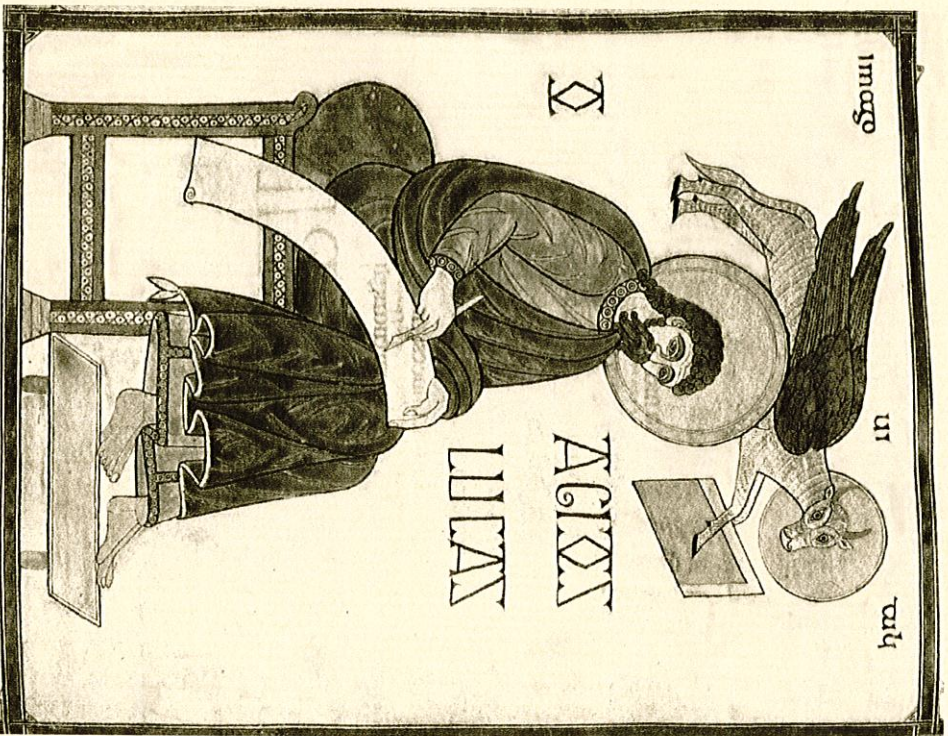


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### God in the Appendices:

## The Myth of the Unencumbered Self

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A few years ago in a postgraduate history seminar at La Trobe University, a PhD student presented a paper in which she was investigating the life and work of an obscure seventeenth century Anglican clergymen who had attempted to contact angels through such occult means as the crystal ball. She had admitted that she found it difficult to understand the thought world of her subject because, as a modern secular person, raised with a scientific worldview, she could not believe in a world of gods, spirits, and invisible forces. During question time I asked her why, therefore, had her subject's astrological sign been important for her to note. I'm not sure she satisfactorily answered my question about star signs, but in order to demonstrate her struggles to understand a supernaturalist worldview she asked anyone in the room who believed in angels to raise their hands. Apart from one other person (who was a visitor from another university), mine was the only hand raised. I was a little embarrassed, to say the least.

I was stuck in that instance between two of what Alfred Schutz has termed 'finite provinces,' first proposed in his paper 'On Multiple Realities,'<sup>1</sup> a concept explained well by Stephen J. Gould in his wonderfully titled book on science and religion, *Rocks of Ages*: 'Each domain of inquiry frames its own rules and admissible questions, and sets its own criteria for judgment and resolution.'<sup>2</sup> Since every finite province has its own set of rules there can be no translating and referring between them. Instead one must 'leap' back and forth by 'suspending' or placing in the background one province while operating within the other.<sup>3</sup> According to this approach I should have kept my hand down because I was inhabiting the 'finite province' of the university's history programme and therefore could not suddenly 'leap' into the 'finite province' of my religious beliefs. In this paper, I wish to discuss the 'alternation' approach to religious history writing and unmask if I can the myth of the 'unencumbered self' that accompanies it.

