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THE ART OF LISTENING TO THE PAST: REFLECTIONS ON THEOLOGICAL HISTORY WRITING

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Abstract:
This essay ponders the ethos and premises of history writing with particular regard to the discipline of Systematic Theology. Taking inspiration from Hans Ruin's recent phenomenological study *Being with the Dead*, the first part reflects on the otherness of historical subjects. More specifically, it raises the question of how we, as modern scholars, relate to and represent historical thinkers and their ideas in a truthful way, that is, without either mystifying them or appropriating them for specific theological aims. The second part of the essay is concerned with our own subjectivity and how it is affected by our "being with the dead", including our dead intellectual peers. Focus is here placed on the moral responsibility that is attached to history writing, especially in a time when efforts are continuously being made to exploit memories of a common Christian past for various ideological purposes.

Key Words:
Systematic Theology, history writing, Hans Ruin, Rowan Williams, otherness of historical subjects, moral responsibility.

Last summer a neighbour and long-time villager came by and gave us an old photograph of our house. The picture must have been about a century old and the veranda looked different, but the old brickhouse displayed in the photo was unmistakably our beloved country home. In front of the house, the then residents had lined up: a mother and a father, two little children, two maids and what seemed to be a farmhand.

I was reminded of the photograph again while reading Hans Ruin's recent study *Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness* (2018). The book is a thoughtful philosophical reflection on the ontological as well as ethical dimensions of the fact that we live, as humans, not only with the living but also with the dead. We live in places that bear the traces of those who once lived there. We entertain gardens laid out by people now long gone, knowing that some of the trees and plants will remain in place also when we are no longer there. I often reflect on that when I look at the beautiful old ash tree in the midst of our garden, or when every spring I cut our timeworn rose bushes.

We also, of course, live with the dead in more distinct ways. We live with the memories of our loved ones who are no longer with us, we tell stories of who they were, and we keep pictures of their faces. And yet we tend to restrict the extent to which we allow the dead to be part of our lives. Already the expression "no longer with us" betrays this inclination in a paradoxical way, because the very fact that we speak of our loved ones as "no longer with us" reveals that in a significant sense they still are with us. And to be sure, we do want our loved ones to remain with us; no longer being able to recall the face or the voice of a lost friend or family member can be an extremely painful experience. But it seems that we somehow want the dead to be there on *our* terms. We don't like disturbing memories, just as we don't like our lives to be unsettled by unexpected episodes from the past. However, it is precisely this desire on the part of the living to reduce the dead to what *we* want them to be (or not) that Ruin wishes to challenge:

> There is a need to resist the temptation of objectifying the lives of the dead as the political, cultural, or spiritual property of the living, just as there is a need to move beyond an unreflective awe before their shadowlike being and demand. Seen from the perspective of the present, the dead are pitiable, always weaker

> than the living whose blood their shadows need in order to be heard. But from the perspective of the dead and the dying, the living are just short, flickering lights waiting to take their place among them in the temporality of *having-been*.[1]

There are two aspects that I would like to emphasize in this dense paragraph. The first concerns the nature of our relationship to the dead, and more specifically, the question of how to respect the otherness of historical subjects. As Ruin indicates, there are two temptations in this regard: either to undermine the alterity of the dead by making them too familiar, or to undermine their alterity by mystifying them. The second aspect concerns our own subjectivity and how it is affected by our "being with the dead". Living with the dead, among other things, reminds us of the transient nature of our lives. Although this can be a source of existential distress, it may also be a source of an enhanced sense of life, as the twentieth-century existentialist philosophers were keen to emphasize. However, as other thinkers in this tradition were equally keen to stress, recognizing our own mortality is not primarily about obtaining a heightened sense of life as a good in itself. It is also about my ethical relation to future generations of human as well as non-human life. Knowing that we are just transient guests on this earth invites us to reflect on how our agency here and now may affect the yet unborn, those who will one day look back at us as those who are no longer there.

In this essay, I shall approach the topic of "listening to the past" from these two perspectives. While Ruin has a broader philosophical approach, ranging – as his subtitle indicates – from reflection on burial practices to the question of historical consciousness, my own approach will be narrower, focusing on the writing of history within theology. In particular, I wish to reflect on the capacity and sometimes lacking capacity to listen to the past within my own discipline, which is that of systematic theology.

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[1] Hans Ruin, *Being with the Dead: Burial, Ancestral Politics, and the Roots of Historical Consciousness*, Stanford: Stanford University Press 2018, 14.

