the Christian Historian,"[2] which was his contribution to the Festschrift for Paul Tillich, and then employing Adolf von Harnack as the case study of that predicament. Tillich's own relation to Harnack, whom he once called " the teacher of all of us in many respects,"[3] becomes clear at several places in his work.[4] Florovsky's relation to Harnack is more diffuse, but also quite important, especially to me; it becomes decisive as the foil for what George Huntston Williams in his tribute to Father Georges has called Florovsky's "Christian Hellenism." [5]

Seeking to emulate Harnack as a scholar even while I was being nurtured by Florovsky as a spiritual father was, therefore, my continuing challenge and my own predicament as a Christian historian while I was working on the five volumes of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of* Doctrine. Over the twenty-five years since the publication of its first volume, readers and reviewers, in seeking to identify how my interpretation of the history of dogma differs from Harnack's, have proposed several possible answers, all of which may ultimately be seen as converging on one answer:

1. There is probably no historical construct for which Harnack is better known than "the Hellenization of Christianity."[6] Less than one percent of the way into his monumental work, on page 20 of what would be well over two thousand pages in the final edition, he stated flat-out: "Dogma is

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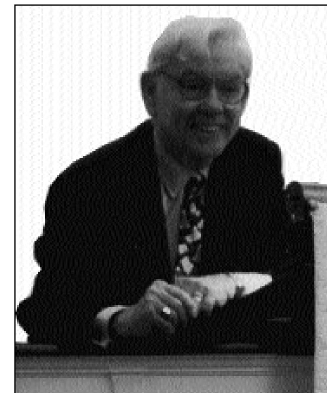

in its conception and in its structure a work of the Greek spirit on the ground of the gospel."[7] Therefore he interpreted Gnosticism as "the acute secularization or *Hellenization* of Christianity."[8] And he invoked the concept of Hellenization repeatedly as an "interpretive principle" for the historical explanation of various subsequent developments.[9] As an intellectual and scholarly grandson of Adolf Harnack, who was the teacher of my teacher, I was deeply under the influence of this interpretive principle when I began; and it helped to shape *From Luther to Kierkegaard* (1950), my first book after the disseration, especially its interpretation of "natural theology."[10] But as I was moving toward my *magnum opus*, that perspective on Hellenization and natural theology shifted profoundly. The shift made itself evident in many places in my works, but it was to reach its consummation in my Gifford Lectures at Aberdeen in 1992-1993, and in the periodic sentence with which I opened them:

> It remains one of the most momentous linguistic convergences in the entire history of the human mind and spirit that the New Testament happens to have been written in Greek—not in the Hebrew of Moses and the prophets, nor in the Aramaic of Jesus and his disciples, nor yet in the Latin of the imperium Romanum; but in the Greek of Socrates and Plato, or at any rate in a reasonably accurate facsimile thereof, disguised and even disfigured though this was in the Koine by the intervening centuries of Hellenistic usage.[11]

As that sentence makes clear, I had completely made my own the "Christian Hellenism" of Father Florovsky.

2. Harnack declared near the end of his career: "Rejecting the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake that the main body of the church properly rejected; keeping it in the sixteenth century was a destiny from which the Reformation was not yet able to extricate itself; but to go on conserving the Old Testament within Protestantism as a canonical authority after the nineteenth century is a consequence of a paralysis of religion and the church."[12] By diametrical contrast, I have seen the Christian engagement both with the Jewish community and with the Old Testament as a never-ending theme, without which the history of Christian doctrine does not make sense, and I have therefore dealt with it throughout the work rather than disposing of it at the beginning, as has been the usual practice.[13] Indeed, I have gone on in a later work to raise the question of the doctrinal and the moral consequences of the estrangement between Judaism and Christianity, and in a rhetorical question that is also a theological question I have asked:

> Would there have been such anti-Semitism, would there have been so many pogroms, would there have been an Auschwitz, if every Christian church and every Christian home had focused its devotion on icons of Mary not only as Mother of God and Queen of Heaven but as the Jewish maiden and the new Miriam, and on icons of Christ not only as Pantocrator but as *Rabbi Jeshua bar-Joseph*, Rabbi Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of David, in the context of the history of a suffering Israel and a suffering humanity?[14]

3. To a far greater extent than Harnack did, therefore, I have emphasized the biblical exegesis that formed and informed the doctrinal positions of the church fathers, instead of seeking to explain those positions on the basis primarily of philosophy or psychology or politics (all of which certainly played a role). For example, I have examined the debates over the doctrine of the person of Christ before and after the Council of Chalcedon in 451 not primarily, as the textbooks do, on the basis of the rival schools of thought of Antioch and Alexandria, with Rome and Constantinople acting as power brokers, but by identifying the "key passages" in the light of which each of the christological alternatives interpreted the rest of Scripture.[15] That has also led me to examine what Augustine called the "canonical rule [*canonica regula*]" for being faithful both to Scripture and to the church's teaching: a rule for classifying the biblical references to Christ according to the distinction, employed by St. Paul in the second chapter of Philippians and probably based on an earlier creed or hymn, between the "form of God" and the "form of a slave."[16]