Many historians who are also persons of faith have argued for an 'alternation' or 'two spheres' approach to history. In this approach the historian alternates between the realm of subjective faith and the realm of objective history. It has been argued that, while one may believe God is active in history and is permitted to say so, this admission should only be made in the introductions and conclusions of monographs and articles.<sup>4</sup> If God is allowed into their work at all, God should only 'peek in from the interpretive margins'.<sup>5</sup> D.G. Hart has argued, based on the idea of the 'unencumbered self', that historians of faith should play by the rules of the academy and keeping their faith private.<sup>6</sup> A similar concern seems to lie behind Tom Frame's concern in his review of *Making History for God*,<sup>7</sup> in a recent issue of *Lucas*:<sup>8</sup> 'The "Evangelical historian" is, by his or her own admission, confessing another, presumably deeper, layer of personal affiliation that has the potential to complicate further his or her attitude to any set of events and their interpretation ... To write for, or consciously within, a discrete theological community is unwise.'<sup>9</sup>

The work of Mark A. Noll, George M. Marsden, and Harry S. Stout might be seen as typifying the 'alternations' approach. Bradley N. Seeman, of Taylor University, Indiana, has offered a powerful critique of this approach as placing too heavy a burden on the scholar and resting on a 'questionable understanding of the self and what it can accomplish'.<sup>10</sup> Such a model places a great deal of stress on a researcher who must see things in his or her research as relevant to one sphere but entirely irrelevant to another. Is the historian to believe in the idea of God acting in history on the way to work, and then suspend that belief during office hours? Is the historian of faith to see only social, psychological, and historical forces at work when writing about the way Methodists worship, and then when offering up a hallelujah on Sunday morning see primarily divine forces at work?

The religious sociologist, Peter Berger, who is also a person of faith, seems content to have a frequent change of hat:

The sociologist qua sociologist always stays in the role of reporter ... As soon as he ventures an opinion on whether the belief [of his subjects] is finally justified, he is jumping out of the role of sociologist. There is nothing wrong with this role change, and I intend to perform it myself in a little while. But one should be clear about what one is doing [and] when.<sup>11</sup>

This 'dual citizenship' approach has been followed by many of the best historians of evangelicalism who also happen themselves to be evangelical

historians.<sup>12</sup> Drawing on Berger, Noll reminds us that 'the atheism of Marx and Freud was principal. For more self-critical social scientists it has become procedural, a difference of great importance.'<sup>13</sup> In other words, social scientists need not be atheists, but they must carry out their work as if they were. Noll makes a distinction between 'lower-order falsifiable explanations and higher-order dogmatic reflections'.<sup>14</sup> The lower order falsifiable explanations are the stuff of history writing; the higher-order dogmatic reflections belong elsewhere, presumably in the writing of theology.

Harry Stout's award winning biography of George Whitefield, *The Divine Dramatist*, seeks to avoid a hagiographical approach, believing that hagiography belongs to the community of faith but not to the community of scholars.<sup>15</sup> Christian historians must either play by the rules of the academy by boycotting hagiography and theology or consign themselves to 'separatist ghettos'.<sup>16</sup> George Marsden also operates within the alternation model and advocates in *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* what he calls 'methodological secularization'. This is not 'methodological atheism', however, because it does not deny the existence of God. 'It just means that for the moment we will be keeping that dimension in the background.'<sup>17</sup>

The claim that the alternation approach is built on a skewed understanding of the self is at the heart of Seeman's rejection of it. 'The alternation approach rests on an unrealistic picture of human beings. No one could actually perform this leap.'<sup>18</sup> According to John Rawls' theory of justice, from where the concept is derived, the unencumbered self 'can rise up out of its own history and stand apart from its private values and interests, which have no place in one's "public identity"'.<sup>19</sup> As a private individual 'any number of values, beliefs, and stories, may grip me'. However, 'as a public citizen... I hold in abeyance the values, beliefs, and stories of my private identity' as irrelevant to my function in the public square.<sup>20</sup> According to Rawls, 'while we may be thickly constituted selves in private, we must be wholly unencumbered selves in public'.<sup>21</sup>

