

CSCH Presidential Address 1997

**History as Identity: Subjectivity, Religion,  
and the Historical Profession**

WILLIAM KATERBERG

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[Everything] ceases to live when it has been dissected completely and lives painfully and becomes sick once one begins to practise historical dissection on it. (Friedrich Nietzsche)<sup>1</sup>

Relativism and subjectivity are like the skin disease eczema, the historian Oscar Handlin once remarked. They are not fatal, but rather annoying, chronic itches best ignored. They only get worse when scratched.<sup>2</sup>

Modern assumptions about objectivity – that reliable knowledge comes from factual evidence and reason – define this medical comparison. Ideally, history is a science, it implies. At worst, the subjective nature of history writing – that evidence is fragmentary and needs to be interpreted – is a matter of bias. As much as they can historians should overcome self-interest, blindspots, and political loyalties, and be honest and objective. At best, subjectivity is a potential opportunity. Scholars with new interests and loyalties, fresh ideas and different points of view can take history writing in innovative, exciting directions. Historians not only have learned to live with the subjectivity itch, this later attitude suggests, but many have also begun to enjoy the occasional scratch.

The acknowledgment, even endorsement, of subjectivity in history writing is a sign of “postmodern” thought and culture, a shift from the

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assumptions of “old-fashioned” modernist history. On the “cutting edge,” so-called postmodern scholars have rejected science and objectivity and championed history writing as interpretation, aesthetics, and politics. Yet I wonder. Despite accepting the relativity of historical knowledge – indeed, all knowledge – despite adopting subjectivity, the question still nags at most of us. *Is it true?* At very least, which perspective is closest to the truth? Few historians would throw out the obligations of evidence and honesty; few would reduce history to fiction (though they might concede that the line between fiction and history is blurred); and no historian worth his or her professional salt would do away with book reviews and Ph.D. thesis defences. To be accepted as trustworthy and of value scholarship must pass the scrutiny of peer review. So I wonder. How far beyond modernity’s rules and practices have we come?<sup>3</sup>

Historians still do research in good fact-finding fashion. Within reason, we track down sources, avoid misquoting, put things in context, and question our interpretations. History is a “soft science,” but we make it as solid as we can. In our spare time we may scratch the itch – reading cultural theory and philosophy of history – and try to decide whether subjectivity is annoying or pleasant. The question remains. *Where are we as a profession?*

What can I say today that goes beyond a banal rehearsal of subjectivity in religious history writing? Is it bias and bad? Perspective and good? A bit of both? Is subjectivity liberating? Or will the objective truth of facts set us free? Scholars have been dealing with these questions for most of this century. Much has been said since, but Carl Becker’s “Everyman His Own Historian” still asks most of the right questions.<sup>4</sup> In 1932, he wrote, “All historical writing, even the most honest, is unconsciously subjective, since every age is bound, in spite of itself, to make the dead perform whatever tricks it finds necessary for its own peace of mind.” The same can be said of individuals and groups. What has changed today is that subjectivity is much more self-conscious and generally recognized.<sup>5</sup> But the same questions continue to set the terms of debate. Is it true? Or, more modestly, which perspective is most true?

To navigate the time-worn but tangled paths of the subjectivity question, I propose that we look at history as identity. This approach is not arbitrary. In Maine this past year, students fresh from high school confronted me directly with history as identity. They spoke and wrote about America’s past personally, using the first-person plural “we,” not the

properly academic third person “he,” “she” or “they.” Despite my best efforts to shake them of such irresponsible habits and subvert their cherished national myths, most left History 103 with the same paradigm that they held entering it. They might agree that American history is full of oppression, tragedy and irony, but most continued to insist that it is a story of progress. Progress requires adversity, they said, using social Darwinism to fit my historical criticism into nationalist myth.<sup>6</sup> Myth clearly trumped academic history. As one student put it in a splendid slip, “Progress requires *advertising*.” I was fighting an uphill battle. One collegiate course in history was not enough to subvert the “myth-historical” power of a national identity.

And should academic history undermine myth? Americans consume the past in great quantities – with the History Channel, A & E, on-line, in popular books and magazines, at Civil War re-enactments, historic sites, and more. Yet most people find academic history irrelevant and boring. One of the grandfathers of postmodern thought, Friedrich Nietzsche, remarked in an essay on history that little of the past survives “the systematic torture of historical criticism.”<sup>7</sup> Non-academics agree, implicitly.

In *Lingua Franca*, a hip journal on academic life in America, reports about battles between the American Academy of Religion and the newer National American Association for the Study of Religion reminded me of the same issues. Do “non-believers” and “believers” approach the study of religion in fundamentally different ways? How do their identities compare? Which is primary? That of believer, agnostic or atheist? That of intellectual, scholar and scientist? Which should be primary? Or do religious and academic identities not have to be mutually exclusive? As my American history students had done, the AAR/NAASR debate raised questions about myth, belief and academic attitudes toward religion.<sup>8</sup> It dramatized the links between subjectivity, history and identity.

This address, taking some brief examples from North American religious history writing, will look at several issues. First, what is identity? Second, in what sense is history about identity? And third, what are the implications of viewing history as identity for the scholarship that we do?