4. As the most perceptive reviewers of volume 2 of *The Christian Tradition* have noted, I have—while striving not to play favorites among these five intellectual children of mine (any more than I did among the three children of my family)—resonated most deeply of all when I was interpreting the Eastern Orthodox tradition, both in its Greek and in its Slavic embodiments. Therefore my late lamented friend, Father John

Meyendorff, paid me the high honor not only of calling that volume "very perceptive and challenging," but even of identifying it as "*the* most comprehensive history of ideas in the Christian East," listing it alongside the work of Father Florovsky.[17] By comparison, I think it is fair to say that there was no major part of of the church to whose history Adolf von Harnack had so unresponsive an antenna[18] as Eastern Orthodoxy. "Nothing is sadder to see," he said of it in one of his harshest judgments, "than this transformation of the Christian religion from a worship in spirit and in truth [John 4:23] to a worship of symbols, formulas, and idols. . . . It was to destroy this kind of religion that Jesus Christ permitted himself to be nailed to the cross."[19] That insensitivity is all the more surprising in the light of his biography. For having been born in Dorpat/Tartu, Latvia, then part of Czarist Russia, where his father, Theodosius Harnack, was professor of theology, Adolf Harnack from his childhood had far closer ties to Russian Orthodox culture than almost any other Protestant scholar; indeed, his grandfather, Johann Philipp Gustav Ewers, whose pioneering contribution to the scientific study of the history of dogma Harnack gratefully acknowledged in the preface to his own first volume,[20] was also the founder of the historical study of Russian jurisprudence.[21]

5. Closely related to that difference is another. In an appendix to the first volume of his history of dogma he maintained: "In this, too, Christianity constitutes an exception: . . . The history of the dogma of the first three centuries is not reflected in the liturgy, insofar as we know it, nor is [the liturgy] a clearly emerging presupposition of dogmatics."[22] In antithesis, citing and applying the principle that "the rule of prayer establishes the rule of faith [*lex orandi lex credendi]*," I have accounted for much of the rise and development of Christian dogma as the explication of the liturgy. My interpretation of the history of the doctrine of the real presence of the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, for example, starts with the rise during the second and third centuries, among other ways of speaking about the Sacrament, of the description of it as a sacrifice (and therefore of the eucharistic ministry as a priesthood).[23] Eventually, though not in full-scale form until the ninth century, someone had to ask whether the body sacrificed on the altar was identical with the body born of Mary that had been sacrificed on Calvary.[24] When that question was answered in the affirmative, that was the doctrine of the real presence. Western Latin language about transubstantiation in fact arose as a way of speaking about the real presence, not as a replacement for it.[25] Even the Council of Trent, responding to Reformation critiques of Catholic teaching, acknowledged this in its surprisingly mild reaffirmation concerning the "change of the entire substance" of bread and wine into the substance of the body and blood of Christ: "This change has conveniently and appropriately been called transubstantiation by the holy Catholic Church."[26]

6. And, I suppose above all, I have, while accepting the challenge of historical research and of historicism to any simplistic claims of doctrinal absoluteness, gone beyond that challenge to a definition of doctrine as orthodox and catholic, and of the church as catholic and orthodox, in which this very relativity becomes a positive force, by suggesting how unity differs from uniformity, and how the church is—in the word of the Psalm that Pope Leo XIII in *Orientalium dignitas* of 1894 quoted to defend the distinctiveness of the Eastern Christian tradition—"*circumdata varietate* [surrounded with diversity]," in its liturgy and governance but even in its theology, while preserving the unity of its doctrine.[27] Therefore I have adopted—and adapted—John Henry Newman's concept of development of doctrine, and I have sought for the elements of continuity as well as for those of change, in fact, for the elements of continuity in the change, as I have learned to see, in Newman's brilliant oxymoron, that "great ideas . . . change in order to remain the same."[28]

Adolf von Harnack was one of the most celebrated humanistic scholars of his time and, by common consent, the outstanding—and the most controversial—historian of Christianity in the learned world.[29] He was the historian of the Prussian Academy of Sciences, as well as the festival speaker at its two-hundredth anniversary; in 1906 he added to his professorial duties the general directorship of the Royal Library of Berlin; he was knighted by Kaiser Wilhelm on 22 March 1914, being one of the last to be so honored; and at his seventy-fifth birthday in 1926, President Paul von Hindenburg of the Weimar Republic presented him with a congratulatory plaque bearing the inscription: "*Dem Trÿauger deutscher Bildung*."[30] His monumental three-volume *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* of 1886-89, is, as his student and my teacher, Wilhelm Pauck, has said, "the clearest expression of [his] basic conception of the historian's task. It shows concretely how and to what extent he tried to carry out his historical principles in his own field of study."[31] Thus it is not only the most influential

of his books, but the one that most amply documents the predicament of the Christian historian. But the book that addressed the predicament most explicitly and that achieved the greatest notoriety together with the widest circulation, with translations into at least fifteen languages (including English soon after the original), as well as many critical responses on both sides of the Atlantic, was *Das Wesen des Christentums*, first published in 1900.

