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Hoyer on History

By HERBERT T. MAYER

During the 32 years from 1930 to 1962 more than 3,500 students of theology sat at the feet of Theodore Hoyer to study church history at Concordia Seminary, Saint Louis. Among them were most of the men currently teaching history and church history in the professional schools of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, including myself. This association with their instructor resulted in a deep admiration and love for him. His influence upon the thinking of his students was profound and continues to manifest itself in them. It is appropriate, then, that in this *Festschrift* a brief review of his view of history should be included. As we present it, many readers of this journal will undoubtedly recognize a part or all of their own philosophy of history. It is good for men to take time to think about the influences which have shaped them.

The remarks in this article are primarily based upon the course in church history as he taught it in 1942 and on his two-semester elective in the history of the Lutheran Reformation. Since he was, above all, a student of Luther, it is in this area that his influence upon Lutheran clergymen has been most profound.

He defined history as "the record and explanation of all that man has thought and said and done in the past." He insisted, however, that the mere recitation of facts was of no value. "How the facts came to happen, the cause-and-effect relationship, *Kausalnexus*—that is the focus of history," he told his students in their first hour with him. In the survey course time did not

permit him to say much about specific social and economic factors in the history of any period. Nor did he take occasion to stress the history of thought. His course was not designed to be a history of doctrine, although it was always fully oriented to the history of the church. The emphasis was rather on political and ecclesiastical affairs. In the detailed electives he devoted more time to "all that man has thought and said and done in the past."

Since church history is "the record and explanation of what the church has experienced in the past, of the influence the church has wielded on the life and thought of the world surrounding it, and again of the influence which the world has exerted on the life and thought of the church," he insisted that church history was a part of the general history of mankind. He pointed out that "members of the church are at the same time citizens of the world and have a part in the history of both." Therefore a close relation has to be maintained between church history and the other aspects of history, for neither could "be understood or profitably studied without the other."

He briefly summarized what he called the true philosophy of history. It was the belief, the faith, the conviction, that "God rules the universe; God's prime object is the building of His church, but for this He usually employs natural means, the natural development of history." This point of view conditioned and controlled his teaching and writing in unmistakable fashion.

Perhaps it was a part of his unassuming nature that he spoke rather depreciatively

of the importance of history in the preparation of ministers. He sometimes referred to it as a "dessert course" which could be dropped from the curriculum without doing irreparable damage to the training of the future pastors. This point of view may also have affected the tradition of the church body he served, in which, till rather recently, historical studies were not prominent. In this connection it is interesting to note that as a general principle, academically trained historians have been called to Concordia Seminary specifically to teach history only during the past fifteen years or so. But although Dr. Hoyer never posed as a professional historian, he demonstrated a mastery of his subject which left no doubt as to his competency. In spite of his self-effacing comments he had a way of making history tremendously interesting and relevant and inspired many men to do further work in this discipline.

He did, however, point out certain important values in the study of church history. He cited five reasons for its pursuit:

1. "Knowledge of universal history is incomplete without a knowledge of church history."
2. "Study of past church history will lead to a better understanding of present institutions."
3. "It corroborates Scripture teachings and prophecies."
4. "It will establish confidence for the future."
5. "As history in some respects repeats itself, it may beneficially influence our conduct." "Like causes," he added, "will produce like effects, relatively."

In a survey course in church history covering five or six centuries it was difficult

to do justice to the study of the cause-effect relationships which Dr. Hoyer liked to emphasize. His interpretation of the *Kausal-nexus* was always precise and always reflected far more study and pondering than the simple lecture statement could reflect. For example, when discussing the pre-Reformation divided papacy, Dr. Hoyer stated that the Marshal of Hohenzollern caught "Pope" John XXIII as he attempted to flee. "This," Dr. Hoyer went on to say, "was the beginning of the rise of the Hohenzollerns." Unless such a statement provoked a question, Dr. Hoyer was content to let it stand. But when questioned, he liked to lay his pencil down on the podium, step around from behind it, smile and say, "All right! All right!" and then proceed with a 10-minute digression concerning all the factors that caused the rise of the Hohenzollerns.

His bibliographical references in the survey course were limited and carefully selected. While he required no standard text, he referred his students to Lars Qualben, *A History of Christianity*; George P. Fisher, *History of the Christian Church*; Benjamin Kurtz, *Church History*; Albert Newman, *A Manual of Church History*, and Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*. These he recommended as the best available. Occasionally he would call attention to additional works. On the papacy he suggested Mandell Creighton, *A History of the Papacy*, and W. J. McGlothlin, *The Course of Christian History*. On the inquisition he suggested Rafael Sabatini, *Torquemada and the Spanish Inquisition*; Charles Kingsley, *Westward Ho!*; Mary Johnston for historical fiction; H. C. Lea's volumes, and G. C. Coulton, *Medieval Panorama*.

