

HISTORY, THE CONCEPT OF TRADITION, AND THEOLOGY

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For the many ways of doing theology in the Christian tradition, historical study is totally unimportant. Or at best they pay it lip-service. Writing in *The Tablet* Of London, Richard Price was blunt about that. He asked:

Does church history matter? Is the study of Christianity in the early centuries more than an antiquarian pursuit? The answer given by the theologians is a verbal 'yes' that thinly veils a mental 'no.'

Price goes on to explain that liberal theologians like to appeal to the primitive past for ammunition against current Roman norms, but only in support of views independently formulated, while conservatives assert a type of development of doctrine that makes present belief normative and early belief embryonic.¹ Neither side gives history its due.

Opponents of history as an element in the theological enterprise are many. There are the presentists, for whom the past is irrelevant and the future will be essentially different. Back in 1909 a Protestant modernist, Episcopal Bishop Charles D. Williams of Michigan, advocated that approach when he declared:

The only question that concerns us today is, what is the character of the stream that reaches us ... ? Is the water of life today as it was of old? Can it quench the thirst of our souls? Can it invigorate our moral and ethical life? If it can do these things, we will accept it as valid for today. If it cannot, we must reject it, no matter how authentic its origin and traditions.²

In an instruction early in 1990 on increased study of the fathers of the church, the Congregation for Catholic Education addressed an approach not unlike that of Bishop Williams and urged Catholics to avoid a theology "limited to confronting fundamental biblical ideas with the social reality and concrete problems of modern life, analyzed with the help of human science." That is not adequate for theology done in the Catholic tradition, and the congregation reminds us of the "fresh breath of true wisdom and Christian authenticity" that comes from patristic - and, I would add - historical studies in general.³

There are other approaches hostile to the historical. That, for example, of the medieval canonists, who shaped the church to which the 1611- century reformers objected. Stephan Kuttner, perhaps the most prominent historian of canon law in the United States, summed up what he saw as their accomplishment when he wrote that they brought harmony out of dissonance by "indulging in a sublime disregard of history" in shaping their discipline and, incidentally, in shaping much of official church structure and thought in the centuries to come. Yves Congar has another perspective on that. Singling out the "False Decretals" of the ninth century, which fabricated texts and attributed them falsely to earlier bishops of Rome, he wrote of these bases on which the later Corpus of Canon Law was built that they not only ruined the chances of historical development, they gave credence to the notion that all the determination of the church's life flowed from the papacy as their source.

The net result was a papacy strongly juridical in character, exercising an authority that tended to be more juridical than spiritual and charismatic.⁴ History was reduced to the role of providing proof-texts, or exempla, adduced selectively in support of conclusions already arrived at by other means. The approach was that recommended by a contemporary American canonist when he outlined a sure-fire method for giving a talk on a Catholic topic:

Take a clear Catholic on just about anything, develop it with philosophical precision, and illustrate the development with citations from the fathers, the classic theologians, and the encyclicals of the popes.⁵

Stephan Kuttner's longtime colleague in the canonical collections at Berkeley John Noonan, pointed to the difficulties inherent in this approach when he described the way the question of contraception was handled in Pope Pius XI's encyclical, *Casti Connubii*:

As a distillation of past doctrinal statements, the encyclical was a masterpiece. At the same time, its composers were indifferent to the historical contexts from which the citations came and uninterested in the environmental changes which differentiated the present context. The encyclical was a synthesis; it was not history.⁶

There is no question that the approach I have described was common in Catholic theological circles in what may be called the "manual" period, the 70 or so years that followed promulgation in 1879 of Pope Leo XIII's encyclical letter, *Aeterni Patris*. It is an approach more difficult to reconcile with the thought of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger when he speaks of "the historicity of a church which is still under way and will first become itself when the ways of time have been traveled"⁷ or with the assertion of Bishop Christopher Butler, an active and thoughtful participant in the second Vatican Council, that the council moved Catholic thought from an almost exclusively conceptual approach (that of the aforementioned manuals) to an approach mainly historical and biblical.⁸ Christianity is a historical religion. There is about it as Rosemary Ruether has commented, "always this past dimension."⁹ It makes Christianity different from other religious systems preoccupied with what they understand as "nature," or perceive as "personal experience." Christianity is in history. It lives, grows and develops in time.