Respecting the Otherness of the Past

"Christianity is not one of the great things of history: it is history which is one of the great things of Christianity."[2] Henri de Lubac's famous remark wittingly captures the fact that Christian theology, from the moment of its birth, was intricately interlaced with history writing. From the author of Luke and the Acts of the Apostles up to Eusebius, early Christian theologians relied significantly on theological readings of history in order to constitute what eventually became the Christian tradition. The other side of this coin – which de Lubac is also hinting at – is that early Christian history writing, in its turn, would leave a decisive imprint upon Western conceptions of history in general. While the latter aspect is a topic far too vast to be approached in this essay,[3] I want to linger for a moment on theology's significant reliance on history writing. This certainly did not end with the early Christian theologians. On the contrary, theologians in all times have elaborated their arguments by means of historical claims. Fredrich Schleiermacher, arguably the greatest of the early modern theologians, even went so far as to claim that it is through the contemplation of history that we come to know the inner essence of religion:

> History, in the most proper sense, is the highest object of religion. Religion begins and ends with history – for in religion's eyes prophecy is also history, and the two are not to be distinguished from each other – and at all times all true history has first had a religious purpose and proceeded from religious ideas.[4]

To be sure, all academic disciplines – especially within the humanities – to some extent rely on history. When philosophers introduce new students into their discipline they usually tell a story that begins with the pre-Socratic thinkers and then runs through Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas,

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[2] Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, trans. P. Simon and S. Kreilkamp, San Francisco: Ignatius Press 1987, 145.

[3] I address this topic in my study *Divining History: Prophetism, Messianism and the Development of the Spirit*, trans. S. Donovan, London and New York: Berghahn Books 2016.

[4] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, 2nd edn, ed. and trans. R. Crouter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996, 42 (my modification of the translation).

Descartes, Kant and Hegel all the way up to contemporary philosophers who, in no small degree, continue to elaborate their own thinking in close dialogue with the canonical figures just mentioned. If you choose instead to study anthropology, you are likely to be introduced to a story about the horrendous acts of the early anthropologists, how they were blinded by the colonial ideals of the time, and how today we know better. History, in this case, not only serves the purpose of defining who we are and where we come from as scholars, but also who we don't want to be and in what direction our discipline should be heading.

However, while it is true that all academic disciplines to a greater or lesser extent rely on history, I want to maintain that theology has a very specific relation to the construction of the past. Hence Schleiermacher and de Lubac were both right in pointing to the symbiotic relationship between history and Christianity. Like Judaism and Islam, Christianity is founded on the idea of a God who reveals himself in history and who continues to act in history, and the traditional role of the theologian has been to interpret the pattern of these actions. Some theologians have gone quite far in this endeavour. One may here think of the twelfth-century Calabrian abbot Joachim of Fiore, famous for his daring charting of the various phases of God's revelation throughout history. Although Joachim was careful not to present himself as someone who had come to impart a new revelation – an interpretation that would be ascribed to his texts by later commentators – he elaborated a complex hermeneutical theory that served to expound the inner connectedness between God's acting as depicted in the Bible, on the one hand, and events in the later history of the church, on the other.[5]

In modern times, beginning with Schleiermacher, theologians have taken a more modest approach to their task. Few theologians today would claim to have "God's revelation" as the object of their study and would rather define their task as studying what innumerable humans throughout history have experienced and interpreted as God's revelation. But that still leaves theology and theologians intimately tied to history, since the main access to such experiences and interpretations are the imprints left by devout persons throughout history in the form of hymns, prayers, diaries, letters and theological meditations or treatises.

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[5] I offer an extensive reading of Joachim's theology of history in Svenungsson, *Divining History*, 35–63.

Returning now to Hans Ruin's concept of "being with the dead", this intense relation between theology and history means that theologians live with the dead in their own very specific way. Just as we as humans live with our near and dear ones who are no longer with us, so we live as scholars with our dead peers. We learn from them, we are inspired by them, sometimes we disagree with them, and sometimes we are deeply disappointed, as for instance when some new biographical details emerge that reveal less flattering aspects of our intellectual heroes.

