

Stirred by A Noble Theme***History, Historiography, and Pentecostal
Higher Education***

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**australasian
pentecostal
studies****Abstract**

This paper proposes that Pentecostal Christian higher education has a strategic opportunity to contribute to the restoration and stewardship of religious history in Australia. Twentieth century historical shifts, especially the rise of social history, the expansion of religious history beyond the church, and the interpretive challenges presented by postmodernism have broadened the discipline's methodological possibilities while also complicating older confidence about truth and providential explanations of causality. Additionally, in increasingly secular and theologically illiterate contexts, these developments risk rendering the Christian past as unintelligible or reducible to non-theological categories. These complexities are relevant for Pentecostals, whose emphasis on experience and renewal can tend toward presentism and a superficial historical self-understanding. Drawing on historiography and examples from Australian scholarship, this paper contends that Pentecostal Christian higher education institutions can hold together rigorous

historical method and theological literacy, forming graduates capable of truthful historiography, disciplined interpretation, and meaningful public engagement. History, it is argued, is not ancillary to Pentecostal Christian higher education, but a formative interdisciplinary practice which shapes Pentecostal identity, mission and institutional stewardship.

Keywords

religious history – historiography – Pentecostal – Christian higher education – Australia – archive - formation.

Introduction

“Do we have longer and deeper memories ... which have, as it were, shaped the landscape of who we are?”¹

Malcolm Guite

When my mother died at the age of fifty-five, only months after the passing of her Polish father, I travelled alone to the town of her family’s origin, Kazimierz Dolny, a cobblestoned hamlet between Warsaw and Krakow. Armed with my grandfather’s air force identification and a desire to explore the archives, I was instead drawn, by small town happenstance, into an encounter with living relatives I had never met. Over an evening of halting, computer mediated conversation, familiar photographs and warm flat beer, an unexpected inner response emerged: I exist. Aspects

¹ Malcolm Guite, *Word in the Wilderness: A Poem A Day for Lent and Easter* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2014), 60.

of my identity were not confined to my own lifetime, but located within a much larger shared narrative of eastern European culture, migration, loss, survival and inherited memory.

This vignette, while personal, is also in a broader sense, instructive. For Christian communities, and particularly for Pentecostal communities that often prioritise immediacy and constant renewal, history supplies the context by which identity may be understood.² It offers a way of knowing that resists both amnesia and its forgetfulness of the past, and mythmaking, which renders Pentecostals vulnerable to such pitfalls as hagiography and over simplification. Stuart Piggin has described the archives as “evidence of the providential and mighty hand of God at work” in the church’s experience and warned that neglecting them can cause the church to “forget all that God is doing for them.”³ Whether this claim is framed theologically or in disciplinary terms, history remains an essential practice facilitating a disciplined institutional and cultural memory. It is a well-ordered and attentive posture toward the past that informs the present.

This paper proposes that Pentecostal Christian higher education (CHE) is positioned to offer a strategic contribution to the recovery, formation, and stewardship of religious history in Australia. This claim is prompted by a coalescence of various pressures within the sector, broader society and Pentecostalism itself. Firstly, there has been a sharp decline in history enrolments in Western universities concurrent with the digital revolution, which has amplified what Sarah Irving-

² For the purposes of this article, Pentecostal will be capitalised when referring to the religious movement in Australia. The term Australian Pentecostalism will be used to denote mainstream Pentecostalism in Australia, referring primarily to Australian Christian Churches, which represents the majority of Pentecostal affiliates in the country.

³ R. D. Linder, S. Piggin, and G. R. Treloar, *Making History for God: Essays on Evangelicalism, Revival and Mission in Honour of Stuart Piggin, Master of Robert Menzies College, 1990–2004* (Sydney: Robert Menzies College, 2004), vii.