Pope John Paul II has been very clear about this. Speaking in the apostolic letter *Ecclesiam Dei* about the schismatic Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, he declared that the archbishop's schism was rooted in:

an incomplete and contradictory notion of tradition, incomplete because it does not take sufficiently into account the living character of tradition which, as the second Vatican Council clearly taught, comes from the apostles and progresses in the church with the of the Holy Spirit. There is a growth in insight into the realities and words that are being passed on.¹⁰

Again, the Pope, in a letter to Cardinal Ratzinger, took issue with what he called "conservatism," or "integritism,"

which stops at the past itself, without taking into account the correct aspiration toward the future that manifested itself precisely in the work of Vatican II.

That approach "sees correctionness only in what is 'ancient,' considering it synonymous with tradition." But, the pope continued:

it is not what is 'ancient' as such, or what is "new' per se, which corresponds to the correct idea of tradition in the life of the church. Rather, the idea means the church's remaining faithful to the truth received from God, throughout the changing circumstances of history.¹¹

The second Vatican Council, in its constitution on divine revelation, addressed headon the problem of concept of tradition, which had bedeviled theologians for generations, but which Catholics say is so important to the question of where they confront the self-revelation of God.

Tradition is understood to be a sense, arising from and discerned in the historical life of the church, as well as in its ongoing life, thought and worship.¹² Joseph Ratzinger tells us that it is to be found "not only in the explicitly traditional statements of church doctrine, but in the unstated and often unstatable elements of the whole service of the worship of God and the life of the church." According to the cardinal, "the final comprehensive formulation of tradition is the perpetuation, the constant continuation and making present of everything that the church is, of everything that it believes." Finally, he says that tradition "is identified and thus defined with the being and the faith of the church.¹³

The constitution on divine revelation deals with tradition in chapter eight, where it is declared to be found in "the teaching, life and worship" of the church. The constitution declares that tradition "develops in the church with the help of the Holy Spirit...through contemplation and study made by believers ... through the intimate understanding of spiritual things they experience ... and through the preaching of those who have received through episcopal succession the sure gift of truth." And, in a sentence added to the constitution by the express wish of Pope Paul VI it goes on to say that "it is not from sacred scripture alone that the church draws her certainty about everything that is revealed.¹⁴ The scriptures are a part, a special part indeed, of what has been handed on, of tradition.

And the magisterium? It "is not above the word of God, but serves it, teaching only what has been handed on, listening to it devoutly, guarding it scrupulously, and explaining it faithfully."¹⁵ The late and great historian of the council of Trent, Hubert Jedin, was dead wrong when he claimed that "tradition is the living teaching office of the church, which authoritatively interprets and complements scripture."¹⁶ Pius is reputed to have silenced Cardinal Guidi of Bologna, who protested that the doctrine of papal infallibility was not to be found in the tradition with the riposte, "Tradition? I am tradition."¹⁷ The bon mot does not make good theology. There is a distinction between the interpreter and what the interpreter interprets; between tradition, including its essential component, scripture, and the authoritative interpreter.

What does this say to the church historian? What does it say to the historian's role, or lack of role, in the overall theological enterprise? Very simply that as a result of the historical-biblical approach renewed in the church by the second Vatican Council, the church historian has a new function to fulfill, or rather must resume an old one, discounted for some centuries. For the historian, chapter eight of *Dei Verbum* is magna carta. If the living tradition of the church is to be found, and must be looked for by simple Christian and authoritative interpreter alike, in the totality of the Christian community's life, thought and worship down the centuries and across the world, then the study of the life of the community, its thought and its worship, must be one of the ways in which accurate knowledge of that tradition is sought. It is not the only way. The theological enterprise is complex. But the part that history must play in recalling what has been authentically handed down can be only at one's grave peril.