So, what does it mean to live with our dead thinkers, or rather, what *should* it mean? For one thing, it means that there is a moral dimension to the writing of history, that is, to the way in which we relate to our dead peers. Rowan Williams captures this aptly in his 2005 essay *Why Study the Past?*, a work from which I have taken a great deal of inspiration, not only for this essay but also for my academic work in general, both as a scholar and a teacher: "the figures the historian deals with are not modern people in fancy dress; they have to be listened to as they are, and not judged or dismissed – or claimed and enrolled as supporters – too rapidly."[6] Dealing with people in the past, Williams suggests, is a matter of striking a sound balance between difference and sameness. On the one hand, we need to recognize the irreducible otherness of historical subjects – they are not just earlier versions of ourselves in fancy dress. On the other hand, we need to assume that human feelings and motivations do not change so fundamentally over history that we cannot imagine at least in part what people experienced, believed or hoped for in earlier ages. The point to bear in mind, as Williams remarks later in the same paragraph, is therefore that "the risk of not acknowledging the strangeness of the past is as great as that of treating it as purely and simply a foreign country".[7]

What about systematic theologians' capacity to listen to the past in relation to these two risks or temptations? As a hypothesis, one may assume that "liberal" or "progressive" theologies would be more prone to the first temptation, whereas "conservative" or "traditionalist" theologies would be more prone to the second.[8] My own suggestion, however, would be that few systematic theologians today suffer from the temptation to make the past too foreign a country. The general temptation among progressive as well as traditionalist theologians – and I include myself in this critical reflection – is rather to appropriate selected parts of history for their own theological purposes. I am thereby not insinuating that systematic theologians intentionally abuse or manipulate history. What I am suggesting, recalling Williams' words, is merely that theologians are sometimes a bit too eager to "judge and dismiss" or to "claim and enrol" historical key figures for the sake their own intellectual objectives. To be generous to my own guild, I think this eagerness has to do with the fact that systematic theology is a discipline that is driven by strong visions and ideals. As a colleague from a neighbouring discipline once remarked at a conference: "Systematic theologians always want to sell something, don't they?".

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[6] Rowan Williams, *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church*, London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd 2005, 10–11.

[7] Williams, *Why Study the Past*, 11.

Indeed, they do. From Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theological denunciation of Nazism via the many factions of liberation theology during the second half of the twentieth century and up to contemporary eco-theologians' radical criticism of our consumerist society, theologians usually have greater ambitions than merely describing Christian dogma. This ambition is certainly not unique to systematic theology but something it has in common with most disciplines engaged in analysing ongoing social, political and cultural processes. In fact, most scholars within most disciplines do more than merely offer descriptions of their material. Political scientists use texts of Plato, Hobbes or Hegel to argue for one approach to state governance rather than another, and moral philosophers draw on Aristotle, Kant or Nietzsche in their theorizing about what constitutes a good human life.

The problem with some of these disciplines is that while they necessarily draw on historical sources, their scholars are not always equipped with the critical skills of the historian (in-depth knowledge of the specific historical context of a source, access to original languages, training in archive research, etc.). Hence the risk of ending up in what both Ruin and Williams in similar ways describe as the temptation to appropriate the past – historical key figures or episodes – for the sake of specific cultural or intellectual motives. To indicate the kind of endeavours I have in mind as regards contemporary theology, let me very briefly point to three influential examples from recent decades.

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[8] I insist on placing these attributes within scare quotes, since they generally tend to simplify rather than clarify the complexity of the contemporary theological landscape.

The first is the role assigned to Duns Scotus among theologians who during the past twenty-five years have been aligned with the Radical Orthodoxy movement. When John Milbank set out to elaborate a comprehensive theological critique of modern secularity in his landmark study *Theology and Social Theory* (1992), he identified Duns Scotus and late medieval nominalism as the point in history where theology went fatally wrong. In contrast, his own theological enterprise was an attempt to recover an Augustinian-Thomist vision for a postsecular era, thereby indicating that there was a finer and more pristine era before theology successively became tarnished by secular reason.[9] As the years have passed, Milbank's account of the origins of modernity has become something of a foundational myth within significant factions of theology, with few commentators ever challenging its idiosyncratic portrait of Duns Scotus as the progenitor of secular reason.[10]

A second example is the equally forceful trope of the Constantinian shift as the moment in history when the deformation of true Christianity set in. This trope has been particularly popular among theologians hailing from low-church backgrounds, but also more generally among theologians who rightly wish to challenge the politicization of Christianity in the context of modern national churches. For instance, the late Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder did a fascinating work in showing the links between an early "free church" vision of Christianity and diaspora Judaism before the "constantinization" of the church set in.[11] And yet there are questions to be raised about the monumental significance ascribed to the Constantinian shift in some contemporary theologies, including the extent to which a particular set of post-reformation quandaries are being projected back upon late antiquity.[12]

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[9] See John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell 2006 (1992); see also John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock and Graham Ward (eds), *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, London: Routledge 1999, and Philip Blond, "Introduction: Theology before Philosophy", in idem, *Post-Secular Philosophy: Between Philosophy and Theology*, London: Routledge 1998, 1–66.