Stonebraker has termed a cultural “ahistoricism”.⁴ Secondly, the decline of Christianity and theological literacy in Australia risks making Christianity’s historic influence hard to interpret. Thirdly, Pentecostalism’s own “culture of change” can cause a functional presentism whereby the new is prioritised over an understanding and appreciation of historical context.⁵

In light of these factors, this paper proceeds to respond in four parts. Part 1 traces the historiographical shifts in church and religious history writing with an emphasis on the last century, identifying both the opportunities and threats faced by contemporary Pentecostal church history. Part 2 considers the vocation of the Christian historian in a largely secularised guild and argues that theological understanding remains essential to interpreting the religious past.⁶ Part 3 examines Pentecostals and history, including the offerings of Pentecostal historiography. Holding these strands together, Part 4 contends that Pentecostal CHE is positioned to deploy these findings for graduate formation, better public engagement and responsible stewardship. The conclusion draws out the beneficial implications of this approach for Pentecostal scholarship and practice.

1. Historiographical Shifts in Church History

The significance of history for Pentecostal CHE in this moment is best viewed within the broader trajectory of religious historiography. Historical writing and its methods illuminate the prevailing scholarly and societal zeitgeist; the kinds of questions that can be asked and answers that are

⁴ Sarah Irving-Stonebraker, *Priests of History: Stewarding the Past in an Ahistoric Age* (New York: Harper Collins, 2024), 19. History has, among all the major disciplines in the US, experienced the sharpest downturn, even as university enrolments have grown. Australia and the UK show similar trends.

⁵ Mark Hutchinson, “The New Thing God Is Doing: The Charismatic Renewal and Classical Pentecostalism,” *Australasian Pentecostal Studies* 1 (1999): <https://aps-journal.com/index.php/APS/article/view/47/44>.

⁶ Albert Outler, “Theodosius’ Horse: Reflections on the Predicament of the Church Historian.” *Church History: Studies in Christianity and Culture* 57 (1988): 9–19, (15).

accepted as legitimate are in themselves historically conditioned and therefore instructive. This matters for Pentecostal historiography as a young enterprise. Its youthfulness and capacity to innovate are advantageous, but an awareness of the discipline's debates locates the movement in a broader pattern of change.

Church history prior to the mid eighteenth century served a probative function in relation to the institutional church and its doctrine, tradition and those in power. This pressed the church historian toward an emphasis on continuity.⁷ Within this frame providence was an acceptable and requisite causality, and the historian's narrative frequently moved "downward, from leaders to led."⁸ The Protestant Reformation expanded critical possibilities, but adherence to *sola scriptura* without reference to tradition as well as the binaries of orthodoxy and heresy as the dominant interpretive lens, posed limitations.⁹

The Enlightenment and the emergence of modern historical method changed the discipline's posture toward sources. The development of critical source analysis, a more tolerant intellectual environment and a new commitment to empirical approaches provided the right settings for church history to mature into a scholarly discipline; the discipline, as it stands today, largely finds its origin in these developments.¹⁰ As this occurred, providence alone as an explanation of causality receded and a greater emphasis on objectivity was prioritised by church historians.¹¹

⁷ James E. Bradley et al., *Church History: An Introduction to Research Methods and Resources* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2016), 6.

⁸ Albert Outler, "Theodosius' Horse." 14.

⁹ Bradley et al., *Church History*, 10.

¹⁰ Bradley et al., *Church History*, 12.

¹¹ Bradley et al., *Church History*, 17.

More recent shifts have been particularly consequential for contemporary church history. Firstly, the rise of social history has reoriented historical interest from the elite toward capturing the experiences of ordinary people: a move from the pulpit to the pews.¹² This expanded the purview of church history, bringing religious practices, lay movements and religious culture into consideration. Moreover, the audience moved beyond the church institution. This fostered an “eclecticism in method” which brought church historians into conversation with other disciplines such as anthropology and sociology.¹³

This shift has been critiqued by some as a dilution of focus. Bruce Mansfield, for example, quips of social history that “simple villagers anxious about the ailments of their cows might as well be in the driving seat as Martin Luther.”¹⁴ The broader considerations of social history, however, did offer some crucial corrections. It widened the study of religious practice, unshackling it from limiting traditional categories. For Pentecostals, this is significant. Pentecostalism is a nascent movement with an embodied tradition marked by a variety of affective experience. Additionally, it has been a revivalist movement from beneath, with non-traditional actors such as the poor, the uneducated, lay preachers and women. Australian Pentecostal history, especially in its early decades, bears this out. Social history allows the methodological space to consider these dimensions in a way that traditional ecclesiastical history could not.