Das Wesen des Christentums consisted of the stenographic transcript of a series of sixteen public lectures that Harnack delivered from notes in the winter semester of 1899/1900 to audiences of "about six hundred" students representing all the faculties of the University of Berlin, of which he became the rector for 1900.[32] As his daughter and biographer has observed in narrating the account of the lectures, "The turn of the century provoked on many sides reflection about what the nineteenth century had achieved and what it could transmit as a legacy to the newborn twentieth century. Schleiermacher had attempted something similar a hundred years earlier in his *Addresses on Religion to the Cultured among Its Despisers*."[33] The parallel to Daniel Friedrich Schleiermacher's dithyrambic *Reden* of 1799 is almost irresistible, also because, as Erich Seeberg said at Harnack's memorial service on 12 July 1930, "two men belonged to the Theological Faculty of the Friedrich-Wilhelm-Universitÿaut in Berlin who were at the same time representatives of the spirit of their age: Schleiermacher was one, Harnack was the other."[34]

Harnack, whose profound spiritual ties to Goethe repeatedly came to voice in these lectures (i,3; vii,77; viii,94-95; xi,122),[35] was as conscious as Schleiermacher had been a century earlier that he was addressing an audience who had become increasingly secular. For his hearers, "the Christian religion has outlived itself" (i,3); and they had concluded, not without a certain existential pathos, that it was irrelevant to modern society (v,57) and no more than a "dream," because it was "inextricably bound to a picture of the world and of history that has long since been made obsolete" (viii,94-95). But for my examination of "the predicament of [Harnack] the Christian historian," the most important way in which Harnack sought to differentiate his *Wesen des Christentums* from Schleiermacher's *Reden* and the myriad similar efforts during the nineteenth and earlier centuries was his disavowal of apologetics, whether Rationalistic or Romantic, in favor

of a methodological approach that professed to be dealing with the questions of religion and of Christianity (as he said already in his introduction) "purely in a historical sense [*lediglich im historischen Sinn*]" (i,4), and that did not "want to be wiser than history" (xi,110-11). Repeatedly he warned that this historicist methodology precluded "absolute judgments" (i,11) and "exclusive judgments" (viii,92), and he quickly caught himself up whenever he sensed that in speaking about the person and message of Jesus Christ he had transgressed his self-imposed boundaries as historian (viii,89), the boundaries beyond which "all research must keep silence" (vii,81). Answering the objections of his contemporaries, who found the early Christian preoccupations with the death and the resurrection of Christ to be "alien," he declared: "It is not our task to defend [these preoccupations]; nevertheless it is the duty of the historian to learn to know them with such understanding that in retrospect he can empathize with [*nachempfinden*] the significance that they have possessed and still possess" (ix,98).

At times such protestations of the objectivity of the historian do appear to be somewhat disingenuous, especially coming from him, but they betokened the drastic intellectual and scholarly shift that had taken place since the last time a century had turned. For many, including Harnack, both the natural science and the critical philosophy of the nineteenth century (especially Kant) had permanently discredited the traditional speculative proofs of apologetics, whether those of Anselm (ix,98-99) or of High Scholasticism (xiv,153-54). Although it was Tolstoy (v,51; vi,68-69; xiii,151), not Dostoevsky, to whom he repeatedly referred, the central issues with which he dealt in going beyond these proofs to a "purely historical" (i,4) approach were in fact the Grand Inquisitor's three themes in the "*Pro et Contra*" of *The Brothers Karamazov*: miracle (ii,16-19), mystery (xiii,146-50), and authority (i,3)—or, as Father Florovsky would have wanted me to say, "*čudo, tajna, avtoritet*." Nor was the nineteenth-century Romanticist apologetic of Chauteaubriand (and Schleiermacher), which had spurned rationalistic proofs in favor of aesthetic ones, any more impressive to him; for in effect the aesthete-apologist "stood before the ruins of the old church and exclaimed: 'Oh, how beautiful!'" (xi,124-25).

Conversely, however, the nineteenth century had been the historiographic century par excellence, in the universities of many countries but

above all in those of Germany, in many of the humanistic disciplines such as literature, philosophy, and law, but above all in theology.[36] It was the golden age of the Christian historical scholar. As Karl Barth once lamented, evidently contrasting his teacher Adolf Harnack (and Harnack's most significant predecessor, Ferdinand Christian Baur of Tübingen) with Schleiermacher, "In the history of Protestant theology the nineteenth century brought with it the none too dignified spectacle of a general flight, of those heads that were wisest, into the study of history."[37] That study of history, including especially the study that produced Harnack's own *Dogmengeschichte*, had demolished absolute claims (x,116). But he believed that history had a correlative and positive task, which was indeed its "highest task," namely, to identify and to communicate "what is the essence [*das Wesentliche*]" (i,8) within and behind the welter of historical details. Could the historian of Christianity, having demonstrated how historically conditioned the faith and dogma of the church had been, now also be the agent for the reconstruction of this *Wesen*? That question was Harnack's version of Florovsky's "predicament of the Christian historian."