### ***Defining Identity***

Concern about identity has been ubiquitous for the past decade or so in the media, politics, advertising, fiction and popular non-fiction. So in the academy. Feminist scholarship, child psychology, studies of ethnicity and race relations, debates about citizenship, modernity, consumerism and postmodernity – all have looked at the ways that communities, institutions, cultures and people identify themselves or are identified by the powers that be. Depending on what you read, identity is about oppression, false consciousness and liberation. For some people it offers almost mystical connections to the past; for others it is a cunning creation of institutions and groups seeking legitimacy and hegemony. Defining identity is like trying to nail Jello to a wall, all but impossible.<sup>9</sup>

One way to begin thinking about identities is with the kinds of questions they attempt to answer for people, individually and collectively: *Where are we?* Questions about the past, how people have come to the time and place they live. *Who are we?* Presentist questions about purpose, the nature and task of people, groups, and institutions. *What is wrong?* What impedes progress towards the goals people set, what confuses their sense of where and who they are. *What is the remedy?* Future-oriented questions about how to find a path from present day brokenness and dilemmas to future consummation.<sup>10</sup> Defined like this, identity becomes all-encompassing, incorporating history, memory, experience, psychology, ideology, and hope. It is a search for transcendence, a religious pilgrimage. This gives a clue as to why it is a preoccupation of scholars from so many fields.

A fundamental debate has been whether the drive to find an identity is a peculiarly modern obsession or an inherent human need. Sceptics rightly point out that the term's popularity is recent, a product of the post-World War II era. Liberal and socialist scholars often have dismissed identity politics – whether in religious conflict, cultural battles, nativism, nationalism, race relations or ethnic community building – as irrational, personal and private.<sup>11</sup> Business cycles, social class and material needs are rational matters and thus properly public. But, as psychologists like Jacques Lacan have pointed out, the problem of identity is one of the first that every human being encounters as infant.

The newly born child, having left the warmth and security of the womb with no language and conceptual tools, confronts the new world as

a stranger. In the evolving relationship between an infant and its parents, the child slowly moves from experiencing “otherness” and difference, a sense of “I” versus “you,” to an experience of togetherness, a sense of “we.” This tie can be broken, of course, or never fully develop, but the social process of raising a family typically creates bonds of identity between parents, children and siblings. This process is rooted in social experience and language. In families and neighbourhoods, at work, through institutions like churches and schools, in popular culture and the media, people learn and assimilate a variety of “I-You” and “Us-Them” identities. Identities may conflict or be inter-related; some have greater consequence than others; and they may simply be “nested,” held together only by the personal and social experiences of a particular individual or group.<sup>12</sup>

As this suggests, identity is inherent and relational. It is inherent in the need from infancy to depend on others for material necessities, emotional support and a secure sense of place in a world of countless knowns and unknowns. It is relational, as a product of experience and social interaction that teaches the instinct of identifying the known and trusted with “us” and the unknown and dangerous with “them.” It takes form in culture, language, politics, ideology and provides names and categories for “us” and “them,” such as citizen, stranger, alien, Christian, heathen, black, woman, gay, educated, employee, boss. People claim some identities for themselves; they identify others; others identify them; and, sometimes people identify *with* others. Sometimes “we” recognize something of ourselves in “them.” Communities and institutions such as churches, nations and states use these needs and processes of identity formation to help create and legitimize themselves. Identity thus is shaped by power and social structures.

Even so, these needs and social processes, and use of them, all centre around those basic questions: *Where are we? Who are we? What is wrong? And, What is the remedy?* History and cultural memory provide people’s stories and so help to answer these questions. But one more question should be added. *Who are they?* This question is of a different order than the other four, as it is inherent in each of them, an ever-present mirror. Identity is about both inclusion and exclusion, both remembering and forgetting. Furthermore, non-recognition and mis-recognition can be damaging and oppressive. People need their stories, need to tell them, and need others to listen and acknowledge them.<sup>13</sup>

The question *Who are they?* implies that identity is relational, about both difference and sameness. This is crucial for understanding how identity became a problem in the modern era. In premodern times, many scholars argue, identity could be taken for granted. People lived in cultures with social, economic and political hierarchies that they deemed natural or God-given. Though the term itself was not used, identity was a matter of descent, something people were born into (man or woman; peasant, merchant or noble; civilized or barbarian). While this may be true, it does not mean that within these assumptions identities were not fluid. People could convert to Christianity or join Christendom by conquest, for example. Jews remained profoundly ambivalent in the Christian imagination, neither quite heathen nor Christian. And merchants sometimes could purchase should be addedth nobility to their children. Because people did not view themselves as autonomous, rational individuals, in the modern sense, because identity was rooted in the gods, in customs, the laws of feudalism and assumptions of place, the fluidity of particular cultures was contained. For good or ill, accepting or disgruntled, in the midst of change, people knew that they and others belonged somewhere, even if the particulars of where they belonged and who they belonged to changed, even if they resisted a particular culture seeking hegemony.<sup>14</sup>

Assumptions about the naturalness of belonging disintegrated in the modern era. Though identity continued to be considered necessary, intellectuals and politicians began to recognize that particular identities had to be constructed. Belonging and place had to be made and chosen.<sup>15</sup> The fragmentation of western Christendom with the Reformation, the emergence of nation-states, and the rise of democratic ideals undermined the seemingly natural and God-given nature of the premodern identities that had shaped Europe. The modern individual emerged, with a conscious, reflexive sense of self, rational and autonomous, free-floating like an atom in a larger rank and bequeay became ambiguity and chaos, something to be feared. And a new, unique, and typically modern project emerged, to combat ambiguity. Rather than the natural, God-given, and often fluid boundaries of the past, modernizers sought stable, strict, constructed, predictable identities.<sup>16</sup>