Secondly, the interpretive developments of the so-called linguistic turn placed a new emphasis on language, discourse and the subjectivity of narrative. Proponents treated historical sources as texts influenced by power, social context and rhetorical devices, subjecting them to

¹² University of Chicago Department of History. *The University of Chicago*. Accessed April 4, 2025. <https://history.uchicago.edu/taxonomy/term/359>.

¹³ University of Chicago Department of History; Bradley, *Church History*, 4.

¹⁴ Bruce Mansfield, *Has “Church History” a Future?* (Sydney: United Theological College, 1994), 11.

literary and social analysis and critique.¹⁵ Postmodernism offered some beneficial approaches to source analysis and a more critical approach to religious history writing. It also fuelled a pervasive scepticism toward truth claims and metanarratives. For Christian historians, the question is therefore not whether sources are constructed, but whether they are being analysed and interpreted rigorously and faithfully. For Pentecostals, this development can operate as a necessary corrective, tempering impulses such as hagiography.

Alongside these shifts, church history has increasingly broadened to become religious history, a wider category which incorporates a fuller spectrum of beliefs, practices and informal and quasi-religious meaning-making. This expansion reflects societal changes: migration, increasing pluralism, and secularism. For Pentecostals, this presents the opportunity to study and be studied within global Christianity and broader patterns of social change and belief. It also heightens the risk of reductionism, relegating Pentecostalism to social or political categories, especially where it is interpreted by religious historians without theological training. The challenge that these twentieth-century shifts present is primarily interpretive: how to sustain rigorous disciplinary method in combination with robust theological literacy capable of discerning and articulating religious meaning in history writing.

2. The Christian Religious Historian

If an understanding of the logic and a literacy of Christianity is no longer commonplace in scholarship, Christian history writing is vulnerable to anachronism or a flattening of Christian religious belief. This was evident in much of the media coverage of the religious affiliation of

¹⁵ Elizabeth Clark, "The Lady Vanishes: Dilemmas of a feminist historian after the 'Linguistic Turn'," *Church History* 67.1 (1998): 1–31, (18).

Australia's self-identified Pentecostal prime minister, Scott Morrison; theological literacy to support balanced media commentary on Pentecostalism was limited. Mark Jennings notes that many in the academy misrepresented Pentecostalism in the media during the period.¹⁶

In this context, contemporary Christian religious historians offer a distinct contribution. In addition to their disciplinary method, they may also hold an increasingly unique set of reference points in interpreting the Christian past: a theological literacy requisite for understanding and forming the historical narrative he or she will tell.¹⁷ Put differently: when a discipline is characterised by what Albert Outler deemed as a “strong and complacent anti-theological bias,” the presence of historians who are theologically literate and sympathetic to Christian belief can broaden the discipline's scope, depth and coherence.¹⁸ This is consistent with evangelical historian David Hempton's claim that “the best religious history is written by those who combine a deep insight into the nature of religious forms and experiences with a proper understanding of their social setting.”¹⁹

This interpretive advantage, however, comes with complexity: the tensions of the participant-observer perspective. The Christian historian is likely to worship within a living faith tradition while seeking to maintain critical detachment in historical analysis. The historian will inevitably produce “narratives which have severe tensions with living the faith of the believer,” excavating complicated historic chapters, unsettling cherished myths or demythologise

¹⁶ Mark Jennings, “When You Don't Know That You Don't Know: Academic Misrepresentation of Australian Pentecostalism,” *ABC Religion & Ethics*, October 15, 2019, updated October 17, 2019, *ABC*, <https://www.abc.net.au/religion/academic-misrepresentation-of-australian-pentecostalism/11605668>.