Identifying "*das Wesentliche*" after nineteen centuries of accretion necessarily entailed a drastic reductionism, though not by shriveling religious faith into a "function" (i,5) of something else that was thought to be real in a way that faith and its object were not, such as economics (i,2) or politics (vi,66) or ethnicity (xvi,176). In Harnack's eyes both as historian and as theologian, the Reformation of Martin Luther was the prime example in history to document the thesis that "every truly significant reformation in the history of religions is in the first instance a critical reduction; for in the course of its historical development, insofar as religion adapts itself to its circumstances, it draws to itself much that is alien" (xv,168; italics original).[38] For Harnack, the most alien of such alien elements in Christian history were (to echo, reorder, and paraphrase the Grand Inquisitor's triad of miracle, mystery, and authority): ritualism, institutionalism, and dogmatism. As mentioned earlier, Eastern Orthodoxy or "Greek Catholicism" as he called it (xii,135), was to him the most extreme embodiment of the first element, ritualism, which, he concluded, "has nothing whatsoever to do with the religion of Christ. All of this is the religion of classical antiquity, attached to some concepts of the gospel" (xiii,150). Or, as he put it in the *Dogmengeschichte*, the Byzantine devotion to icons was carried on

"just as it had been in paganism, only the sense of beauty had been corrupted"; for it was one of the distinctive marks of Christianity that its teaching was not defined by its liturgy.[39]

Roman Catholicism, whether medieval or modern, represented the ultimate expression of the second "alien" element, institutionalism. As "the ancient Roman empire, sacralized by the gospel" (xiv,157), it evoked from Harnack *as historian* the following quite remarkable tribute: "The Roman church is the most comprehensive and the most powerful, the most complicated and yet the most unified construction that history, so far as we know it, has ever brought forth. All the powers of the human spirit and soul and all the elemental powers that are at the disposal of the human race have had their part in building this construction" (xiv,153). Nevertheless—or rather therefore—it evoked from Harnack *as theologian* this no less remarkable condemnation as well: "In everything that presents itself here as external ecclesiasticism [*äußeres Kirchentum*] with a claim to divine status, there is lacking any connection at all with the gospel" (xiv,163).

Despite the bitterness of these polemical statements, it was the third "alien" element, dogma and dogmatism, that Harnack the historian had treated in the greatest detail and with the most magisterial control of the historical source material in his *Dogmengeschichte* and that he stressed throughout *Das Wesen des Christentums*. The message of Jesus was not "*eine Lehre*" but "*Leben*" (i,7)—or, by a similar assonance in English, not creeds but deeds—no "construct of thought" (iii,28); for "it lay completely outside his view of things to provide, apart from the gospel, a 'doctrine' about his person" (vii,81). But the subsequent development of church dogma overcame, though never completely, "the elemental powers of this religious temperament" (ix,104), and the identification of Jesus Christ as Logos, "the most important step ever taken within the history of Christian teaching" (xi,127), led to the church's identification of dogma as "religion itself" (xi,129). It was these three elements of traditional Christianity, and above all its dogma perhaps even more than the miraculous, that the secularized students of 1900 whom Harnack was addressing found the most offensive, specifically because these elements were the bulwark of "particularism."

Disengaging the person and message of Jesus from this particularism, therefore, was the means by which the historian (and apparently only the

historian) could show the universality of the message, which was "more simple than the churches want to make it out to be—more simple, but therefore also more universal and more earnest" (viii,90). Although the sectarians, also within Reformation Protestantism, made the claim, "We, that is, our particular church [*Partikularkirche*], . . . are the true church" (xvi,184), it had been the revolutionary message of the authentic Reformation to affirm: "Our church is not the '*Partikularkirche*' in which we stand, but the '*societas fidei*,' which has its members everywhere, also among the Greeks and Romans" (xv,173). While it was necessary to acknowledge historically that "Jesus Christ and his first disciples stood within their own time just as we do within ours" (i,8), it was a characteristic of all "epochmaking personalities"—therefore also and preeminently of him, though not only of him—that they were not to be seen in the light of what they shared with their contemporaries (iii,34-35). It had been his greatness to recognize "man as he basically remains ever the same" (i,11); and the willingness of his disciples in the next generation to distinguish between "kernel" and "shell" even in his own person and message, and thus to transcend particularism in the name of universality, "is the most impressive fact of the apostolic age" (x,112-13). But in so doing, they were in fact carrying out the deepest impulses of their Master, whose Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount "set religion free from everything external and particular" (iv,47). The emphasis of Jesus on God the Father and on the infinite worth of the human soul, therefore, showed "that the gospel is not just one positive religion among others, that it does not contain anything . . . particularistic, but that it is religion itself" (iv,41). The massive body of particularistic christological dogma that had developed, specially in the East, during the councils of the first several centuries of church history stood in the sharpest possible contrast to the view of himself that Jesus had held and taught, which Harnack with some irony designated in a major section of the book as "The Question of Christology" (vii-viii,79-92). The dialectic between particularism and universality at work in Harnack's interpretation is visible near the end of this section, in the one sentence from *Das Wesen des Christentums* that evoked the most controversy,[40] and then in the sentence that immediately followed it (which his critics often chose to ignore): "*Not the Son, but only the Father belongs in the gospel as Jesus proclaimed it*. But the way he

knows the Father, no one else has ever known Him, and he brings this knowledge to others" (viii,91; italics added).