Identity thus became a problem, how to construct what no longer could be assumed, and a source of liberty, a matter of personal and public choice. People had to choose whether to be Roman Catholic or some variety of Protestant. In society, people on the make could reinvent

themselves, succeeding as middle-class entrepreneurs or failing as labourers. In the realm of nations and politics – as revolutions in England, America and France swept away feudal hierarchies during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – society came to depend on the will of individuals, their choices and social contracts. In effect, identity became a personal quest and a public concern. Nationalism and democracy became crucial modes of state and social legitimation. And unprecedented migration – by people in search of work, land or freedom – forced nation-states and their residents to deal with definitions of citizenship and the dilemmas of immigrants, refugees, aliens, and strangers.<sup>17</sup>

A matter of choice, identity could not be isolated from politics, society, the marketplace or material culture. For example, the construction of identity in nationalism and the contest for souls during the Reformation could not have happened without the printing press, which allowed for standardized languages and the rapid spread of new ideas and propaganda. Identity, I have said, is both inherent and relational.<sup>18</sup> We are born into some identities; we learn, choose and sometimes make others for ourselves in the marketplace and politics. These choices are private and public. In early modern England, for example, becoming Anglican, Roman Catholic or dissenting Protestant also meant legitimating or challenging the regime. People had the freedom and burden of finding personal identities because cultural boundaries no longer were natural and God-given. The personal was always political. Identity should not be reduced to social control or legitimation, but in the modern era of state building could not be separated from it either. Institutions and communities needed stable identities too.

In our postmodern or “late modern” time the locus of identity has shifted again, from the state to the marketplace. For multicultural societies such as Canada and the United States, identity has become much less a matter of descent, as in premodern times, or legitimation.<sup>19</sup> The modern project of constructing personal and public identities did not result in stability but fragmentation, a multiplicity of competing, overlapping, fluid, loosely-related ethnic, cultural, sexual, religious, class and civic identities. If the modern ideal was the autonomous self, able to construct or choose an identity, the postmodern self is a conditioned, fractured, volatile, multi-layered persona. The public meaning of identity is less and less centred around legitimation of nation-state regimes and more and more located in the marketplace, in a vast carnival of personalized commodities bought and sold. Even postmodern identity politics focuses more on consumption –

lobbying the state for rights, public money and services – than on shaping unified civic and national cultures. Postmodern identity thus is not a return to premodern fluidity within boundaries, but a new fluidity without any assumptions, structures, rules or boundaries, except perhaps the marketplace.

One scholar has remarked with acerbic wit that proof of existence today is not the autonomous and modern “I think therefore I am,” but the postmodern “I am noticed therefore I am.” People tend to reject stable boundaries, communities and institutions in favour of personal statements and casual expression of the commodified and inter-changeable identities of the multicultural shopping mall. In other words, people want identities without consequences, without restraints or responsibilities, other than purchasing power.<sup>20</sup>

Still relational, though now in the consumer marketplace, still inherent, though now a flight from permanence more than an anxious search for stability, identity has been reduced, or elevated, to the fundamental right of individual choice. Unlike our premodern ancestors, we are not born into the communities and hierarchies in which we live and die. Unlike the modern era, identity no longer legitimates regimes and locks us into social contracts.<sup>21</sup> Communities and institutions today rarely have or need ties that bind, other than non-compulsory individual associations. The nation-state’s significance is reduced, though not gone.<sup>22</sup> A series of metaphors makes the point. In the premodern world, identity was natural and God-ordained; in the modern era, it was constructed from concrete and steel by nation-states; in our postmodern day, it is made of biodegradable plastic, sold in shopping malls, and put on interactive display at Disneyland.<sup>23</sup>

### ***History as Identity***

Through all of these changes in the character, meaning and purpose of identity, what has been the role of such “keepers of the past” as historians? In oral cultures in the premodern west and non-western societies some record of the past often was kept in material form, visually or in officially-written chronicles. But culture was also shaped and communicated orally, stored in the memories of prophets, bards, druids, medicine men and soothsayers. Official keepers of the past, and ordinary folk too, transmitted their stories – their identities – from generation to



generation through song, myth and legend. Have historians, have we, carried on this tradition in the modern and postmodern eras? In some ways yes. There are close connections between modern scholars, universities and the state.<sup>24</sup> Historians have helped to shape, critique, and legitimate nations, states and other kinds of communities and institutions. Nevertheless, the ideal of the historian as an objective scientist, above the passions and interests of the crowd, has separated scholars from non-academic “lay” audiences. Unlike bards, arguably, modern historians often have isolated themselves from the society around them, in the concrete halls and offices of academia. If this is so, what is it that historians do with the past? What roles do they play in society? And how do they identify themselves?

When modern historians began to define and organize their profession in the late-nineteenth century, they usually thought in scientific terms and spoke of “reconstructing” the past. Already in the 1920s and 1930s, however, historians such as R.G. Collingwood, in *The Idea of History*, were rejecting the notion that history is a science based on collecting evidence and reconstructing a narrative from it. Collingwood claimed that historians “reimagine” the past.<sup>25</sup> The past itself is gone, he pointed out, leaving behind only a “fossil” record. Only by using their imaginations, by creatively mixing something of themselves with that record, can historians breathe tenuous life into the past. Even then, it is not the past brought back to life, but a mix of present imagining and past record. A useful metaphor to describe this process, doing justice to both the collection of evidence and the subjective process of reimagining, is “translation.”<sup>26</sup>

Translators start with a text, something objective, but translations seldom are literalistic. Literal, word for word rendering in another language typically cannot do justice to the imagery and rhythm of the original.<sup>27</sup> A word play in French often will have no direct English equivalent. An image such as the “Lamb of God” or “shepherd” will have no meaning to people who have never tended domesticated animals. Translations in some sense are new creations, themselves works of art and imagination. They must be “faithful” (itself a subjective notion) to the original text, but also reach out to people who speak different languages and have distinct cultural references. Not surprisingly, translations themselves can acquire great authority (e.g., the reverence for the King James Bible expressed by some fundamentalists and cultural conservatives). As with poems, novels and religious texts, history writing – that is, the telling of stories about the past to people living in other times and

places – is a process of cultural translation.

