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**GOD'S JOUST, GOD'S JUSTICE:  
Confessions of a Christian Historian**

John Witte, Jr.

**Abstract**

*A brief argument that that a Christian theory of history is built on the idea that time has a pattern, that history has a purpose, and that life has an end of reconciliation.*

**Keywords:** Dresden, *Frauenkirche*, Augustine, Martin Luther, time, the end of history

*"History is God's theatre, ... God's jousting place."*

Martin Luther

*"All things are ruled and governed by the one God as He pleases, but if God's motives are hid, are they therefore unjust?"*

St. Augustine

In the spring of 1995, I visited the great Saxon capital of Dresden. I stood on the banks of the Elbe River at the site of the *Frauenkirche*--the monumental domed church, consecrated in 1734, graced by one of Johann Sebastian Bach's greatest organ concerts in 1736, and celebrated in German music, art, and literature ever since.

It was a sobering moment. For the great church lay in ruins. A guide explained that the church did not survive the fire bombing of Dresden near the end of World War II. On February 13 and 14, 1945, 773 Allied bombers emptied their payloads on Dresden. No bombs hit the church directly. But the fires were enough. First the art, the woodwork, the pulpit, the organ, and the altars were consumed. As the fires penetrated more deeply, scores of people hidden in the church's catacombs were burned to death. Eventually, the intense heat of the fires weakened the church so much that it simply collapsed under its own weight. Large chunks of the dome, charred and cracked, still lay where they had fallen some fifty years before. A large piece of the steeple still protruded from the ground at a grim angle. Only one wall of the nave still stood, its top jagged and pocked where the roof had torn away.

It was also an exhilarating moment. For stretching out from the wall of the nave in all directions were hundreds of rows of scaffolds, where workers were storing the 10,000 odd pieces of stone that had been collected from the rubble of the fallen church. The Frauenkirche, the guide informed me, would be reconstructed, using as many of the original stones as possible. A giant blueprint assigned each of the recovered stones to its original place in the structure. New stones were being collected from the same quarry that had been mined for the original construction. A massive outpouring of charity had made this reconstruction possible.

I have often given thanks for that brief moment on the banks of the Elbe River. For this small frame captured several themes that are at the center of my life--as a Christian believer and as a legal historian.

The story of the Dresden church is a metaphor of life. Construction, destruction, and reconstruction. Work, judgment, and purgation. Birth, death, and resurrection. Creation, fall, and redemption. These are the stages of life. These are the passages of faith. The old must pass away so that the new may come forth. We must die so that we can be reborn. Our bodies must be buried so that they can be resurrected. Our works must be burned so that they can be purified. Our bonds must be broken so that we can be reconciled. This is the nature of biblical religion. It gives life its power. It gives pain its purpose. It gives time its pattern.

These basic biblical themes--that time has a pattern, that history has a purpose, that life has an end of reconciliation--inform my understanding of history. The Bible teaches that time is linear, not cyclical. Biblical history moves forward from a sin-trampled garden to a golden city, from a fallen world to a perfect end-time. Our lives move, circuitously but inevitably, toward a reconciliation with God, neighbor, and self--if not in this life, then in the life to come; if not with the true God, then with a false god; if not in the company of heaven, then in the crowds of hell.

Human history cannot be fully understood without reference to this divine mystery. God is beyond time, yet has chosen to reveal a part of himself within it. Through the creation and incarnation, God pours out a measure of his being and grace. Through the law and Gospel, God sets forth a measure of his word and will. Through miracles and messengers, God puts forth a measure of divine power and judgment. All of history, in Martin Luther's words, is "a demonstration, recollection, and sign of divine action and judgment, how God upholds, rules, obstructs, rewards, punishes, and honors the world, especially the human world." We are within time, yet we are able in part to transcend it. Through our conscience and imagination, we gradually discover something of the meaning of God's plan for each creature. Through our creativity and experimentation, we slowly uncover something of the majesty of God's plan for the creation. Through our liturgies and epiphanies, we slowly uncover something of the mystery of God's incarnation for the Church. Through our texts and traditions, we gradually accumulate something of the wisdom of God's revelation for all people.

To be sure, God's plan and our history are not identical. God's plan consists of

much more than what God chooses to reveal to us or what we are able to discern of it. Much of what we see appears to be the work of a concealed God, even at times a seemingly capricious God. In Luther's colorful image, history is "God's mummery and mystery," "God joust and tourney." History is "God's theatre," in which the play cannot be fully understood until it ends and until we exit. To equate one act or actor, one speech or text with the divine play itself is to cast a partial and premature judgment. To insist on one interpretation of the play before it ends is to presume the power of eternal discernment. To judge the play on the basis of a few episodes is to insult the genius of the divine playwright.

Human history, in turn, consists of much more than our conscientious struggle to follow God's word and will in our lives, to reflect God's image and immanence in our world. Much of what we see in our personal lives is the "war between our members," the struggle between the carnal and the spiritual, the sinner and the saint. Much of what we see in our collective lives is the sinful and savage excesses of corrupt creatures, the diverse and perverse choices of free human agents. But there is simply too much order in our world, too much constancy in our habits, too much justice in our norms for us to think that the course of human events is not somehow channelled by God's providential plan.

God is thus both revealed and concealed in history. "All events," as John Calvin put it, "are governed by God's secret plan." If God were completely revealed in history, there would be no reason for faith. History would simply be a mechanical execution of a predetermined plan. There would be no eternal mystery for which faith could yearn. But if God were completely concealed in history, there would also be no reason for faith. History would simply be a random and rudderless exercise of chaos. There would be no eternal justice in which faith could trust. "Somewhere between those two the Christian has to find his [or her] own balance between concealment and revelation."

This is the balance I try to find in my work as a Christian historian. For me, history is more than a series of tricks that we play on the dead, or that the dead play on us. History is more than simply an accidental chronology of first one thing happening, and then another. For me, history is also a source of revelation, a collection of wisdom. The archive is a treasure trove. Old books are windows on truth. Though, as St. Paul reminds us, we can only "see in the glass darkly," we must still try to look through the glass, and still try to learn from what we see. The challenge of the Christian historian is to search within the wisdom of the ages for some indication of the eternal wisdom of God. It is to try to seek God's revelation and judgment over time without presuming the power of divine judgment. It is to try to discern God's justice within God's joust.