THOUGHTS OF A CATHOLIC HISTORIAN

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No student of history can go far in his studies before realising that religion ranks high among the subjects which rouse passion and prejudice. In this, historical studies have been the mirror of life. The pen is less messy than the cudgel and the hot blast of rhetoric less hurtful than the faggot, but Catholic and Protestant historians have set to with all the zest with which their fathers beat and burned. They have stalked one another down through the ages, buttering friends and battering enemies, relishing the vices of monks and monasteries or the bumblings of politically-minded ecclesiastics, savouring the misdeeds of Luther and Zwingli or the murkiness of the English settlement. And History is sadly reduced to the pricking of papal balloons and the blowing of Calvinistic bubbles.

Unfortunately, the historian lives in no ivory tower. The 20th Century hardly needs reminding that history or pseudo-history has played a tragic role in our society. All the passions that have paraded under the abstract titles of Fascism, Communism, National Socialism, Militant Nationalism have given the lie to the adage that the past is dead. Better to say that the past has added to the dead, because millions have died through the race and class hatred flamed by lies that masquerade as history. I suppose we are no different than our fathers in this, except in the massive viciousness of modern propaganda. The past has always been used to bolster the present; Roman, Anglo-Saxon and Elizabethan historians have all preached as glib lessons from the past as any to be found in modern text-books. Passion and prejudice have always been with us, and, no doubt, will stay. We might look with awe at the ferocity with which rack, rope and quartering knife were applied for religion's sake, but we might remember that it has been for 'liberty' and 'justice' that we have had our Belsen's, our Peoples Courts and our Hiroshimas.

It is a sobering thought for the historian that he wields so mighty a sword. He might write history because he enjoys delving into the past: he might write from a sense of vocation: he might even write to earn a living: but, if he writes at all, he writes for an audience, and the width of his audience is the measure of his influence. C. V. Wedgwood has reminded us that this influence is not small. "Most of us will go through life with a silt of moral and political prejudice washing about in the brain which has been derived directly or indirectly, by way of textbook and propaganda, school and home, theatre and market-place, from historical writings". The silt of religious prejudice lies pretty heavily in most brains. There is little doubt that much of it has been laid in floods of
historical ink.

Catholics in the English-speaking world, as a minority group in an often hostile environment, have been very conscious of this prejudice. While Macaulay's histories these days are probably not to be found, as they once were, in every lady's boudoir, and while Walter Scott's novels are not much to the taste of modern youth except in comic form, their views and attitudes to the Catholic Church are shared far more widely than their books are read. Gibbon and Froude are studied only by the connoisseur, but many school text-books still smack of their personal prejudices transmitted as historical judgments. The work of such modern historians as A. L. Rowse and H. R. Trevor-Roper has done little to soften their effect.

The unsubtle simplicities of the Liberal-Protestant view of the Catholic Church's history has been broken down by modern secular scholarship, just as the raw inadequacies of Belloc's histories have been replaced by the more sensitive and complex analyses of such catholic historians as David Knowles and Philip Hughes. Yet public opinion is rarely influenced by subtleties and niceties of judgement. Historical battles long since decided at a professional level are still being fought at a lower level. How does an apologist put forward balanced, positive history of the Church, when all the public wants is to re-fight the battle on 'Pope Joan', Foxe's Book of Martyrs, and Anglican Orders? These might or might not be the interests of only lunatic fringe, but one is constantly amazed how wide the fringe is.