In his course on the Lutheran Reformation the bibliography was more extensive and most of the standard works on the period were listed and analyzed. In 1944 to 1945 he called attention to the fact that with the exception of Heinrich Boehmer almost all the studies on Luther were by Calvinistic authors, such as James MacKinnon, Henry Lucas, Preserved Smith, T. M. Lindsay, Arthur McGiffert, and Albert Hyma. These men, he felt, did not present Luther's point of view correctly. He referred to the monographs published by the *Verein für Reformationsgeschichte*, which the seminary library at that time was beginning to acquire. There was little reference to the wealth of periodical literature because the library holdings in those days were very limited.

In his interpretation of medieval history Dr. Hoyer cautioned against the uncritical use of the label "Dark Ages" for the whole period prior to the Renaissance. He insisted, however, that this label had to be applied to Roman Catholic theology up to the time of the Reformation. He found only very few exceptions to this general statement. In this connection he liked to emphasize the organizational and political aspects of the medieval papacy. Thus he spent considerable time with the Crusades, showing how the early Crusades had a genuine religious motivation while the later ones were prompted by political considerations. The medieval popes devoted much of their energy to reestablishing their political supremacy in the Eastern Church and saw in the Crusades an effective tool for the accomplishment of this goal. For the attentive student Dr. Hoyer's lectures were filled with hints about the fierce power struggles which were raging within the Roman

Church. His discussion of the conciliarist movement was an excellent introduction to this phase of Roman Catholic polity, which is once again in the limelight in these days of Vatican II. Time did not permit him to say much about canon law or the curial organization.

He emphasized that the three keys to the understanding of the power of the papacy lay in the concepts of sacramentalism, sacerdotalism, and the interdict. He characterized the first two in particular as instruments which served to put the people under the control of the hierarchy. Luther's reformatory efforts succeeded where others had failed, because he launched a theological attack upon these three walls of the Roman Catholic fortress.

His descriptions of papal corruption were vivid. For example, Innocent VIII was rightly called Father by the Roman people because he brought his eight boys and eight girls to Rome when he became pope. Leo X was identified as the author of the statement that the "Christ fable" had proved to be an effective device for raising unheard-of sums of money to be used primarily for papal enjoyment. People came to despise the papacy because the "luxury of the papal court grew beyond anything known in the past." When the necessary revenues decreased, new techniques for raising money were developed: "provisions; reservations; expectancies; commendations; annates; census; spolia; tithes; pallium dues; dues for appeals; indulgences and the Jubilee indulgence." These methods succeeded in relieving the financial stringency, but they at the same time "increased the degeneracy of the papal court and the bitterness and opposition in all lands." The Babylonian captivity destroyed

the prestige of the papacy, as also the later Crusades had done. The subserviency to France alienated other nations; the immorality of the clergy at all levels destroyed popular respect; the burden of taxes irritated the people; the refusal to return to Rome from Avignon, despite repeated promises, shattered the confidence of the people; the dissolution of the Knights Templars and the condemnation of the Spiritual Franciscans was highly unpopular. All these elements resulted in a universal clamor for reform.

He repeatedly emphasized that the real root of corruption in the Roman Church was doctrinal. At the basis of the problem, he insisted, was the almost complete absence of the doctrine of justification by faith, Luther's *sola fide*. In everything that he said in class and in everything that he wrote he was concerned to set forth the centrality of this doctrine. The proper understanding of history, of the church and ministry, of one's own role in life—all depended upon this basic teaching. (See, for example, his article "Through Justification unto Sanctification," CTM, XIII, 1942.) Luther's theological power, asserted Hoyer, began with the fact that he had "a thorough knowledge of his total inability to do anything good, an understanding which so many lack." The decadent scholasticism of the 15th century was also identified as a factor which resulted from a spiritually dead church and which contributed to its further uselessness.

With this background material carefully sketched, the student was ready to proceed to a discussion of the Renaissance. Hoyer began with Schaff's definition: ". . . a long intellectual and artistic process preparatory to that moral and religious renovation which we call the Reformation,

and to what we understand by modern, as distinct from medieval and ancient, civilization." To this he added his own comments to the effect that it began with the Crusades, that it led to "reformation, revolution, and rationalism," and that it has not yet ended. He characterized the Middle Ages as essentially a period of the subordination of every individual to some other person, while the keynote of the Renaissance was emancipation.

He cited James Harvey Robinson's interpretation of the Renaissance as a "questioning of authority, both heavenly and earthly." The Italian Renaissance was completely humanistic and resulted chiefly in raising the standards of education and in throwing off all moral restraints so that the old Adam was free to run wild. In Germany, Renaissance humanism spread the Bible among the people and in that sense was truly preparatory to the Reformation.

The Renaissance was furthered by the flow of scholars from Constantinople after its fall to the Turks and by the invention of the compass, gunpowder, paper, printing, and the telescope. Dr. Hoyer insisted that these inventions at this time were no accident but that the hand of God was clearly visible here. For example, gunpowder assured safety and peace on the highways by overthrowing the troublesome, warmongering knights. As a result the Reformation was enabled to spread widely. It took only four weeks for the Ninety-five Theses to reach Constantinople.