¹⁷ Outler, “Theodosius' Horse,” 15.

¹⁸ Outler, “Theodosius' Horse,” 15.

¹⁹ Christopher Brooke et al., “What is Religious History?” *History Today* 35 (1985): 43–53, (51).

hagiographic accounts.²⁰ Moreover, the tension increases when the church and the academy are intertwined, as they often are in Pentecostalism, incentivising particular biases. This requires Pentecostal CHE institutions and their affiliate churches to grapple with and protect the virtues of good Christian history writing.²¹

Recent Australian Christian history scholarship provides of wealth of examples of how this might operate in practice. Stuart Piggin's extensive corpus has deeply challenged secular master narratives. Michael Gladwin's research subverted a number of long held national myths including the trope of the secular Australian soldier.²² Meredith Lake's cultural history revealed the largely ignored presence of scripture, which lay "under the skin" of the Australian story, even in contested and unexpected public spaces.²³

The significance of such examples is that religious history is markedly enhanced when it is written with theological literacy alongside robust historical method. For Pentecostal CHE, the implications are timely: institutions that are training historians and interdisciplinary practitioners with theological literacy and historic awareness are not only serving the church. These programs have the potential to form graduates that are capable of contributing to and strengthening Australian historiography and public narratives and as well as influencing other disciplines with an historic awareness, ensuring that the influence of Christianity, including Pentecostalism, on these is neither caricatured nor erased.

²⁰ Terrence Tilley, "Introduction: Practicing History, Practicing Theology" in *Theology and the New Histories* (ed. G. Macy; Maryknoll; NY: Orbis Books, 1999): 1–20, (7).

²¹ Michael Gladwin, "The Virtues of Religious History," in *God's Exemplary Graduates: Character-Oriented Graduate Attributes in Theological Education* (ed. P. G. Bolt and P. Laughlin; Sydney: SCD Press, 2021), 265–293.

²² Michael Gladwin, "Reading Anzac Religion and the Sacred: The Bible as a Central Text and Artefact of Experience of the First World War," *Journal of Religious History* 47.2 (2023): 196–221.

²³ Meredith Lake, *The Bible in Australia: A Cultural History* (Sydney: New South Publishing, 2020).

3. Pentecostals, Memory, History and Historiography in Australia

The significance of history writing is arguably heightened for mainstream Australian Pentecostals in this moment. In the last three decades the movement has experienced significant growth, increased mainstream acceptance and has come to maturation. Additionally, it has achieved transnational expansion, mostly through the international reach of large multi-campus churches, and is exerting an increased cultural and political influence. Pentecostalism's vitality, pragmatic adaptability and posture toward constant renewal have been central to this growth. The tradition, however, does not naturally incline toward considering the past and engaging with the archives; instead, it leans toward informal ad-hoc oral tradition and testimony. Yet a denomination or movement's commitment to its own history writing is central to its identity and ongoing existence.

Australian Pentecostal history writing has developed significantly over the last four decades. For example, Barry Chant's early accounts such as *The Spirit of Pentecost* have pioneered a consideration of the Pentecostal story in Australia.²⁴ Mark Hutchinson has been instrumental in establishing a more methodologically aware Pentecostal historiography, locating the movement within the broader study of Australian religious and social history. Denise Austin has translated Pentecostal experiences into institutional and biographical histories of the movement. Her work, *Jesus First: The Life and Leadership of Andrew Evans*, offers closer attention to the sources and the particularities of Pentecostal identity, giving a more nuanced and robust account of Evans' political success than other commentaries such as those, for example, of Marion Maddox and John Warhurst.²⁵ The emergence of the Australasian Pentecostal Studies Centre and the founding of its

²⁴ Barry Chant, *The Spirit of Pentecost: Origins and Development of Pentecostal Movement in Australia, 1870 – 1939* (Emeth Press, 2011).