A powerful example of historical-cultural translation is the “Huron Carol.” It tells the Christmas story in a way that the French Jesuit missionary Jean de Brébeuf hoped seventeenth-century natives might identify: “Twas in the moon of wintertime/When all the birds had fled/That mighty Gitchi-Manitou/Sent angel choirs instead.” In place of shepherds the song has “hunter braves”; rather than swaddling cloths in a manger it has a “ragged robe of rabbit skin”; and playing the role of the wise men are “chiefs from afar” with gifts of fox and beaver skin. Most startlingly, and likely controversially in 1643, instead of God the Father the song speaks of the “mighty Gitchi-Manitou.”<sup>28</sup>

Another useful example, more academic and formally historical in the modern sense, is the retelling of the evangelical story in North America since the 1960s and 1970s by historians such as George Marsden, Nancy Hardesty, George Rawlyk, Edith Blumhofer, Mark Noll and Nathan Hatch. Self-consciously coming out of various evangelical traditions, these scholars wrote for both the historical profession and their own religious communities. They explored the place of their religious traditions in North American society, hoping to address both present-day problems and the challenges of the future for their co-religionists. They also hoped to help the larger historical profession better understand evangelical Christianity, by taking advantage of their intuitive, insider knowledge as self-identified evangelicals. In so doing, they translated the past both for scholars and for their religious communities.<sup>29</sup>

Though a very different person, and writing for a different audience, much the same can be said of Perry Miller’s rehabilitation of Puritanism and Jonathan Edwards for mid-twentieth century agnostics. Miller took seemingly esoteric Calvinist theology and religious debates and made them sensible, even compelling. In his imagination, the Puritans lived in a world of awesome cosmic beauty, human suffering and divine providence. With rich intellect and piety, the Puritans rigorously and profoundly confronted the mysteries and tragedies of life. Miller felt that twentieth-century American intellectuals paled in comparison, fooling themselves with sentiment and naive progressive self-confidence. His Puritans were existentialists, his Jonathan Edwards the last medieval and the first modern man, an eighteenth-century Jean-Paul Sartre. A colleague thus depicted Miller as a believing agnostic. Miller saw himself as a literary artist and interpreter whose task was to make the obscure past visible and give it a

voice in twentieth-century America. Failure by historians to “get underneath concepts,” he argued, left history little more than “a mail-order catalogue” of details.<sup>30</sup>

As Miller suggested, a mere scientific reconstruction of the past, like a literal translation of a psalm or poem, would be no more moving than a department store catalogue – with no life, unable to speak to anyone. For people to identify with the past, it must speak to them in terms that they can understand and that have meaning for them. While history writing should not violate the past, like a translation should not violate the original text, it is inevitably creative and subjective because it is a meeting place, a melding of past and present. People find much of their identity in the past – however narrow or broad, personal or communal – but only if they can connect with it. History writing, like identity formation, like translation, is product of relationships. The spirit in which it is done is at least as important as the brute recovery of facts.<sup>31</sup>

This is an ideal. Historians are translators of the past, for themselves, their communities and institutions, in all their rich variety of identities, from nations, classes, religious communities, genders, ethnic and racial groups, to professional intellectual elites. History as translation, as identity, can bestow near mystical significance on the past and on what historians do.

Why then do historical monographs not sell? Why are historians not held in high esteem like the storytellers of the past? Questions like these suggest that the heart of the subjectivity dilemma is not *Is it true?* Or which story is true? If history writing is a process of cultural translation – neither meaninglessly objective nor completely relative, but rather identity-forming and relational – then the most crucial subjectivity question is *Whose stories and truths are being heard?* Whose identities do historians help to form? And, for whom do historians, for whom do we, translate the past? The heart of the matter is questions of voice.<sup>32</sup>

Voice is crucial because academic historians act as “gatekeepers” to the past as well as “keepers” of the past. In Nietzschean fashion, Michel Foucault once observed that there is no “Truth,” only “regimes of truth,” with “ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation and operation of statements.” Remembering and forgetting is a process, one rooted in social relations and power. Because of relativity and subjectivity scholars cannot reconstruct the “Truth” about the past. But through their profession – its graduate programs, historical societies,

funding agencies, university presses, the tenure process and technical jargon – they can exercise significant control over access to the past. Society’s designated experts can legitimate, condemn and suppress stories of the past. Like academics in the other disciplines, in practice historians exercise a kind of “legislative” role in society.<sup>33</sup>

Not a product of malevolence or some conspiracy, this power results from connections during the modern era between universities, the professionalization process, and the evolution of society and the state. Ironically, society today no longer needs academics as it once did. The state has been built and now is being “downsized.” And scholars have become critics of the state (as well as a financial burden to it). Yet the identities of academics, as academics, and the practice of their profession remain defined in modern terms. The historiographic revolution of the 1960s made it almost impossible to write master narratives of the Canadian or American past. With the explosion of topics and methods, from women’s history, to class and race, to religious history, and much more, there simply was too much complexity and too many stories. As Peter Novick quipped in his study of the American historical profession, “there was no king in Israel.”<sup>34</sup>