[10] A significant exception is Daniel P. Horan, *Postmodernity and Univocity: A Critical Account of Radical Orthodoxy and John Duns Scotus*, Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2014. Horan's book was the subject of a symposium at *Syndicate* in December 2017, featuring both Horan and Milbank: https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/postmodernity-and-univocity/ (accessed 14 July 2020). Worthy of mention in this context is also Wolfgang Hübener, "Die Nominalismus Legende: Über das Mißverhältnis zwischen Dichtung und Wahrheit in der Deutung der Wirkungsgeschichte des Ockhamismus", in Bolz, N.-W. and Hübener, W. (eds), *Spiegel und Gleichnis: Festschrift für Jacob Taubes*, Würzburg: Königshausen-Neumann 1983, 87–111. Hübener's essay was written in response to Hans Blumenberg's classical study *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1966), which – albeit with opposite aims – presented a genealogy of the modern era with clear parallels to that of Milbank.

My third example is one used by Williams himself: the tendency by some feminist theologians to buttress visions of a non-sexist church with historical claims about the original egalitarianism of the early Jesus movement. These claims are usually inspired by the significant work that has been carried out by both historians and biblical scholars to explore the status of women in the early church. Worthy of mention in this context is especially Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, who in her long scholarly career has combined exegetical skills with a strong feminist theological pathos.[13] However, while the significance of her pioneering research to subsequent feminist theology cannot be overestimated, there is nonetheless a tendency in her systematic theological work to picture a golden age of inclusiveness and egalitarianism which was subsequently overthrown by the emerging patriarchal church.[14]

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[11] Among the many works in which Yoder deals with this topic, see notably *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press 1984; *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, London: SCM 2003; *Christian Attitudes to War, Peace, and Revolution*, Grand Rapids: Brazos Press 2009.

[12] The most comprehensive critique to date of this perspective is offered by the historian Peter J. Leithart in *Defending Constantine: The Twilight of an Empire and the Dawn of Christendom*, Downers Grove: IVP Academic 2010. Leithart was in his turn challenged by an array of scholars loyal to the theology of Yoder in John D. Roth (ed.), *Constantine Revisited: Leithart, Yoder, and the Constantinian Debate*, Eugene: Pickwick Publications 2013.

[13] See especially her classic study *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York: Crossroad 1983, but also *Discipleship of Equals: A Critical Feminist Ekklēsia-logy of Liberation*, London: SCM Press 1993.

At this point, I want to make clear that I am not arguing *against* any of these theological endeavours. On the contrary, I chose these three examples because they all offer valuable theological perspectives. Hence, there are good reasons to scrutinize monolithic constructions of secular rationality, especially in light of the effects such constructions tend to have in multicultural contexts.[15] Similarly, we need to keep an eye on unhealthy forms of nationalist politicization of religion, a point to which I shall come back in the second part of this essay. Last but not least, the process of coming to terms with patriarchal structures in both theology and the church is far from being completed. However, these theological tasks could all be pursued without succumbing to what Williams aptly describes as "the temptation to look for a period of Christian history in which the ordinary ambiguities or corruptions of human history have not obscured the truth of the gospel"[16] – be it in the form of a harmonious medieval synthesis (Milbank), a pre-Constantinian "free" church (Yoder), or an original community of equals (Schüssler Fiorenza). To respect the otherness of the past, in this perspective, is also to be prepared to hear voices that we do not want to hear, voices that challenge our preconceptions about the past and thereby threaten to unsettle our historical identities.

History Writing and Moral Responsibility

This brings me back to the second part of the paragraph by Hans Ruin quoted in the introduction, and more specifically to the question of how our own subjectivity is affected by our "being with the dead". Ruin's philosophical meditation on this question is situated within a phenomenological-hermeneutical tradition, and those who are versed in this tradition will already have recognized Martin Heidegger's *Mitsein mit dem Toten* in the English words "being with the dead". This expression was first coined by Heidegger in *Being and Time* in a section where he deals with how *Dasein* – human existence – responds to the death of the other.[17] Throughout his study, Ruin elaborates this theme in close dialogue with later thinkers within the same philosophical tradition, notably Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. Unfortunately, the limited scope of this essay does not allow me to do justice to Ruin's compound argument, and I shall have to content myself with briefly touching upon one particular aspect: the shift in focus between Heidegger and Levinas with regard to the death of the other.