²⁵ Denise A. Austin, *Jesus First: The Life and Leadership of Andrew Evans*, Australasian Pentecostal Studies Supplementary Series 7 (Parramatta, NSW: Australian Pentecostal Studies, 2017); Denise Austin,

Australasian Pentecostal Archive have further legitimised Pentecostal historiography. Moreover, the emerging integration of Pentecostal voices within the broader evangelical history community has brought the movement into a broader conversation. Nevertheless, gaps remain: uneven archival preservation and the continued need for scholarship which holds together methodology and theological literacy.

The need for Pentecostals is to cultivate historical thinking. For Pentecostal CHE institutions this presents an opportunity to embed cross-curricular historical awareness. This requires training students to examine sources contextually, consider intellectual history as it relates to a variety of disciplines, recognise change and continuity in their own tradition and differentiate between myth and history. The opportunity also exists for Pentecostal CHE institutions to continue to form and release scholars to engage the broader academic community, increasing the scope and contribution of Pentecostals to the study of history. If Pentecostals are to faithfully steward their identity, history trained graduates must continue to be formed to steward the past and engage responsibly in the church and in the public square.

4. History and Pentecostal Christian Higher Education

“The ability to reconstruct the past is directly a gift from God.”²⁶

Mark Noll

“Andrew Evans: The Making of an Australian Pentecostal Politician,” in *Australasian Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements: Arguments from the Margins*, ed. Mark Hutchinson, Cristina Rocha, and Kathleen Openshaw (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 149, 146, 148, 155.

²⁶ Mark Hutchinson, “Professing History I: An Interview with Professor Mark Noll.” *Lucas: An Evangelical History Review* June 13 (1992): 86–98 (95).

This article has so far contended that Pentecostal CHE holds a strategic stewardship opportunity. It is a site where academic method and theological formation can be effectively held together at a time when the absence of either threatens a comprehensive understanding of Pentecostalism. This discussion now turns to three interrelated areas where this might be realised: formation and identity, public engagement and vocation, and stewardship of archives and memory.

4.1 *Formation and Identity*

History forms graduates by placing them in conversation with, their “own true community and family” through the ages, as Matthew Hall suggests.²⁷ For Pentecostals, who incline toward what Mark Hutchinson discerns as a “culture of change” and a predilection for “the new thing,” this historical conversation relieves the existential burden of having to invent identity anew.²⁸ In engaging with the Christian community beyond the immediate, imagination is expanded to consider how faithfulness may be lived out in a variety of contexts.

The formative possibilities of history also extend to moral and intellectual virtue. The writing of good religious history requires balance, perseverance, patience and attentiveness. The discipline’s demands foster these attributes within a committed student – virtues which find application in both ecclesial and public life. As Michael Gladwin observes, these virtues, “can and should be embodied in academics and graduates as they serve churches, academic and scholarly communities, and civil society,” this is surely a proper object of contemporary Pentecostal CHE institutions.²⁹

²⁷ Matthew Hall, “13 Reasons We Need Church History,” accessed July 20, 2025, <https://www.matthewjhall.net/articles/13-reasons-we-need-church-history>.

²⁸ Hutchinson, “The New Thing God Is Doing”; Irving-Stonebraker, *Priests of History*, 19, 16.

²⁹ Gladwin, “Virtues of Religious History,” 267.

In a period where some Pentecostal churches in Australia and abroad have faced increased public scrutiny for failure, historically trained students are equipped to avoid both defensiveness and cynicism. They are potentially more capable of engaging in a fair-minded examination of both achievements and failures. The honesty required by good history compels plain speaking about complexities, restraining moralism and triumphalist narratives.³⁰

4.2 *Public Engagement, Mission, and Vocation*

Pentecostal communities, especially in the recent period, have expressed an increased desire for meaningful public engagement: a faith that can speak to justice, human dignity and common good. Additionally, Pentecostalism in Australia has become more politically mobilised in the recent period.