To return to my moment of embarrassment at the postgraduate seminar: I may tell the story in a sermon on Sunday of how an angel came and strengthened Christ during his agony in the garden of Gethsemane, in order to encourage believers to have a sense that invisible, though real, forces are at work to uphold them also during their own trials. What if I had then gone to La Trobe University and told an entirely different story, one in which angels do not exist because metaphysics may not be allowed to intrude upon scientifically based historical research? They would be

two quite different stories but which one would have been *my story*? Can I believe something as a Christian that I do not believe as an historian? It seems that the Christian in the academy is not so easily 'unencumbered'. 'Dual citizenship' is one thing; multiple personality disorder is quite another. Seeman maintains that however valuable the idea of writing history as an 'unencumbered self' may appear to some to be, people do not generally do a very good job at it.<sup>22</sup> 'The fact we actually believe things to be true betrays the alternation approach at its very core.'<sup>23</sup>

Nor is it simply that I must shift between a supernaturalist worldview and a non-supernaturalist worldview, or between a religious and a non-religious one. There is also a bewildering variety of Christian beliefs, some of which I can believe and others I cannot. I do not share the Pentecostal belief that glossolalia is evidence of the Holy Spirit at work in one's life. When I place the word 'tongues' in quotation marks in my historical writing on Pentecostalism, I am betraying the fact that my 'self' is indeed encumbered, encumbered with certain beliefs which I cannot simply switch off. Just as no religious movements can be understood as something floating above or suspended over the cultural, political, and social forces that shape the historical period it inhabits, so no historian is floating above or suspended over his or her subject matter or chosen methodology. One cannot simply lay aside who one is in order to arrive at 'objective' history. The attempt to do so would in fact be the act of an 'encumbered' self. So the idea suffers from what philosophers call 'self-referential incoherence'. When the idea is applied to itself it disproves its own validity, much as when a person says 'it is absolutely true that there are no absolute truths'. The moment a person seeks to be 'unencumbered', he or she becomes 'encumbered' with the attempt to do so. The problem with the unencumbered self, then, is that it doesn't exist. Seeman maintains that 'strictly speaking, there is no alternation approach, for no one can pull off the kind of bracketing needed to suspend one's historical situatedness.'<sup>24</sup>

I decided to re-read my PhD thesis to see whether I might find God 'peeping in from the margins' anywhere. How unencumbered was that particular piece of writing? For the most part I found I had maintained an objective reporting style from which a reader probably would not discern any particular faith commitment. Yet, in selecting material, I did so informed by a set of beliefs. When I described, by way of contrast, two types of American GIs living in Australia during the Second World War as 'gum chewing doughboys' and 'sanctified soldier boys', I have to admit that I enjoyed the comparison because I admire the latter more than the former. The reason I admire them is because I believe I see the grace of God at

work in their lives. In my creation of these descriptors, God has suddenly leaped out of my appendices and intruded upon my historical narrative. When describing the spiritual impact of the 1959 Billy Graham Crusade I recognise that, as much as the written style is 'reporting', I also harbour a conviction that something *did* happen that year that had its origins in God.

All of this needs to be placed in the context of the state of religious history writing, which currently is dominated, especially in America, by persons of faith, many of whom are evangelical Christians. Earlier historians of religion in America such as Perry Miller, Sydney Ahlstrom and Sidney Mead wrote religious history as intellectual history. Then the *New Social History*, beginning around 1970, saw religious historians begin to read sociology and sociologists begin to read history. Historians looked to sociologists for theory and methodology and sociologists looked to historians for historical context. This trend also heralded a shift for religious history out from a divinity-school-based 'church history' approach to a university-based 'history of religion' approach. Undoubtedly the social science concern for statistics threatened to narrow the scope of religious history and led to a certain reductionism as though religious behaviours could be explained in terms of human social behaviour alone. What role could the historical theologian play in the writing of religious history if his or her special concerns could not be allowed to intrude upon the telling of the story? At home in the church-based divinity school, the theologian became orphaned in the shift to the university religion department.