But making such a claim, even in so dialectical a form, not only sounded very much like the sort of "absolute judgment" (i,11) and "exclusive judgment" (viii,92) that Harnack the historian had forsworn as outside his province, but that he could not avoid; it also raised, in the Berlin of 1900, the question that was to become so tragically poignant precisely a third of a century later, in the Berlin of 1933: the relation of Jesus Christ to Judaism. To paraphrase that question as posed to Harnack by his Jewish colleagues, "What do you mean to be saying about this Christ of yours? He did not bring anything new!" (iii,30). For the very analysis by which the historian had created (or, as he would certainly have preferred to say, rediscovered) the chasm between the religion *of* Jesus and the religion *about* Jesus seemed to have imbedded the person and message of Jesus all the more firmly in the highly particularistic soil of first-century Palestine, creating a new predicament for the Christian historian. Conversely, the drive for universality had meant, when "'original Christianity' had to be submerged in order for 'Christianity' to abide" (i,9), the expansion of the church's horizon beyond Palestine to the Graeco-Roman world, in short, the very "Hellenization of Christianity" that Adolf von Harnack, in the *Dogmengeschichte* and elsewhere, had identified as the betrayal of the original Christian message and as the transformation out of which had come the intellectualism of dogma and creed. At both poles, therefore, "particularity" and "universality" were involved in a profound ambiguity for the Christian historian-as-theologian.

Harnack's answer to this predicament was to emphasize, as historical fact, the distinctiveness and universality of the message of Jesus as a contrast to the ambivalence of the Judaism of the first century, in which "sometimes the horizon seems to be as narrow as the circle of hills surrounding Jerusalem, sometimes it embraces all humanity" (viii,86). But Jesus, who had not studied in any rabbinical school (ii,20-21) and was not representative of normative Judaism, managed to transcend that ambivalence. He broke with the punctilious ritualism of his people (iv,45-46; v,58), which was what made the later ritualism of Eastern Orthodoxy such a betrayal (xii,135; xiii,148-50). The connection of his message with

Judaism was an almost accidental one (i,10), and therefore the Jewishness of Jesus and of the early church belonged to the "palaeontological" (ii,14) phase of the history of the Christian message. "As non-Jews," according to Harnack, "we simply do not understand" the basic meaning of the concept "Messiah" (vii,81). The Christian use of the "Old Testament," too, was highly ambiguous (ii,16), especially when it was repeatedly invoked to provide Christian social and political programs with the specific moral, political, and legislative content that was missing from the New Testament (vi,63). Harnack summarized his view of this cluster of issues in a programmatic paragraph:

> Over and over men have arisen in the human race with the sure consciousness of possessing a divine message and of being obliged, willingly or not, to proclaim it. But the message was always imperfect, fragmentary at this or that point, bound up with the political and with the particularistic, intended for a momentary situation; and the prophet often did not stand the test of being himself the example of his message. But here [in Jesus] the most profound and the most comprehensive message was brought, which seized man at his very roots and *in the framework of the Jewish people addressed all the human race*—the message of God the Father. It is not fragmentary, and its genuine content i*s easily separated* from the necessary husks of its historically conditioned forms (vii,82; italics added).

That meaning of the message was achieved when, through the activity of the apostle Paul, "the gospel was transplanted from the Orient, where also later it never properly took root, to the Occident" (x,111).

Yet this Westernization and universalization happened through the medium of the Greek language, with all the conceptual baggage that this carried. Harnack recognized that there were undeniable "elective affinities" (xi,126: Goethe again!) between the Jewish and the Greek traditions, above all perhaps the quest for wisdom, as the two traditions were combined, for example, in the Wisdom of Solomon. The idea of justice/righteousness as a divine attribute and as a human virtue was one such shared element (v,48-49), with the corollary sense that injustice demanded punishment (ix,100); and demonology was another (iv,37-38). Nevertheless, it was on the contrasts between the two that he dwelt. The Gospels containing the life and teachings of Jesus (by which Harnack meant almost exclusively the synoptic Gospels) were, to be sure, written in Greek. But Jesus had "no relation to Hellenism" (ii,22), and the Greek of the Gospels did not mean that they were "determined by the Greek spirit," for their Greek language was in fact nothing more than "a transparent veil [ein durchsichtiger Schleier]" (ii,13-14); that was true even of the Gospel of Luke, though it was written by a Greek and in the "literary language [Bÿuuchersprache]" of Hellenism (ii,15). Thus when the apostle Paul carried the gospel into the Roman world, preaching and writing in Greek even while he was speaking to his fellow Jews or addressing his epistle to the Christians in Rome, he imbued it with a language that made it intelligible not only to Greeks and Greek-speaking Romans, but to everyone who was human, thus transcending Greek particularism no less than Jewish particularism (x,111). Yet it was this Greek language that provided the basis and the justification for "the influx of Hellenism, of the Greek spirit, and the fusion of the gospel with it," above all by the Christian appropriation of Greek philosophy, though also by the adaptation of the simple actions that Jesus had instituted in baptism and the Lord's Supper (ix,101) to the Greek notion of "mystery," and by the assimilation of Greek polytheism with the Christian cult of the saints (xi,125-26). The identification of the Logos of Greek philosophical speculation with the person of Jesus of Nazareth "gave a historical fact metaphysical significance and made a person who had appeared in space and time a part of cosmology and the philosophy of religion" (xi,128). But the effect of this Hellenization was to reduce the contrast between the emphasis of Jesus on the universality of faith, as this was found in the Lord's Prayer, and the elitism of Plato (iv,42-43), as well as the contrast between the primitive Christian hope based on the Easter experience and the Platonic notions of immortality (ix,102-3), and ultimately to make the orthodox dogma about him into a weapon to be used in the persecution of fellow Christians (vii,79). In sum, the universality seemingly provided by the Hellenization of the gospel and its "intellectualism" (xii,132) became instead, through the authority of dogma as doctrine that was officially legislated and politically enforced, the most oppressive brand of particularism.