There was no king or queen left in the historical profession by the 1970s, but “bureaucrats” with designated sub-topical portfolios survived. History from the “ground up” meant that the lives of ordinary people, once ignored in the nationalist “colony to nation” narratives, could be reclaimed. Women explored their past, immigrants and their descendants did ethnic history, and evangelicals and catholics wrote their religious histories. African Americans, natives, and other minorities did so too.<sup>35</sup> What history from the ground up did not mean was that history writing would be comprehensible or compelling to non-academics, at least not very often. History from the ground up was written “of” and about “the people” but seldom “for” them or “by” them. It is easy and often unfair to pick on scholars, as journalists and politicians regularly do, but there is some truth to the stereotype of the “tenured radical.” Insurgent historians too, many of them at least, become professional academics. As a result, and in short, the professional “medium” all too often has become the historical “message.”<sup>36</sup>

Ironically, though rejecting the “master” nationalist narratives of earlier generations of scholars, and though trying to recover the identities of ordinary people by writing their histories, historians continue to

reinforce one master identity, that of the professional scholar. The problem is not one of intent or historical content but academic form and professional structure. Three words may well summarize the dilemma, even if a little too simply: “Publish or perish.” Whatever an idealistic historian’s goals – and recognizing the worth of peer review, the tenure process and professional standards – the discipline of history and academia in general subtly shape an identity. The results have not been all bad. Far from it. The research and writing of recent decades has made scholarly understanding of the past, religious and otherwise, much deeper and richer than modernist. The influence of professional historians on non-academic, “lay” audiences remains narrow. The state has less and less use for historians. Historical articles and monographs rarely enter the marketplace of culture, secular or religious. Grants and fellowships mean that historians do not need to reach non-academic markets, in effect ensuring that most scholarship does not. Furthermore, in good modernist fashion, most scholars see themselves as de-mystifiers, as historical critics, rather than as bards or poets addressing public identities and narratives.<sup>37</sup>

Even postmodern scholars, in good modernist fashion, tend to see themselves as de-mystifiers. Postmodern *isms and methods* usually are anti-narrative. Along these lines, the prominent French postmodernist, Jean-François Lyotard, has said, “Simplifying in the extreme, I define the postmodern as incredulity toward metanarratives.” The arcane jargon of most postmodern scholarship reinforces the elitist character of academia and rejects story-telling, whether local or “meta” narratives. But postmodern *culture*, especially popular culture on television and in movies and books, is profoundly narrative oriented. Many of these stories are desperately religious. Non-academics perhaps recognize something that scholars have forgotten. Furthermore, and ironically, postmodernism assumes and tells its own story, the death of narratives.<sup>38</sup>

These are harsh and impertinent judgements perhaps. My point is not to denigrate individual scholars or their work. Most of us admit the inevitability of subjectivity and relativism in our scholarship; some of us self-consciously work within postmodern frames of reference. But the structure of our profession, the institutions that socially, politically, and materially shape our work, are still modernist. This essay thus is a call to move beyond individual intellectual recognition of such issues and towards sustained critical reflection on and change of the structures of academic intellectual life. This is essential because those structures inevitably shape

our scholarship. More immediately, it is imperative because many academic institutions are suffering from an obvious financial crisis and a waning sense of purpose. Departments find themselves unable to replace retiring faculty; libraries cannot afford to buy books and journals; scholars, academic societies and university presses compete for ever-thinner and hard to acquire grants and fellowships; and cost-cutting politicians, administrators and scholars too often wonder about the purpose of the humanities and social sciences. Modernist and older religious visions of truth are gone or at least under suspicion, and the legitimizing functions of the university are less and less relevant. The public space of academia thus has been shaken.

This is not all bad. A crisis can be an opportunity. As the Canadian poet and singer Leonard Cohen has said: “There is a crack in everything/That’s how the light gets in.”<sup>39</sup> The cracks may be more obvious, but there is some evidence of light. For example, the CSCH has members from history and religious studies programs, from seminaries, “lay” people and clergy – a rich mix of professional academics and non-academic intellectuals.

### ***Implications***

History writing is in part, large part, about identity formation. Even critical, self-consciously demythologizing scholarship promotes an identity, if only that of the scientific-minded, illusion-free, critical, objective scholar. The intellectual above the crowd. In that sense, all historical scholarship is about myth-making as well as myth-subverting. William McNeill once observed that one scholar’s “history” is “myth” for another.<sup>40</sup> If so, then the boundaries that academic historians often draw between history, propaganda, statements of belief and fiction blur. There is a growing pluralism of topics and methods in academia today, but at some level most scholarship still reflects the modernist canons of the past. Scholarship needs to admit and recognize a greater plurality of “criteria of knowledge.”<sup>41</sup> Two examples from religious history point this way.

In a recent study of the Dene people of northern Canada, *Drum Songs*, Kerry Abel tried to deal seriously with both Dene accounts of their origins in North America and anthropological analysis. Ethno-historians contend that the first ancestors of North America’s native peoples arrived some 14,000 years ago. The archaeological record suggests that the first

settlers of regions historically occupied by the Dene arrived about 2,000 to 3,000 years ago. Abel also treats Dene legends as a historical source. These stories, about “When the earth was new,” speak of magic and giants and dwarfs and a great flood. The Dene did not migrate to North America, their stories insist, they were created here.<sup>42</sup> The difference is not one of antiquarian interest or academic debate but fundamental spiritual identity for the Dene, a people who consider themselves part of the land. Their gods created them here; they always were here, from the time “when the earth was new.” Will people recognize and remember their stories? Similar questions can be raised about archaeological digs of grave sites. To whom do the graves belong? To whom does the past belong? Who has the right to dig up and root around in the past and subject it to historical criticism? There are no easy answers. Pluralism is not only about topics and methods, but metaphysics and spirituality. Can different kinds of knowledge find a place in the academy? Is the past sacred territory?