Meanwhile historians migrated out of the divinity school and into the university in large numbers. And those who did so brought their religious beliefs with them. Religion scholars in the United States who responded to a 1993 survey conducted by Stout and Taylor registered a strong religious faith, which contrasted with the broader academic community. 78% classified themselves as either "very religious" (47%) or "quite religious" (31%). Only 6%...classified themselves as "not very religious".<sup>25</sup> Related to this is an apparent decrease in academics who profess a "liberal Protestant" faith.<sup>26</sup>

Stout and Taylor express concern at the relativism and fragmentation that have entered the field of religious history:

[M]any religious historians have separated themselves from the 'enlightenment objective' foundations of the American historical profession. Citing their own personal Christian epistemology with its critique of modernism and faith in reason, they join forces (at least implicitly) with postmodern criticism in denigrating the whole idea of scientific history

and the consequent search for a unified history of the American past 'as it really was'. By blurring the lines between their personal faith commitments as Christians and their salaried careers as professional historians, they have separated themselves from their origins in social science even as the profession first slighted them. And by distancing themselves from 'naturalistic world views' originating in the Enlightenment, they have also distanced themselves from any obligation to relate their scholarship to some professional 'field' concerned with 'scientific objectivity'. Undergirding postmodern and 'providentialist' Christian research agendas is an implicit assumption that one's self interest is at once one's scholarly, academic, and professional legitimation. Freed from all commitments to science or professionalism, they, like postmodernists, are freed to be left with themselves.<sup>27</sup>

Whether these newer approaches have resulted in the kind of unfettered freedom Stout and Hart suggest is open to debate. The New Social History has given birth to the New Religious History, which still utilises social science methodologies and disciplines but is not very interested in questions of overarching theory. Where the religious historians of the 1970s used the methodologies of the New Social History to examine mainline denominations, the New Religious History has sought out the little known, the quirky, the particular, and the marginalized - Fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, Mormonism, cults, sects, and religious configurations of all types. Religious historians and sociologists alike have given up on grand explanatory devices and have settled for no broader methodologies and theories than those required to investigate the particular communities upon which they focus.

In 'coming of age', leaving the relative safety of the divinity school, and entering the broader world of the university, evangelical historians have tended to adopt a methodology that amounts to a practical atheism. Historians who are also persons of faith should be able to tell their stories about the past without needing to consign the metaphysical to prefaces, appendices, and other entirely separate pieces of writing known as 'theology'. After all, since none of us physically live in the past we research, any creative account of it that goes beyond the mere chronological recitation of events, involves a kind of meta-physics as we imaginatively visit times and places we do not physically inhabit. It may not be belief in God that encumbers the historian, but he or she will surely be encumbered

by *something* because the complete divorcing of our private and public selves is in the final analysis not possible.

It should be made clear here that this paper is diagnostic not prescriptive. It alerts us to the need for a better model but does not offer, much less develop one. For historians who are persons of faith to attempt to offer historical accounts which must leave God as active agent out of the picture, is to attempt the impossible. The insights of an 'observer-participant' can bring to historical research an immediacy that might not otherwise be there. Yet the need for objective unbiased history which does not skew the evidence in a direction favoured by the historian because of his or her religious belief or theological convictions remains of great importance. An approach must therefore be found that lies somewhere between procedural atheism and history as 'His-story'. John Adams famously wrote: "Facts are stubborn things; and whatever may be our wishes, our inclinations, or the dictates of our passion, they cannot alter the state of facts and evidence."<sup>28</sup> It is true of course; facts are stubborn things. It would appear, however, that beliefs are equally stubborn.