Yet public engagement without historic literacy or public theology is fragile. It risks a reactive, harmful or unformed response to immediate issues and a vulnerability to ideological capture. Historically formed graduates are “immune” or, at least, less vulnerable to what C.S. Lewis described as “the great cataract of nonsense that pours from the press and the microphone of his [or her] own age.”³¹ History cultivates graduates which steward their own times well, recognising that many contemporary issues have historical roots and that Christians have responded variously to them through time.³²

Public theology is not the domain of history alone, but history provides a necessary foundation in the development of it: the context and precedents, which when held with scripture

³⁰ Gladwin, “Virtues of Religious History,” 282.

³¹ C.S. Lewis, “Learning in Wartime,” in *The Weight of Glory: A Collection of Lewis’s Most Moving Addresses* (London: William Collins, 2013), 58–59.

³² Irving-Stonebraker, *Priests of History*, 136.

and tradition, contribute to a full-orbed approach. This has direct interdisciplinary implications for Pentecostal CHE; history is already implicit in disciplines such as hermeneutics, economics and business, education, theology, and ministry and leadership practice. The integration of history across the curriculum increases the capacity of graduates to engage culture intelligently in their field of service.

4.3 *Stewardship*

Finally, Pentecostal CHE institutions are well placed to function as stewards of history. Early Pentecostalism's ad hoc nature, periods of rapid growth, and the movement's diffuse organisations have meant that archival records are uneven. The concentration of expertise within a CHE institution, together with its commitment to research positions it strongly to become a curated repository of sources and archival material.

This stewardship also extends beyond preservation to interpretation. As stakeholders in the movement, Pentecostal CHE institutions are participating in making history and interpreting its episodes. Hutchinson quips that there are often too few trained historians on the "edge of a hot renewal."³³ The implication is that changes in theology and practice can occur without adequate analysis. Here, CHE institutions can serve on the reflective edge; they are close enough in fellowship to discern what is implicit but specialised and distant enough to deploy critical analysis.

Taken together, these three areas make a compelling argument for why history should be ensconced in Pentecostal CHE offerings. In a context of declining historical consciousness, and

³³ Hutchinson, "The New Thing."

diminishing theological literacy, history offers the Pentecostal movement formation in the present and resources for faithful innovation into the future.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Pentecostal Christian higher education occupies a strategically significant position in the recovery, formation and stewardship of Christian religious history in Australia. In a context shaped by historiographical expansion, scepticism toward truth claims, declining Christian affiliation, and diminishing theological literacy, the interpretation of the Christian past, and for the purposes of this paper, the Australian Pentecostal movement, has become increasingly fragile. Religious episodes in history risk being relegated to political or social categories, while Pentecostalism's own culture of renewal inclines the movement toward presentism.

Against this backdrop, Pentecostal Christian higher education institutions are uniquely placed to hold together what is being cleft apart by these pressures: rigorous disciplinary method and robust theological literacy. When these are integrated, history becomes formative. It trains graduates to narrate truthfully, to interpret discerningly and to engage the public sphere with historically-shaped wisdom. In this sense, history is not ancillary to Pentecostal Christian higher education but a core-curricular practice that shapes identity, vocation and institutional wisdom.

This article has further contended that Pentecostal Christian higher education institutions are well placed in the Pentecostal ecosystem to steward memory and historical thinking. This includes the preservation and curation of the archives, the cultivation of cross-curricular historical thinking and the formation of historians capable of holding the attendant tensions of a participant

observer. This is mission critical for Pentecostal identity, increasing its capacity to tell its own story without myth-making or misinterpretation.

Recovering history, therefore, is not a nostalgic indulgence or an attempt to domesticate or distract from the vitality of Pentecostal revivalist instincts. Rather, it is an expression of faithfulness: grounding identity, enabling repentance and change, disciplining innovation, and shaping Pentecostal communities with a full-orbed understanding of the past to inform their present and future. For Pentecostal Christian higher education, history is a noble theme which must continue to stir the community imaginary, inform scholarship, and shape graduates who are able to serve church, academy and society with discernment in late modernity.