The quest for the universality of faith did not, however, lead Harnack to embrace one of the concepts that had drawn widespread support, in the

century whose conclusion he was observing, as a means of transcending religious particularism and achieving religious toleration: the concept of "natural religion." In his Testament creating the lectureship that bears his name and that began in 1881, Lord Gifford had prescribed as the content of the lectures "promoting, advancing, teaching and diffusing the study of natural theology."43 But Harnack—who, like John Henry Newman, was overlooked by the Gifford Lectureship—made clear that this "abstraction, namely, the sum total of the elemental intuitions and procedures that can be shown to exist in all religions," was not the sort of "critical reduction" (xv,168) he had in mind as the way out of the cul-de-sac of particularism; for, speaking as historian, he found it "questionable where such [universal intuitions and procedures] really exist and whether they are sufficiently clear and identifiable to be brought together into a whole" (xii,138). Nor did he find himself impressed by—or, for that matter, even very much interested in (i,4)—the history of the world religions. Judaism was, of course, the exception, because it had a historic connection with Jesus and early Christianity, but also because in a unique and universal sense it represented "the authentic history of religion for humanity" as a whole (viii,89). Thus Buddhism appeared in his account only as a foil for Christian social teaching (vi,63) or as a device for taking account of the denial of self and the world by Christian asceticism (v,50). Similarly, Islam provided him with an opportunities to contrast the high estimate of Muhammad as a prophet with the primitive Christian exaltation of Jesus as a prophet but as far more than a prophet (ix,97-98), to contrast the permanently Arabic character of Islam with Christin universalism (x,112), and to comment (in 1900!) on the significance of the loss of territory by Eastern Orthodoxy to Islam in such places as Bosnia (xii,137). A year after the lectures on *Das Wesen des Christentums*, in a lecture delivered on 3 August 1901, Harnack addressed himself specifically to the question of the place of a particularistic Protestant or Roman Catholic theological faculty in a modern secular university operated by the State. The study of the world religions was an essential component of the research and teaching of the university; but in the structure of the German university, as this had been worked out by Wilhelm von Humboldt and his colleagues (including not only Fichte but Schleiermacher) at the founding of the University of Berlin, that study belonged in the Philosophical Faculty, not in the Theological Faculty, which continued to have its own distinctive vocation even in a secular society.[42]

In a discussion that sounds like a reprise of the late medieval controversies between Nominalists and Realists about universals,[43] Harnack insisted upon its being historically verifiable that universality was not merely a speculative construct so that only the particulars were real, and on the other hand that it was not a reality unto itself so that the particulars could be ignored; but that the "*universalia in rebus*" were both real and knowable. Instead of seeking to move around (or behind) the particularistic religions to a universal faith, therefore, Harnack was proposing a critical methodology that would employ the scalpel of historical analysis to find that universal faith within particularistic religion—or, more specifically, within one particularistic religion—and would go through that to the universal, once again in search as "*das Wesentliche*." But in the University of Berlin at the conclusion of the nineteenth century it was unavoidable for the historian to ask the question: Why, among them all, should one study this specific religion and single out its historical development? One reason was that "what developed then is our history, for there would be no concept of 'humanity,' no 'world history' in the higher sense, without that decisive change" (v,49; italics original). No historicism about the West and no exoticism about the East could excise that specific history, the history of Jesus and of the movement that came out of his life and message, from the history that had produced the members of Harnack's audience at the University of Berlin in 1900, who could be and were ignorant of it but who could not be and were not unaffected by it in a fundamental way. As he put it in his opening words, "The great philosopher of Positivism, John Stuart Mill, once said that the human race cannot be reminded often enough that there was once a man named Socrates.46 He is right, but it is more important to go on reminding the human race that a man named Jesus Christ once stood in their midst" (i,1).

But there was a more substantive and fundamental reason as well: the history of Jesus and of his message carried that force also because his sayings and parables uniquely "speak to us through the centuries with the freshness of the present" (iii,33). Therefore Harnack emphasized the message of Jesus as "religion itself" (iv,41), as well as the claim of Christianity, even of a highly particularistic orthodox Christianity, "that in the doctrines

with which it was opposing its adversaries it had given expression to religion itself" (xi,129). This, then, was the assignment he took upon himself:

> In these lectures we do not want to concern ourselves with "the religious principle" and its evolutions, but we want to attempt to answer the more modest but no less urgent question: What is Christianity? What has it been, and what has it become? We hope that from the task of answering this question light will be shed on the more comprehensive one: What is religion, and what should be it? Within this latter question, however, we finally have to do only with the Christian [religion]; the others do not move us to our depths any more (i,4).

