

HISTORY AS MORAL AND POLITICAL ART

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Recently I've been reading Thomas Albert Howard's impressive *Protestant Theology and the Making of the Modern German University*. That title may sound dry as dust [or a lot drier], but for the person who has been at home in the academic world for more than two-thirds of his life, Howard's book is a real page-turner.

Critical to the new research universities was the ideal of *Wissenschaft*, an almost untranslatable German word that is roughly equivalent to 'objective, critical knowledge.' Over the course of the nineteenth century all fields of inquiry had to conform to this ideal and if they could not, the new model university questioned their right to participate in its life. During this period, the study of history emerged from the old traditional faculty labeled 'philosophy.' The great German scholar, Leopold von Ranke, gave the modern academic discipline of history much of its character, conforming it to the canon of objective, critical, "science-like" knowledge.

Earlier in my career, I largely agreed with von Ranke's model of history, but as I read after Jaroslav Pelikan, Stanley Hauerwas, John Howard Yoder, and Alisdair MacIntyre my ideas about history and its uses departed from von Ranke's nineteenth-century Enlightenment based ideal. I think that ideal is correct, but not without qualification. I quite heartily consent to the importance and practice of modern, critical history, the home of which quite properly is the university; indeed part of my work as a historian tries to measure up to that ideal. But I also part company with that ideal in two respects. In the first place, I think it is important to ask where and when ideas about anything, certainly a powerful notion like *Wissenschaft*, originate and become popular. The idea of 'reason,' for example was variously defined in Athens during the fourth century B.C., Paris in the thirteenth century, or Berlin in the nineteenth.

By the same token, *where* knowledge is pursued shapes definitions of knowledge. Universities give knowledge a theoretical cast because theoretical, critical thinking is the heart of the university enterprise. Recently, universities have come under sharp criticism whether they are as capable of *Wissenschaft* as they have claimed, but that is another matter. Here I wish simply to state that I do not think university knowledge is the only kind worth pursuing. Neither do I find very attractive the correlative notion of a disinterested search for knowledge, as if the search was its own reward.

Older than the idea of objective critical knowledge is the notion of knowledge as wisdom. In subordinating *Wissenschaft* to wisdom is my second point of departure from modern ideas about history. Medieval and early modern universities agreed in placing wisdom above all else, but nineteenth-century reformers ruled it out of universities and replaced it with *Wissenschaft*. But if wisdom is no longer comfortable in the modern university (there are schools where it continues to hold a preeminent position), certainly it should still be at home in the church.

And this brings me to the study of history. In the church, history can quite properly be conceived as a moral and political art. It is not so much in method as in end that history in the church differs from the university. The end or aim of history in the church is moral. That is, it contributes to the formation of the church's character. And since the church is a body composed of many members, history is also political. That is, it is a crucial aspect of being together. The church lives by remembering. If one thinks of history as a moral and political art, the Church of God Historical Society should be understood as more significant than merely a group gathered about a shared antiquarian interest, or the church's 'history club.' The work of the Society, from the Archives to publications to the interest and commitment of each member, contributes to the character and the way of being together of the Church of God in the present and into the future.

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