I stress these aspects of historical writing because they have had important effects of Catholic historical scholarship. In many respects Catholics are more historically minded than other Christian sects. All Christians share in an essentially historical religion. Their eyes are turned to a particular place, Palestine, at a particular time, the first century, when God played a direct part in the human story. All Christians also believe that the Church, whatever meaning they give to the term, has played and will play to the end of time an historical role in society. For Catholics the concept of the Church as an institution built on the Rock of Peter has given special impetus to historical research. Not only are there interests sparked by loyalty to an establishment rooted so deeply in the European past, but theology itself takes on a new dimension. Dogma is not to-day's thoughts of to-day's theologians, but the teachings of the Church's Popes and Councils, Bishops and Fathers and theologians, handed down in a living tradition. Liturgy is not merely to-day's worship of the faithful, but the sum of the Church's past. Hence within the Church itself, within the theological framework, there has been an impressive array of historical scholarship. Scripture studies have reached a delicacy in historical methodology which is not often attained even in secular studies. Every modern movement in dogmatic theology, liturgy, patrology has involved a deeper and more objective search into the Church's store of tradition.
Historical scholarship within the Church has not always been matched by Catholics in secular fields. This is a complaint voiced by Catholics themselves in recent years. Ask the non-academic whom he might classify as Catholic historians and he might list Belloc, Dawson, Hughes, and perhaps Maynard. The academic might add Gasquet, Knowles, and perhaps Pollen and Thurston. The list is not long and the calibre of the writers is very varied. Most of them have earned their Catholic reputation in their defence of a Catholic view of the English Reformation against the prevailing Liberal-Protestant view. This might give us pause. What are the distinguishing marks of Catholic history? The human mind has a fascination for pigeon-holes. One of these is Catholic and another is Marxist. I suspect that the non-catholic and the non-marxist sometimes feels that he fills a comfortable niche between these imagined extremes. Does the Catholic historian lay claim to any specifically Catholic interpretation of history? Does his faith preclude him from writing history with the objectivity demanded by the standards of modern scientific history? 

Prejudice and bias aside, the catholic historian will have feeling and understanding in matters of Catholic interest. He might, for example, understand why Elizabethan Catholics clung so desperately to the Mass and saw no clash of political and religious loyalties in doing so. Or he might understand how Edmund Campion's apostolic zeal could be non-political when he said that 'we are dead men to the world, we only travelled for souls; we troubled neither state nor policy'. Such sentiments are clearly not altogether intelligible to historians like Rowse and Trevor-Roper. Yet we must be careful not to say too much. Hottentots have a clear grasp of the Hottentot mystique, but this does not prevent an outsider from writing a good history of the Hottentot Wars. Indeed, if our criterion for history writing was that like should write on like, then history itself would be impossible. Whatever the community of human nature, there is a gulf between age and age, people and people. How could the armchair archaeologist write of the cavenan cannibal, if, as we may presume, their tastes are so divergent? Empathy is not enough to constitute specifically Catholic history.

What of the Catholic in controversy? Should we dub an historian Catholic because he defends the Church? A page of two back we saddened ourselves by thinking of the dog-fight much of religious history has been and in which many a Catholic and Protestant historian has earned his laurels. We might clarify the issue by making a distinction. Controversy has a place in historical studies, as it has in all living disciplines. Surely the hours of drudge at research deserve some reward, and there is none so sweet as being able to write an 'Historical Revision'. Henry Ford said that History is Bunk. He would have been more accurate if he had said that History is Debunk. Controversy has a role, but controversy takes place at two levels. Firstly there is the dispute over what happened, when, how and why. The motive is plain historical truth. Secondly, there
is the debate over the relevance of what is past to present beliefs and attitudes. The motive is truth with an apologetic hook.

Of course, the banner of plain historical truth sometimes has tattered edges. Fierce battles rage among Anglo-Saxon historians over the existence of Hengist and Horsa: archaeologists are known to lose their peace of soul over the significance of squiggly lines on battered pots: even Australian historians occasionally differ. In general, such squabbles are largely professional. Barrackers are few. The attractions of a Hengist and Horsa League are limited: few feel that eternal salvation rests on a squiggly line: no one really seems to mind what Australian historians think anyway.