Similar questions apply to the history of Christianity. In a post-modern climate, if we truly consider truth relative and scholarship subjective, should we take seriously accounts of revivals that cite the work of the Holy Spirit? Should Jonathan Edwards’s *Some Thoughts concerning the present Revival of Religion in New-England* and *A History of the Work of Redemption*, or a twentieth-century equivalent, be put alongside Paul Johnson’s *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium* and Nathan Hatch’s *The Democratization of American Christianity*?<sup>43</sup> Should scholars today who think and write like Edwards be given a hearing during meetings of the history and religious studies organizations of the Canadian Congress of Learned Societies? Whose identities should be privileged? Can pluralism extend to “criteria of knowledge”?

These are not questions of truth but power and voice. They get to the heart of the university’s place and the academy’s purpose. Is scholarship best set apart in ivory towers and academic publishing networks? Or should it take place, along with other kinds of remembering, in the hurly burly of shop floors, union halls, women’s shelters, ethnic associations and church sanctuaries?

No narrative can be complete or total, though some pretend to be. To be comprehensible and have structure and meaning, narratives must both include and exclude. This is the fundamental, enduring insight of post-modern thought. If all knowledge is socially constructed, then like any system of thought metanarratives are “particular moral visions dressed up

in the guise of universality.” As Brian Walsh and Richard Middleton explain in *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, by “falsely claiming universality while being blind to their own constructed character, metanarratives inevitably privilege unity, homogeneity and closure over difference, heterogeneity, otherness and openness.” This leads to a second problem, that “metanarratives are inevitably oppressive and violent in their false claims to ‘totality.’”<sup>44</sup> More simply, but fairly, people or institutions that claim to see the big picture cannot help but try to impose their views on others. As individuals, most academics no longer claim to master the big picture; indeed, they often promote intellectual specialization, fragmentation and pluralism. But as a social, political and material structure the academic world still tends to homogenize. The challenge can be stated most clearly by asking which criteria of knowledge, which stories, have a voice in the academy in today? Which will have a place in the future?

In religious history writing, what relationships should be fostered between various communities of scholars, academic and church institutions, and individual believers, agnostics and atheists? Is the separation of institutions more of a strength or a weakness? Separation may contain divisiveness and bad manners; it may also inhibit creative scholarship; it clearly reflects a struggle for power, as George Marsden argued in *The Soul of the American University* (1994).<sup>45</sup> This point brings us back to the debate between the American Academy of Religion and the National American Association for the Study of Religion. Can the methods and metaphysics of various intellectuals be respected? Can people with conflicting “criteria of knowledge” speak to each other in creative, comprehensible ways? Can they at least listen with civility? And what are the limits of pluralism?

### **Conclusion**

In his reflections *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, Friedrich Nietzsche observed that history writing, like personal and cultural memory, is a process of remembering and forgetting. Historians build monuments to the past and through historical criticism tear them down. We are creators and destroyers; the question is not whether we create and destroy, but what and whom. Nietzsche portrayed the burden of history writing powerfully:



History, so far as it serves life, serves an unhistorical power. While so subordinated it will and ought never, therefore, become a pure science like, say, mathematics. But the question to what degree life requires the service of history at all is one of the highest questions and concerns affecting the health of a man, a people, a culture. For with a certain excess of history, life crumbles and degenerates, and finally, because of this degeneration, history itself degenerates as well.<sup>46</sup>

History writing thus is a mystical, even religious endeavour, a search for transcendence. Natalie Zemon Davis made this point when describing her passion for social history. “I want to show how different the past was,” she said.

I want to show that even when times were hard, people found ways to cope with what was happening and maybe resist it. I want people today to be able to connect with the past by looking at the tragedies and the sufferings of the past, the cruelties and the hatefulness, the hope of the past, the love people had, and the beating that they had. They sought for power over each other, but they helped each other too. They did things both out of love and fear – that’s my message. Especially I want to show that it could be different, that it was different; there are alternatives.<sup>47</sup>

Deconstruction, cliometrics, and other forms of historical criticism are tools. The purpose is encourage people, “lay” people and academics alike, to establish a relationship, an identity, with the past. Historians should be careful lest the means subvert the end.

“Every living thing,” Nietzsche wisely observed, “needs to surround-ed by an atmosphere, a mysterious circle of mist: if one robs it of this veil, if one condemns a religion, an art, a genius to orbit as a star without an atmosphere: then one should not wonder about its rapidly becoming withered, hard and barren. That is how it is with all things great indeed, ‘which without some madness ne’er succeed.’”<sup>48</sup> True of religion, true of identity, the same is true of the writing of history.

### ***Endnotes***

1. *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, trans. Peter Pruess (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980), 40.