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[14] Critique of this argument has been launched by e.g. Kathleen E. Corley, *Women and the Historical Jesus: Feminist Myths of Christian Origins*, Santa Rosa: Polebridge 2002, and John H. Elliott, "Jesus Was Not an Egalitarian: A Critique of an Anachronistic and Idealist Theory", *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, 23:2 (2002), 75–91. The critique has been countered by e.g. Mary Ann Beavis, "Christian Origins, Egalitarianism, and Utopia", *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, 23:2 (2007), 27–49.

[15] I address this topic more extensively in "The Return of Religion or the End of Religion? On the Need to Rethink Religion as a Category of Social and Political Life", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 46:7 (2020), 785–809. DOI: 10.1177/0191453719896384.

[16] Williams, *Why Study the Past*, 102.

Although Heidegger dedicates some space in *Being and Time* to how the death of the other affects our being, his main interest lies in how the individual existence is affected by its own mortality. In this respect, Heidegger's reflections echo the long Western tradition of *memento mori* – the art of enhancing the quality our finite existence by acquiring a philosophically mature relation to our own mortality. However, as already indicated, this notion of authentic finitude as approachable primarily from the perspective of individual mortality has been challenged, especially by Levinas, who contrary to Heidegger argued that it is the death of the other – our near and dear ones – that truly reveals our finitude. When we lose a friend or family member, our entire existence is shaken in a way that profoundly affects who we ultimately are. But the experience of loss does not merely throw us into despair. Living with the memory of our lost loved ones moves us out of ordinary time into the time of the past and thereby invites us to participate in a shared finitude which also implies a shared responsibility between the dead, the living and the yet unborn.[18]

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[17] See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Staumbaugh, Albany: SUNY Press 2010, 238.

[18] Ruin, *Being with the Dead*, 20–21. Part of the originality of Ruin's contribution to this debate lies in his argument that there is – Levinas's critique notwithstanding – still a potential for a more compound reading of Heidegger's approach to mortality, which takes into account his reflections on historicity as constituted by an existential confrontation with the present pastness of the dead ancestors.

Taking my inspiration from these phenomenological reflections, I wish to apply them, once more, to the specific question of history writing in theology. If "being with the dead" is constitutive of our very identity in a way that implies a moral responsibility for the dead as well as the yet unborn, what does this line of thought entail when transferred to our scholarly identities? More specifically, what does it mean that we, as scholars, are constituted by our past, by our relation to thinkers who are long gone but who nevertheless continue to live in us, in our thoughts, in our writing, and in our teaching? Recalling an earlier point, it means among other things that we recognize the extent to which history writing serves to construe and uphold our scholarly identities. In Williams's words: "We don't have a 'grid' for history; we construct it when we want to resolve certain problems about who we are now. We use narratives to define a subject – a person, a country, a process or practice – as something that exists and persists through time."[19]

The fact that we relate and listen to the past in order to better understand who we are explains our uneasiness with episodes or facts that challenge our representation of a particular past. This is what I referred to a moment ago as the voices we don't want to hear, because they risk unsettling our identity in relation to, for instance, a particular theological or confessional tradition. Confronted with such disturbing voices, one common impulse is to recognize their presence but simultaneously dismiss them as deviations of the true core or essence of the tradition with which we identify. An opposite impulse is to end up in a wholesale rejection of the tradition in question because of its awkward or problematic aspects. As an example, both these tendencies were clearly present in the struggle to handle the ambivalence of the Lutheran legacy – including Luther's writings about the Jews and the Peasants' War – during the Reformation Jubilee in 2016 and 2017. Despite many excellent initiatives of dealing with this complex past, much of the public debate was polarized between those who hailed Luther as a forerunner of liberal and democratic ideals, and those who instead depicted him primarily as a betrayer of any truly liberating ideals. In both cases, there was a tendency to foreground and accentuate certain aspects of the past, whereas other aspects were toned down or ignored. By contrast, I want to argue that the art of listening to the past is precisely about owning up to our chequered past, which means to assume this past in all its complexity as part of our own identity. Applied to the example of Lutheranism or Lutheran theology, this means that Luther's hatred of the Jews remains part and parcel of the Lutheran tradition to which I belong. As such, it cannot simply be rejected as an unfortunate deviation of this tradition, nor does it afford me to reject the Lutheran tradition wholesale. Rather, it gives me a special responsibility for this particular past.[20]

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[19] Williams, *Why Study the Past*, 5.