Christianity is a historical religion. It declares that God entered into history. God did so in the peculiar relationship he had with the people of Israel and when, in the fullness of time, he sent his only son, who was born and died and rose and who brought the church to birth in time. Down the centuries Christians have found other way of translating their faith, philosophical ways. And often those philosophical ways have eclipsed the basic historical nature of the Christian message. We are aware of what is called the "hellenization of Christianity," which introduced a prioristic philosophizing from what was understood as the "nature" of this or that phenomenon. It is familiar to us from the days of Augustine. There were the enormous syntheses made in the high middle ages, the *summae* of St. Thomas and others. But I want to concentrate on what happened in the course of the 19th century.

In an age when science, technology and social and political revolution led to universal reassessment of human and religious values, all Christian theology was challenged, as the Anglican historian Bernard Reardon has remarked, either to adapt to the radically changed circumstances or to "fall back on the stronghold of absolute authority."¹⁸ Liberal Protestantism took the former path; Catholicism the latter. Roman theologians of the 19th century rejected historical imagination and procedures and took their stand on an essentialist metaphysics which accompanied and supported a renewed insistence on church authority.

British historian Owen Chadwick has traced the history of this theological tradition, and Howland Sank completed it.¹⁹ They wrote of theologians who saw as their task explication by logical inference of what was already implicit in an immutable revelation. At its apogee with the Jesuit "prince of theologians," Louis Billot, the notion "tradition" came to be identified with the voice of living authority, that is the pope. For thinkers like Billot, history had no part in theological enterprise. Edgar Hocedec: the historian of 19th-century Catholic theology, remarked simply of Billot, "history and its methods were beyond his horizons."²⁰ He was not alone in that. It was a widespread malaise.

Stephen Tonsor long ago noted the consequences for Catholic theology when he wrote: "In a remarkably short time theological system came to replace historical facts, and clever system builders to replace patient historians."²¹ No longer did apologists build their arguments carefully from the scriptures and from reflection on the past practice of Christians living their faith, from the thought of theologians ancient and modern and from the Christian community's habits of prayer and liturgical observance. In other words from tradition. Abandonment of historical study, so Lord Acton reminded us, made

the teaching of the church the sole foundation and test Of certain knowledge, a criterion alike of the records of history and the arguments of unbelief. It recognized no means of ascertaining the truth of facts, or the authenticity of documents, sufficiently trustworthy to interfere with theological opinions.²²

No longer the Catholic theologians argue as had our later first bishop, John Carroll, back in 1784. His Address that year to the Roman Catholics of the United States was the product of personal research in an Annapolis library, where he gathered evidence from the scriptures, church fathers and later theologians and from the history of the church and of the religious practice of its people. It was a classic exercise in inductive, that is, historical theology.²³

But a half-century after John Carroll's death, historical appeal to the Great Tradition had gone out of Catholic style. Deductive reasoning held the field, the explication by logical inference of which Owen Chadwick wrote. Historical data were used, if at all, for illustrative purpose only, not as central to the argument. H. Richard Niebuhr has pictured the Catholic mind set that resulted, One had a sense

of being part of an established order of things, member of an enduring and fundamentally unchanging church, recipient of a truth once and for all revealed, believer in a well-defined and articulated 'true religion,' subject of constant and known laws, follower of leaders who stood in a unchanging office and successions²⁴

Something obviously has happened in the church of Rome since Niebuhr penned those words. In 1987 the Catholic bishops of England and Wales produced a document picturing the church not "as an army marching in formation, but more like a group of travelers in a desert," a "pilgrim people," as the second Vatican Council put it, a community in which lay people as well as church professionals were expected to "take proper initiatives," and to "shoulder their responsibilities."²⁵ What had happened to the once highly predictable Roman church? What of the dictum of that fifth-century stalwart, Vincent of Lerins, that "what is Catholic is that which has been believed everywhere, always and by all?" What of the proud motto of the redoubtable Cardinal Alfredo Ottaviani, longtime chief executive officer of the Holy Office? That motto was "Semper Idem ... Always the Same."

What has happened is that there has been a revolution in the ways we perceive and evaluate reality. There has been an acceptance of historicization. It began boldly in the early years of this century in the thinking of those condemned by Pope Pius X in 1907 as modernists. There were indeed serious problems at that time on the part both of the official church and on the part of those they called modernists. In the case of the historians among them, there was a tendency to make their discipline the final theological word. Thanks to the patient work of many, for example, those involved in the "Sources chretiennes" publications at Lyons and to the great French Dominican Yves Congar and his colleagues, we have come a long way from those stumbling modernist/integrist days. We understand that historical study - or biblical study, for that matter - are not the final word in a theological inquiry that is far more complex.