Controversy at the second level is different. The dead past is involved in the living present. To overplay the grosser elements in Henry VIII's breach with Rome and to underplay the other elements of religious tension is a theological prick to Anglican self-esteem. To explain Cromwell's barbarism in Ireland in terms of moral irresponsibility and religious prejudice and not by way of political necessity is no small slight to Independency. And Romans are easily goaded by reference to politicking Jesuits, Alexander VI, St. Bartholomew Massacres and the like. We are all sensitive to the past, because we feel that its unsympathetic presentation is an attack on the stronghold of our faith. Often it is. But then it ceases to be history.

Such assaults and apologias are not history, because they exceed history's limited purpose to describe the objective past. To crib a science so narrowly is not altogether fashionable in these days of scientist-philosophers, field-marshal-diplomats, general-presidents. Our modern Delphic oracles are film stars, footballers and all newsworthy bodies, and their wisdom is sought on all things from soap to the supernatural. At this we can be amused, but I boggle at putting my morality, my philosophy, my theology, my religion into the hands of the historian. The certainties of my faith and the objectivity of the laws that bind me come from sources other than the uncertainties of the historian's descriptions of the past. They do not come from history and they are not taken away by history. Thus, I have nothing to lose from an objective story of the past, but rather something to gain from the more realistic notion of man in his relations to man and with God.

Controversy and apologetics do not make an historian Catholic. Such Catholic writers play a legitimate role in defending the Church against an illegitimate use of history, but it is largely a negative role. We might expect that the Catholic historian's ambitions go further than to have his name inscribed forever as 'Fidei Defensor' on the small change of history, noble though the title be.

In what way do the assumptions of the Catholic Faith affect historical judgement? It is axiomatic that a man's personality, age, environment, philosophy, religion weave a screen through which his historical judgements are sifted. Catholics believe that the ultimate
explanation of all created being and activity is the Will of God, that the Church is divinely protected, that men are free and responsible for their actions and are ruled by an objective norm of morality. How do these beliefs affect a Catholic's historical explanations? Do they bind his hands? Do they force him along lines of interpretation which would differ essentially from those of, say, a liberal agnostic? Do they offer him a philosophy of history?

From the very beginning of history-writing the Divine has been evoked by historians to explain what seems inexplicable or inevitable, or to rally the good and rail the evil with the thought that the hand of God has a preferential touch which can be discerned in worldly success and failure. Divine Providence of theological belief is not so easily used in an historical context. God's power and presence is universal: in all the apparent chaos of the human story there is a Divine Plan. Yet from the human point of view, this plan has the two aspects of totality and particularity. We know the plan in its totality, in its broadest outline, by faith - its beginning in Creation, its centre in the Incarnation, its end in the coming Judgement. Not so easily seen are the intricacies of its working in every day's story.

In a recent article in Historical Studies Dr. K. Inglis has rather solemnly traced out an alternative historical explanation to an event which the most prominent of Australian Catholic historians, Dr. Eris O'Brien, described in a chance phrase as illustrating the workings of Divine Providence in Australian History. I rather suspect that Dr. Inglis is tilting at windmills: I doubt if Dr. O'Brien was invoking Divine Providence as an historical explanation at all. Perhaps the distinction will be clearer if we take an example from another science. A Catholic biologist might be analysing the formation of blood clots in wounds. He unfolds the complex chain of cause and effect in the body's response to the wound. His explanation is in chemical, clinical and neurological terms. So far he has acted purely as a biologist. But the marvel and delicacy of the body's organisation might give him pause for the reflection that not chance but Intelligence has planned this biological wonder. He adds to the scientific view a philosophical or theological dimension. His conclusions cannot be proved biologically or disproved biologically: they are extraneous to his experiments. Only on the supposition that the biologist has side-stepped the demands of his science and given a philosophical or theological explanation to his immediately scientific problem can his suggestion be said to be scientifically illicit. We might add that prudence, propriety and economy of effort would seem to demand that his musings on the First Things be kept out of the context of his scientific papers.