This brings me back to the moral aspect of history writing in general and theological history writing in particular. While representation of the past is always and inevitably selective, we currently live in a time when efforts to deliberately adjust or manipulate collective memory in order to promote particular ideological agendas are on the rise.[21] Such efforts will certainly not diminish as the technological means for mobilizing selective memory continue to evolve. Of particular concern for theologians in this context are the nationalist claims that are today being laid to a purportedly common Christian past of the European continent. While most bluntly articulated by nationalist parties in Eastern Europe, variations of such claims can be found in most right-wing populist parties across the continent, as well as in a growing number of conservative parties.[22]

The problem – and danger – with such memory politics is threefold. First, it is problematic in relation to the past itself. In placing emphasis on the harmonious aspects of Europe's Christian history while deliber-

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[20] A good example of what such scholarly responsibility might look like is Elisabeth Gerle's recent endeavour to do justice to the complexity of the Lutheran legacy in *Passionate Embrace: Luther on Love, Body, and Sensual Presence*, trans. S. Donovan, Eugene: Wipf and Stock 2017.

[21] See Barbara Törnquist-Plewa and Ingrid Rasch (eds), *Minne och manipulation: Om det kollektiva minnets praktiker*, Lund: CFE Conference Papers Series No. 6 2013.

[22] There is a rapidly growing literature on these tendencies; see e.g. Per-Erik Nilsson, "'Shame on the Church of Sweden': Radical Nationalism and the Appropriation of Christianity in Contemporary Sweden", *Critical Research on Religion* (forthcoming as DOI: 10.1177/2050303219900252); Jakob Schwörer and Xavier Romero-Vidal, "Radical Right Populism and Religion: Mapping Parties' Religious Communication in Western Europe", *Religion, State & Society*, 48:1 (2020), 4–21; Hannah Strømmen and Ulrich Schmiedel, *The Claim to Christianity: Responding to the Far Right*, London: SCM Press 2020.

ately directing focus away from its repressive episodes, it fails to do justice not only to the complexity of the past but also to Christianity's many victims in medieval as well as in modern Europe. Second, such memory politics is pernicious because it invokes a past that appeals to the imagination and memory of certain segments of the population at the expense of others (this is, of course, a deliberate strategy, the aim of which is to convey a message of who belongs and who does not belong in contemporary Europe). Third and finally, this deliberately selective account of Europe's past is problematic in relation to the future. As I have argued elsewhere, there is a close relation between memory politics and the ways in which we are able to conceive of the future.[23] More precisely, as populist policy makers are well aware, selective and simplifying constructions of the past tend to breed exclusive and excluding visions of our future societies.

This cultural situation has given new urgency to the question of theological history writing. As a consequence of declining religious literacy, there is a fading critical knowledge of the Christian inheritance among average Europeans. This also means that fewer and fewer people have the education to question the arbitrariness with which representations of the Christian past are brought into play by nationalist actors. In this context, theologians and church historians – as experts on the Christian tradition – have a special responsibility to point to the complexity of our collective past and to challenge interpretations that are deliberately brought forth with a view to excluding groups and individuals from a shared European cultural identity. Bearing in mind my earlier discussion on respecting the otherness of the past, this critical responsibility certainly does not allow scholars to cover up or obscure the more problematic aspects of Christian history. However, it does allow them to question and criticize particular uses of the past in light of the harmful effects certain ideas and doctrines have had and may have in the church as well as in the broader culture. Carrying a tradition forward in a responsible and generous way is thus a matter of doing justice both to the subjects of the past and those of the future.

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[23] Jayne Svenungsson, "Whose Justice? Which Future?", in J.-I. Lindén (ed.), *To Understand What is Happening* (forthcoming).

To summarize my argument, I have suggested that history writing in theology – as all history writing – is ultimately about what Ruin describes as a "shared responsibility over generations", words that echo not only Levinas but also the famous saying, commonly traced to Edmund Burke, that "history is a pact between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn". Or, to offer my own metaphor inspired by the photograph mentioned at the outset: good history writing is like cultivating an old garden, which means respecting and entertaining the work laid down by generations that have gone before us in a way that gently and carefully prepares it for those who will come after us.