#### Endnotes:

1. Alfred Schurz, 'On Multiple Realities,' in *Collected Papers I: The Problem of Social Reality* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1971) 207-59.
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3. Schurz, 'On Multiple Realities,' 6-7.
4. Leslie Woodcock Tentler, 'Loving Them Into the Kingdom," *Books and Culture* 4.6 (Nov./Dec. 1998) 29.
5. Bradley M. Seeman, 'Evangelical Historiography Beyond the "Outward Clash": A Case Study on the Alternation Approach,' *Christian Scholar's Review* 23:1 (2003), 95-123. I am heavily indebted to Seeman's article in this paper, both as a starting point and a stimulus for further thinking.
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7. Geoffrey R. Treloar and Robert D. Linder (eds), *Making History for God: Essays on Evangelicalism, Revival and Mission in Honour of Stuart Piggin, Master of Robert Menzies College, 1990-2004* (Adelaide: Openbook, 2004).
8. Tom Frame, 'Making History for God: A Discordant Review,' *Lucas: An Evangelical History Review*, new series 1 (January 2009) 163-73.

9. *Ibid.*, 168.
10. Seeman, 'Evangelical Historiography,' 96.
11. Peter Berger, *A Rumour of Angels* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969) 7-8.
12. Peter Berger and Hansfried Kellner, *Sociology Reinterpreted: An Essay in Method and Vocation* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969) 85.
13. Mark A. Noll, 'And the Lion Shall Lie Down with the Lamb: The Social Sciences and Religious History,' *Fides et Historia* 20.3 (Jan 1988) 14.
14. Noll, 'The Lion Shall Lie Down with the Lamb,' 20.
15. Harry S. Stout, *The Divine Dramatist: George Whitefield and the Rise of Modern Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) xvi.
16. Harry S. Stout, 'Evangelicals and the Writing of History,' *Evangelical Studies Bulletin* 12.1 (Spring 1995) 7.
17. George M. Marsden, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 91, n. 12.
18. Seeman, 'Evangelical Historiography,' 110.
19. Seeman is summarising John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 30-32.
20. Seeman, 'Evangelical Historiography,' 111.
21. John Rawls, 'Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory,' *Journal of Philosophy* 77.9 (September 1980), p. 545.
22. Seeman, 'Evangelical Historiography,' 113.
23. *Ibid.*, 113.
24. *Ibid.*, 121.
25. Harry S. Stout and Robert M. Taylor, Jr., 'Studies of Religion in American Society: The State of the Art,' in Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart (eds.), *New Directions in American Religious History* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 21.
26. *Ibid.*, 22.
27. *Ibid.*, 31-2.
28. John Adams, 'Argument in Defense of the Soldiers in the Boston Massacre Trials,' December 1770. <http://www.quotationspage.com/quote/3235.html>.

## Cheat the Prophet:

### G.K. Chesterton and Historical Progress

Susie Byers\*

In 1904, G.K. Chesterton (1874-1936) published one of his best-loved novels, which opened with the following memorable lines:

The human race, to which so many of my readers belong, has been playing at children's games from the beginning, and will probably do it till the end, which is a nuisance for the few people who grow up. And one of the games to which it is most attached is called, 'Keep tomorrow dark', and which is also named (by the rustics in Shropshire, I have no doubt) 'Cheat the Prophet'. The players listen very carefully and respectfully to all that the clever men have to say about what is to happen in the next generation. The players then wait until all the clever men are dead, and bury them nicely. They then go and do something else. That is all.<sup>1</sup>

The book which opens with these words is *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, which is Chesterton's take on the futuristic novel. It's set in 1884, and things in England are more or less the same. The English have neither progressed to become the super-men imagined by George Bernard Shaw nor declined to the miserable beings prophesied by some pessimistic eugenicists in the Edwardian era. The citizens of *Napoleon* continue to live, love and die as humanity always has, but hindered in ever-imaginative ways by government and corporate power. Compare Chesterton's approach to that of H.G. Wells, who nine years before *Napoleon* came out had published *The Time Machine*. This widely-read novel tells of a future populated by a human race that has evolved unrecognisably into the childlike Eloi (who are the descendants of the aristocracy) and the terrifying Morlocks (descended from the working classes).<sup>2</sup>

Chesterton, still well-loved today, was a key Catholic political thinker of the early twentieth century. He was born in 1874 and died in 1936, and during his 62 years he wrote 100 books as well as newspaper