History is the same. Historians can look at the whole concatenation of causes which lead to an historical event: it might be the preservation of the Eucharist at convict Port Jackson, or the rise of Christianity in a pagan world. From the historical stand-
point, the events are explained in terms of personalities and trends and factors: from the standpoint of faith, which can see the wonder of graces and the far-reaching spiritual good, the Hand of God seems very near. Both standpoints are legitimate. There is, again, the question of prudence and propriety in introducing one standpoint into the context of another science, but in this respect history is a little more flexible than the physical sciences. The real danger lies in the indiscriminate confusion of faith and history.

We have not squeezed out the role of Providence in human affairs. On the contrary, we have underlined its universality, so that the Catholic historian, like the Catholic scientist, can assume that the finger of God is not here and there, but everywhere. On that assumption he can apply himself, like his Marxist, or Liberal, or Agnostic brethren, to the field of factors and forces.

Similar analyses of other basic assumptions of the Catholic faith lead to similar conclusions. The abstract concept of man's nature as essentially unchanging is not vitiated by the detailed analyses of changing environment and its effects on the individual and society. The basic freedom and responsibility we demand in man is not overthrown by the extraction of the factors which have in some way determined history; nor is the existence of a law for all men disproved by the day to day story of its breach. The divine element in the Church is not denied if we merely outline the human element. We might suspect that the devil and sin have played their part in the evolution of man from wool-bedecked barbarism to the sophisticated savagery of the atomic era, but like Good Queen Bess we can feel slow "to open windows into men's souls. 

Or like the poet, we might merely register our puzzlement:

Men don't believe in the devil now, as their fathers used to do; They've forced the door of the broadest creed to let his majesty thru! There isn't a print of his cloven hoof, or a fiery dart from his bow To be found in earth or air today, for the world has voted so.

The Devil has voted not to be, and of course the thing is true, But who is doing the kind of work the Devil alone should do? The Devil was fairly voted out, and of course the Devil is gone; But simple people would like to know who carries his business on?

Most historians who occupy their time with particular fields and particular times are suspicious of giants like Spengler, Marx, Wells, Toynbee who demand the broad canvas of universal history. More cautious souls tend to think of them as Hilaire Belloc did of the Water beetle.

The waterbeetle glided on the water's face With ease, celerity and grace; But if he stopped to try and think Or how he did it, he would sink.

Be that as it may, there is a broader field of historical interpretation in which a Catholic historian, precisely as a Catholic, can become
engaged. Indeed, if the term Catholic historian is to have any meaning beyond a description of an historian who happens to be a Catholic, I suggest it should be confined to the interpretation of history by the light of revealed faith. The investigation of the meaning which Christianity has given history from its beginning to its end has occupied many of the great theologico-historical minds of Europe, Catholic and non-catholic alike. Christopher Dawson, Jean Danielou, Nicholas Berdyaev, among many, have spoken for the Catholics: Karl Barth, Oscar Cullmann, Herbert Butterfield, among many, have spoken for the rest. They can give a meaning to the human story which the historian at the lower level cannot give, because they have the whole story and the whole evolution, whereas he can only look backwards from where he stands. - They deal in the metaphysics and he with the physics of the past. They are both humble, yet both noble tasks: humble, because the pace of our progress in them is set by the mincing steps of the human mind: noble, because their fruit is not merely knowledge, but wisdom.

Catholic historical scholarship, then, has its strength in fields which are specifically catholic, those closely allied to theological research. What of the complaint that it is under-represented in other fields? Undoubtedly, History itself needs the balance which sympathetic catholic understanding can give it. The Church too, engaged in its apostolate, needs apologists and champions to ward off the irrelevancies of those who seek theological kudos by winning historical battles. But what the Church needs of historians, what Protestants need of historians and what the world need of them is the truth told without blush and by the truth to move a little of that silt of religious prejudice that washes in all our brains. It was a gentle hope, surely, that of Francis Bacon, that 'Histories make men wise'.

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