And all of that was to be presented, as he claimed in that immediate context, "purely in a historical sense" (i,4). That did not deter him from going on to acknowledge the validity of the concept of "religion" as this was held in common by all the faiths (i,6), or from explaining various events of Christian history by reference to what was "inseparable from every higher religion" (ii,17) and by reference to "a constantly recurring phenomenon of the history of religions" (x,108; viii,89), or from describing as a characteristic of "the higher religions" (which he did not list, but in which he included Christianity) that prayer was their most decisive element, as the Lord's Prayer supremely showed (iv,41).

Although such prayer was not only individual but corporate—the Lord's Prayer was, after all, addressed to "*Our* Father"—Harnack was, as noted earlier, profoundly suspicious of the corporate expression of prayer in such forms as those of ritual and liturgy, above all Eastern Orthodox ritual and liturgy, except for the simplified worship of the Protestant Reformers (xv,169-70). Making his own Augustine's familiar formula, "All I desire to know is God and the soul, the soul and its God,"47 he interpreted the petition "Thy kingdom come" to mean that "the kingdom of God comes in that it comes to individuals, makes an entry into their soul, and they take hold of it" (iii,36). Such "individualism" had already been growing in the Judaism out of which Jesus came (viii,85). Jesus "always has his eye only on the individual and on the constant attitude [Gesinnung] of the heart in love" (vi,71), and his followers insisted "that the Christian religion would not be the last and highest [of religions] if it did not provide every single person with an immediate and living connection to God" (ix, 104). Therefore it was mistaken to see Jesus as a "social reformer" (v,56; vi,63). Harnack recognized—and made his own significant contributions to—the growing sense of "moral duty" (vii,72) toward the social order, which underlay the Social Gospel movement also in the United States, and in the final lecture he hailed this rising social consciousness as a new era (xvi,188); but that did not entail equating the gospel with social revolution (vii,73). The unity of the human race was to be found "in persons" (viii,89-90). Therefore Harnack would have understood, and would have made his own, the celebrated and often caricatured definition in the second of the Gifford Lectures of his contemporary, William James, according to which religion was "the feelings, acts and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relationto whatever they may consider the divine."[46] For history showed that it was the mark of an authentic religious faith that it could enable the believer to overcome the universal human condition of slavery to death (ix,102) and the burden of the absurdity of life and death (iv,40), with all their toil and trouble (vii,76). It meant, as Harnack said in the first lecture, "eternal life in the midst of time, by the power and in the presence of God" (i,5; xi,120). And that faith was both perennial and universal.

But that leaves the question ultimately unresolved: Was it "the Christian historian" as historian or "the Christian historian" as Christian, perhaps even "the Christian historian" as theologian, who was speaking in pronouncing such judgments? It is the predicament of the Christian historian to live in that tension; for, as I have suggested elsewhere, every historian must be a polyglot, speaking one or more of the dialectes of "past-ese" and simultaneously communicating to contemporaries in "present-ese."[47] All of which confirms the thesis of Father Georges Florovsky in his conclusion:

The Christian historian will attempt to reveal the actual course of events in the light of his Christian knowledge of man, but will be slow and cautious in detecting the "providential" structure of actual history, in any detail. Even in the history of the Church "the hand of Providence" is emphatically hidden, though it would be blasphemous to deny that this Hand does exist or that God is truly the Lord of History. Actually, the purpose of a historical understanding is not so much to detect the Divine

action in history as to understand the human action, that is, human activities, in the bewildering variety and confusion in which they appear to a human observer. Above all, *the Christian historian will regard history at once as a mystery and as a tragedy—a mystery of salvation and a tragedy of sin.* He will insist on the comprehensiveness of our conception of man, as a prerequisite of our understanding of his existence, of his exploits, of his destiny, which is actually wrought in his history. The task of a Christian historian is by no means an easy task. But it is surely a noble task.[48]

And I believe that, too, thanks to both of the portraits on my study wall.

Notes for The Predicament of the Christian Historian

1. A lecture at the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, New Jersey, 3 April 1997, cosponsored by the Orthodox Christian Fellowship as the Fourth Annual Florovsky Lecture. I have amplified it with portions of my inaugural lecture for the Joseph Chair at Boston College, 22 January 1997, and of my inaugural lecture for the Godfrey Diekmann Center at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, 13 March 1997.
2. Georges V. Florovsky, " The Predicament of the Christian Historian," in Walter Leibrecht, ed., *Religion and Culture: Essays in Honor of Paul Tillich* (New York, 1959), 140-66; reprinted in Georges V. Florovsky, *Collected Works*, 2 (Belmont, MA, 1974), 31-65, 233-36 (notes). Because of its relatively greater accessibility, I shall cite the latter.
3. Paul Tillich, A *History of Christian Thought*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York, 1968), 292.