2. The simile is Oscar Handlin's, from the 1950s (see Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 410-411). Novick's study touches on postmodern issues, but focuses on modernist notions of objectivity and history as a science. Relativity and subjectivism are not the same, but are part of an inter-related dilemma.
3. Modernity continues to define postmodern debates in academia today (see Zygmunt Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence* [Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991], 231-79). Postmodern can accurately be described as "late" modern.
4. A presidential address to the American Historical Association, the essay appeared in the *American Historical Review* 37 (1932): 221-236.
5. The quote is from Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1932), 44. The argument is similar to "Everyman His Own Historian." Another change in the language of subjectivity is greater attention to groups. Becker called his essay "Everyman His Own Historian," while Novick's *That Noble Dream* has a chapter on recent scholarship called "Every group its own historian."
6. My impressions come from final exams, which asked students to reflect on American history from European contact to Reconstruction. Is American history a story of progress, tragedy, or ambivalence?
7. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life*, 40. On people's dislike of the academic history, see James Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1995). Loewen indicts school teachers for feeding students bland nationalist myth. University academics usually are anti-nationalist and intellectually rigorous, but they might be charged for using obscure jargon, trading narrative for analysis, etc. In my limited experience, even history majors often find academic studies of the past tedious. Their devotion to the past survives despite history programs. Only a small minority join the literati of grad school.
8. See Charlotte Allen, "Is Nothing Sacred?" *Lingua Franca* (November 1996). For a few letters to the editor in response, see the February 1997 issue.
9. I can only begin to cite the literature: Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in Fragments* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995); Madan Sarup, *Post-Structuralism and Post-modernism*, 2nd ed. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993), and *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1996); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 1991); Cynthia Enloe, *Ethnic Conflict and Political Development* (Boston:

Little Brown, 1973); Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers* (New York: Penguin, 1985); Charles Taylor, *Multiculturalism and "The Politics of Recognition"* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992); Werner Sollers, *Beyond Ethnicity* (New York: Oxford, 1986); Philip Gleason, *Speaking of Diversity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1992); John Higham, *Send These to Me*, 2nd. ed. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1984); W. Brueggemann, *Abiding Astonishment: Psalms, Modernity, and the Making of History* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991); and, Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988). For more material, see Katerberg, "The Irony of Identity," *American Quarterly* 47 (1995): 493-524.

10. See J. Richard Middleton and Brian J. Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be: Biblical Faith in a Postmodern Age* (Downer's Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1995), chapter 1.
11. I have commented further on this in "The Irony of Identity."
12. On childhood, language and identity, see the work of Jacques Lacan. For a brief but helpful introduction, see Sarup, *Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*, chapter 1.
13. My point is to avoid reductionism, making identity a mere tool and product of people, groups and institutions that have power. The Foucaultian question of how identity has been conceptualized and used historically does not go far enough. Metaphysical questions – "What is identity?" and "Is it an inherent need?" – also must be asked. Identity can not be separated from questions of power, social process and legitimation, nor reduced to them. The search for identity has its own dynamics, partially independent but never autonomous from politics and social structures (see Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace* [Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996]).
14. See Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*.
15. There is ambiguity here, as modern attitudes towards identity could be framed in terms of both "creation" and "discovery." By intellectuals, I mean the narrow sense of scholars and thinkers and the broader Gramscian "organic intellectuals," purveyors of culture and ideology – doctors, lawyers, clergy, academics, teachers, political leaders, experts, journalists, literati, etc. (see Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith, eds., *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci* [New York: International Publishers, 1971]; and, T.J. Jackson Lears, "The Concept of Cultural Hegemony," *American Historical Review* 90 [1985], 567-93).

16. See Anderson, *Imagined Communities*; Katerberg, "The Irony of Identity"; Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*; and, Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1989).
17. Categorizing people was fundamental to modernity, both as an intellectual task and a social-political program. Zygmunt Bauman has used the metaphor of "gardening" to describe modernity, the pulling and destroying of weeds and the carefully planned cultivation of flowers and edible plants. The violence and power associated with identity formation are no accident. The Holocaust and Nazism stemmed from the logic of modernity rather than departed from it. As a science and policy, racism was a particularly modern phenomenon, not a premodern, irrational throwback (Bauman, *Modernity and Ambivalence*, and *Life in Fragments*).
18. This point needs to be kept in mind. The literature focuses on how identities are constructed and used to legitimate a society, nation, or regime, but neglects the human need for an identity. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983) is a good example. As correctives, see Taylor, *Multiculturalism* and Sarup, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*.
19. I mean, historically, in cultural terms: premodern (to 1500), early modern (1500-1750), modern (1750-1950), postmodern or late modern (1950-near future).
20. For the analogy, see Bauman, *Life in Fragments*. On the commodification of identity, think of religion--in place of authoritative religious communities you can find religious apparel, weekend seminars, crystals, bumper stickers, mega-churches and tapes. This is not uniquely postmodern, and indeed is rooted in modern developments, but it is characteristic of postmodernity (again, the postmodern is "late modern") (see Laurence Moore, *Selling God* [New York: Oxford, 1995]; and Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995]).
21. This is a somewhat bold generalization. Identities in the western world still do play a legitimizing role, but less and less so. In the United States, for example, less than half of voters typically vote in elections. People today are defined less by being good or bad citizens and more by being good or bad consumers (i.e., spending significant amounts of money in the marketplace or not). In politics, public debate and civic participation are less important than consumption of rights through courts, interest groups and lobbies. See Bauman, *Life in Fragments*, and Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld* (New York: Ballantine, 1996) on the decline of democracy and the reduction of citizenship to consumer rights. Also note David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*