The Renaissance was preparatory to the Reformation only in a secondary degree. Renaissance movements by themselves would never have produced the Reformation. "The Renaissance alone, however, could not produce a true and permanent Reformation; it led to paganism in Italy

and to the Erasmian code of morality in Germany." But, humanly speaking, it would have been far more difficult, if not impossible, for Luther to reform the church if the new thought had not preceded the Reformation. It prepared the way for the Reformation in various ways:

1. The general standard of culture and education was raised.

2. A general intellectual revival resulted; thought was stimulated in a new direction.

3. Individualism was revived in opposition to the domination by the church.

4. Humanism, particularly in Germany and England, gave impetus to new study of the Bible and the church fathers in the original languages and produced new critical editions of both.

5. It revived the grammatico-historical interpretation of the Bible."

His presentation on the history of the Reformation in his two-semester senior elective showed Dr. Hoyer at his very best. In these lectures every important point was carefully worked through. Pertinent questions were asked and answered; proper sources were regularly introduced; both sides of the issues were investigated. A good grasp of Luther's theology was combined with a detailed knowledge of the political history of the period. He was abreast of most contemporary studies. He devoted one lecture to historical methodology and had words of special praise for Leopold von Ranke, whom he called the outstanding historian of the time, although he also cautioned that some of his views were one-sided.

In these lectures, as stated above, he regarded the Middle Ages as essentially a period of darkness preparatory to the

Reformation chiefly in that a "hunger for a sure way of salvation developed." He spent considerable time discussing pre-Reformers. "Luther is still to us the great Reformer, but now we are able to recognize that men worked before him and that he gave recognition and credit to their work."

He dated Luther's enlightenment between the time of his *Doctor in Biblia* degree in 1512 and his lectures on the Psalms in the summer of 1513. In the latter there was "good evidence that he had the new insight." Luther only gradually became aware of the radical change which had come into his own theology. By the time he lectured on Romans in 1515 he was apparently conscious of how far he had gone.

The influence of the mystics on Luther's development has been exaggerated, Dr. Hoyer maintained. They helped him by emphasizing that religion was a personal matter between man and his God. But the mystics saw sin only as imperfection and therefore were content to speak about communion between the creature and the Creator. In contrast, Luther was concerned in the *Heidelberg Disputations*, for example, about communion between sinful man and the righteous God. Through his study of Rom. 1:17 Luther came to the conviction that "the sinner is justified by faith through which the 'righteousness of God' (not the essential righteousness of God, which damns, nor the righteousness of life or sanctification, but the righteousness which avails before God, the righteousness earned by Christ) is imputed to him."

Hoyer called attention to the Leipzig Debate as the turning point in Luther's reformatory career. Previously Luther had

not completely crystallized his thinking on papal primacy. In preparing for the debate by careful historical research and in the debate itself Luther reached the conviction that both pope and councils could err and that therefore only the Scriptures could properly bind a man's conscience and demand unquestioning obedience from him.

No analysis of Hoyer on history should be concluded without commenting upon the aphorisms which he loved and which were the distillates of years of thought and study. Probably each of his students has preserved his own favorites, but pithy statements like the following are typical. "To quash a rebellion, you can do better than give them a martyr." "Revolutions are caused not by the poorest groups but by those who have had something taken away from them." "The Reform Council of Constance killed John Hus, the most effective reformer of the day." "Councils only attacked the fruit of the evil tree; they made no effort to attack the real root of the evil." "The Roman Catholic Church reformed herself at Trent, but chiefly in moral areas and only because she had already lost two thirds of Europe and was rapidly losing more." "Scholastic argumentation was like a squirrel running in a cage." "The object of scholastic education was not research or the discovery of truth but the inculcation of the already perfect teaching of the church." "The Inquisition at its height was the most satanic institution in history." "Those who make the rules in the Roman Catholic Church have

not yet disavowed the principle of using force to suppress heresies."

Sometimes the remarks were not immediately germane to the study of history but rather represented personal convictions of Dr. Hoyer. "Legislation cannot affect the vital law of supply and demand." "Communism in the real sense means the pooling of the results of labor, and it destroys all initiative. Socialism means the pooling of the sources of income and labor; it should work." "In religion the Bible marks the limit beyond which we dare not question. Rationalists disregarded this and questioned even the authority of the Bible."

Listening carefully again to Hoyer on history is a rewarding experience. It permits one to see a topnotch Lutheran interpreter of history at work. It permits one to see a careful historian whose faith and trust in the Lord of history was in no way diminished by some of the sad scenes through which he had to lead his students. It should make all of his students appreciative of his interpretations. But Dr. Hoyer would be extremely disappointed if he felt that he had trained a generation of men to stop thinking and worrying about history because he had reduced it to relatively neat patterns of *Kausalnexus* under God's providence in the Augustinian sense and in relationship to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He would much rather feel that he had instilled in his students the capacity of checking, challenging, questioning, and if necessary, reinterpreting Hoyer on history.

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