4. See especially Paul Tillich, *Perspectives on 19th and 20th Century Protestant Theology*, ed. Carl E. Braaten (New York, 1967), 219-23.
5. George Huntston Williams, " The Neo-Patristic Synthesis of Georges Florovsky" in Andrew Blane, ed., *Georges Florovsky: Russian Intellectual—Orthodox Churchman* (Crestwood, NY, 1993), 331, note 10.
6. Walther Karl Erich *Glawe, Die Hellenisierung des Christentums in der Geschichte der Theologie von Luther* bis auf die *Gegenwart* (Berlin, 1912).
7. Adolf von Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte* (5th ed., 3 vols.; Leipzig, 1931), 1:20; translations from Harnack are my own.
8. Harnack, *Lehrbuch*, 1:250; italics added.
9. Aloys Grillmeier, "*Hellenisierung-Judaisierung des Christentums als Deuteprinzipien der Geschichte des kirchlichen Dogmas*," *Scholastik* 33 (1958):321-55, 528-58.
10. Jaroslav Pelikan, *From Luther to Kierkegaard: A Study in the History of Theology* (Saint Louis, 1950), esp. pp. 24-48.
11. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Christianity and Classical Culture: The Metamorphosis of Natural Theology in the Christian Encounter with Hellenism* (New Haven, 1993), 3.
12. Adolf von Harnack, *Marcion: Das Evangelium vom fremden Gott* ([1924] 2d ed. ; Leipzig, 1960), 217.
13. Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago, 1971-89), 1:12-27; 2:200-215; 3:242-55; 5:111-13, 191-92, 292-93, 334-35.
14. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Jesus through the Centuries* (New Haven, 1985), 20.
15. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1:243-56.
16. Phil. 2:5-11; Augustine, *On the Trinity* I.vii.14; Jaroslav Pelikan, "*Canonica regula*: The Trinitarian Hermeneutics of Augustine." In *Collectanea Augustiniana*, I, *Augustine: "Second Founder of the Faith,"* ed. Joseph C. Schnaubel and Frederick Van Fleteren (New York, 1990), 329-43.
17. John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trands and*

Doctrinal Themes (New York, 1974), 229; italics added.

18. To borrow his own metaphor upon confronting the "dialectical theology" of Karl Barth, Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *Adolf von Harnack* (2d ed.; Berlin, 1951), 416.
19. Adolf von Harnack, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (4th, corrected ed.; Leipzig, 1900), 148.
20. Harnack, *Lehrbuch*, 1:iv.
21. Johann Philipp Gustav Ewers, *Das älteste Recht der Russen in seiner geschichtlichen Entwicklung dargestellt* (Dorpat, 1826).
22. Harnack, *Lehrbuch*, 1:806-8.
23. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 1:166-71.
24. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 3:74-80, 184-204.
25. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition*, 3:202-4, 268-69.
26. Pelikan, *The Chistian Tradition*, 4:297-300.
27. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Confessor between East and West* (Grand Rapids, 1990), 58-59.
28. John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (1845), 1.1, ed. James Munro Cameron (New York, 1974), 100.
29. A useful introduction in English is G. Wayne Glick, *The Reality of Christianity: A Study of Adolf von Harnack as Historian and Theologian*, "Makers of Modern Theology," ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (New York, 1967).
30. Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *Harnack*, 409.
31. Wilhelm Pauck, *Harnack and Troeltsch: Two Historical Theologians* (New York, 1968), 22.
32. His *Rektoratsrede* was delivered on 15 October 1900: Adolf von Harnack, "*Sokrates und die alte Kirche," Reden und Aufsätze* (2d ed.; Gießen, 1906), 1:27-48.
33. Agnes von Zahn-Harnack, *Harnack*, 181-82.
34. Erich Seeberg, "*Gedächtnisrede auf Adolf von Harnack*" (Tübingen, 1930), 11. Hereafter I shall cite *Das Wesen des Christentums* in the body of the text by a lower-case Roman numeral for the number of the lecture and an Arabic numeral for the page of the fourth edition (Leipzig, 1901), which contained Harnack's corrections; that should facilitate reference to any other edition or translation.
35. Cf. Adolf von Harnack, "*Die Religion Goethes in der Epoche seiner Vollendung," Erforschtes und Erlebtes* (Gießen, 1923), 141-70.
36. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology: Continuity and Change in Christian Doctrine* (New York, 1971), 51-67.
37. Karl Barth, *Protestant Thought: From Rousseau to Ritschl*, tr. Brian Cozens and H. H. Hartwell, int. Jaroslav Pelikan (New York, 1959), 311.
38. Jaroslav Pelikan, "Adolf von Harnack on Luther," in *Interpreters of Luther*, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (Philadelphia, 1968), 253-74.
39. Harnack, *Lehrbuch*, 2:480; 1:806-8.
40. On this, see Karl H. Neufeld, *Adolf Harnacks Konflikt mit der Kirche: Weg-Stationen zum "Wesen des Christentums*" (Innsbruck, 1979).
41. Stanley L. Jaki, *Lord Gifford and His Lectures* (Edinburgh, 1986), 72-73.
42. Adolf von Harnack, "*Die Aufgabe der theologischen Fakultÿauten und die allgemeine Religionsgeschichte," Reden und Aufsÿautze*, 2:159-97.
43. *Lehrbuch*, 3:505-14.
44. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2, in Edwin A. Burtt, ed., *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill* (New York, 1939), 967.
45. Augustine *Soliloquies* ii.7.
46. William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, int. Jaroslav Pelikan (New York, 1990), 36.
47. Jaroslav Pelikan, "The Historian as Polyglot," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 137 (1993):659-68.
48. Florovsky, "Predicament," 65; italics original.

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