- (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990), and Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Democracy on Trial* (Concord, ON: Anansi, 1993).
22. See Barber, *Jihad vs. McWorld*; Sarup, *Identity*; and Bauman, *Life in Fragments*.
  23. The second two parts of the metaphor are from Bauman, *Life in Fragments*.
  24. On scholars and the modern state, see Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity* (New York: Routledge, 1992).
  25. R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993, 1946), 231-249, 282-302.
  26. My use of “translation” is from Andrew Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1996). He argues that the key to the spread and variety of Christianity is a process of cultural translation. Bauman, in *Intimations of Postmodernity*, uses the term “interpretation” in a similar way.
  27. On translation, see “Breakthrough Books--Literature,” *Lingua Franca* (February 1997): 18-19.
  28. This quote is an English version of the song, from the 1918 Canadian Anglican *Book of Common Prayer and Common Praise*.
  29. See Leonard Sweet, “Wise as Serpents, Innocent as Doves: The New Evangelical Historiography,” *Journal of the Academy of American Religion* 56 (Fall 1988), 397-416; and, Douglas Sweeney, “The Essential Evangelicalism Debate,” *Church History* 60 (1991), 70-84. The best example of this scholarship is Mark Noll’s *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). On women and religion, see David G. Hackett, “Gender and Religion in American Culture, 1870-1930,” *Religion and American Culture* 5 (Summer 1995): 127-51.
  30. Quoted in James H. Moorhead, “Perry Miller’s Jeremiad Against Nineteenth-Century Protestantism,” *South Atlantic Quarterly* 86:3 (1987), 312-326. On Miller, see Robert Calhoun, “Perry Miller,” *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, ed. Clyde N. Wilson (Detroit: Gale Research Co., 1983), 17: 272-285.
  31. More examples could be given. Nancy Hardesty’s recovery of the history of evangelical women in leadership roles spoke to contemporary women fighting for leadership in churches and illuminated the religious roots of feminism for many secular women’s studies scholars. Religious practice and scholarly debates over goddess worship and the existence of pre-historical matriarchal societies is another example (see Marci McDonald, “Is God a Woman?”

*Maclean's*, 8 April 1996, 46-51).

32. In *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, The AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), Marita Sturken distinguished “personal memory” (rooted in individual experience), “cultural memory” (shaped by popular and political culture), and “history” (professional, academic accounts of the past). Sturken argued that formal history writing has a limited impact on personal and cultural memory. Why this is so is at issue for me. We should not idealize the bards and storytellers of the past, making memory and identity *then* wholly unproblematic or uncontested. But academic historians in the modern and postmodern eras, as keepers of the past, do seem uniquely separate from the “lay” audiences they presumably would like to influence. On recognition and oppression see Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 19; and, Taylor, *Multiculturalism*.
33. This role is not uncontested by amateur history buffs and writers, the popular media, the state, etc. On scholars as “legislators,” see Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon, 1970), 38; and “Truth and Power,” Paul Rabinow, ed., *The Foucault Reader* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), 74. Generally on this theme, see Bauman, *Intimations of Postmodernity*. On whether the internet and easier access to archival sources makes this less true today, see Michael O’Malley and Roy Rosenweig, “Brave New World or Blind Alley? American History on the World Wide Web,” *Journal of American History* 84 (1997): 132-155.
34. Novick, *That Noble Dream*, chapter 16.
35. On the explosion of religious history, see Jay Dolan, “New Directions in Catholic History,” in *New Dimensions in Religious History*, eds. Jay Dolan and James P. Wind (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 152-174; R.L. Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (New York: Oxford, 1986); Jon Butler, “The Future of American Religious History,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 42 (1985): 167-183; and Mark Noll, “Christianity and Canada: Good Books at Last,” *Fides et Historia* 23 (1991): 80-104.
36. This is not new. Already during the 1930s, historians complained that they spoke and no one listened (see Novick, *That Noble Dream*, chapter 7). Not all historians can be painted with the same brush, of course. Women’s history, for example, often is closely connected to political movements. Whether scholars are connected to the majority of non-academic and non-politicized women is another issue. Some religious historians, too, may reach non-academic audiences, for example, clergy. The generalization stands, I think. In gnostic fashion, most academic history is written for fellow illuminati –

student “initiates” and professorial “priests.” To be fair, note that non-academics and politicians also often reject historical scholarship because it challenges contemporary historical orthodoxies. But many academic heresies do exist in splendid isolation from “lay” people.

37. See John Higham, “History in the Culture Wars,” *OAH Newsletter* 25, No. 2 (May 1997): 1, 4. Arguably, this trend is similar in form to the fine arts, notably visual arts, which have become self-referential, losing and even self-consciously rejecting a broad public audience.
38. These are big generalizations, based on my impressions of academia and popular culture in North America. Lyotard is quoted in Middleton and Walsh, *Truth Is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, 70. On religion and popular culture, see “God and Television,” *TV Guide* (US version), 29 March-4 April, 1997.
39. Cohen, “Anthem,” *The Future* (Sony CD, 1992).
40. William McNeill, “Mythistory, or Truth, History, and Historians,” *Mythistory and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 3-22. The essay is also in the *American Historical Review* (February 1986). It was an AHA Presidential Address.
41. The phrase is Bauman’s (see *Intimations of Postmodernity* and *Life in Fragments*). I mean plurality of epistemologies and even metaphysics.
42. Abel, *Drum Songs: Glimpses of Dene History* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1993), chapter 1.
43. Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts* (Boston, 1742), and *A History of the Work of Redemption* (Edinburgh, 1774); Paul Johnson, *A Shopkeeper’s Millennium* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978); Nathan Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale, 1989).
44. Middleton & Walsh, *Truth is Stranger Than It Used to Be*, 70-71. Note also Sarup, *An Introductory Guide*.
45. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). Note also his new book, *The Outrageous Idea of Christian Scholarship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).
46. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage*, 14. Most scholars read Nietzsche as having contempt for history; I read him in a somewhat more ambiguous fashion, as both having contempt for it and longing for a meaningful past.
47. Davis, quoted in Alvin Finkel, et al, *History of the Canadian Peoples* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman, 1993), 2: xxi.

48. Nietzsche, *On the Advantage*, 40.