Joseph Ratzinger is clear on this. Vincent of Lerins, he assures us, "no longer appears as an authentic representative of the Catholic idea of tradition, but outlines a canon of tradition based on a semi-Pelagian idea." His "static semper no longer seems the right way of expressing the nature of historical reality and continuity."²⁶ Another conservative German theologian, Walter Kasper, now Bishop of Mainz, acknowledged "the radical historicization of all reality," and pointed out that

theologians in the 19th century discovered metamorphoses and developments in the church's pattern of faith which had not only taken place in accordance with the laws of regular organic growth, but which also proceeded by leaps and bounds, shifts, anticipations and retardation.²⁷

Obviously, Bishop Kasper is not talking about the Roman theologians to whom we have referred, but of the Tubingen school and others! John O'Malley is another who sees the same patterns. He has written of the need to recognize "discontinuities" in the church's history.²⁸

Twenty years ago, Yves Congar talked of two understandings of "Church History as a Branch of Theology." One meaning saw "development," a progressive revelation of what had heretofore been implicit. Radical only to the defender of complete stasis, this position is acceptable to many. The second understanding is that posited by Ratzinger, Kasper and O'Malley. Congar described it as seeing "a series of formulations of the one content of faith diversifying and finding expression in different cultural contexts."²⁹ In Robin Collingwood's phrase, we have become "historically conscious," able to think of theological formulations in terms of their culturebound and historically contingent character, interpreting previous traditions in terms of present self-understanding.³⁰ History is no longer "frozen solid" the term is Collingwood's and we realize that when we deal with the church, we are dealing with a dynamic phenomenon. The church is pilgrim, not yet at the goal. We underline its historicity. It is, in Ratzinger's phrase, "still under way, and will become itself only when the ways of time have been traveled."³¹

A sense for the dynamic, for change, action and life has replaced the static classicism so long the norm. What does this say to the church historian? What does it have to do with his/her role or non-role in the theological enterprise? To review a bit, for a good part of the Christian era, and especially in the Catholic intellectual world that reached its high point in the later 19th, and earlier 20th century, a "classicist" or "substantialist" mentality prevailed. It allowed at best for only accidental external changes as the church passed through time. Its favorite protasis was, "For the past 1900 or 2000 years, the church has..." That has usually been a good sign that a false apodosis will follow. The mind set produced an image of the church that emphasized order and unchangeableness. It was the church of Vincent of Lerins, whose obituar Joseph Ratzinger wrote. Tradition in this understanding was an arcane, illdefined treasuretrove of proportional statements waiting the proper moment for enunciation.

Two factors changed all that. One was the emergence of the historical-critical method, applied not only to the scripture, but to the church's other memories and documents. Is everything then relative? Is there nothing absolute? Of course there is. But we must be careful of identifying contingencies with the Absolute, who, as Karl Rahner reminded us, is only God.³²

In this light the historian's task is to assist in discerning and distinguishing, in a phrase that should be recalled to service, the "Great Tradition," from traditions with a final "s." We contribute by establishing the facts to our best ability, always aware that we inevitably see things as our own personal prisms. The myths that abound in church history, as in all history, we try to evaluate for what they are. We are cautious about the demands made on our historical judgment by pleas for "prudence" or "piety," even as we acknowledge that God dealing with his people is not bound by rules and may work through what is mythical as well as what is rational.³³ That is a process not amenable to our historical discipline, although we sometimes observe its effects.

Our partnership in the theological enterprise consists in offering the results of our historical-critical research in testifying to the pervasive change in human affairs that is the lot of a church which is incarnate in human being. What is the relationship of history to the Great Tradition? Robert Taft addressed that in an essay he did several years ago on the frequency of the eucharist in Christian practice. After marshalling the evidence, he concluded with a statement that may stand for us all.

Final judgment is not the historian's for history shows the past to be always instructive, but never normative. What is normative is tradition. But tradition, unlike the past is a living force whose contingent expressions ... can change.³⁴

History's instruction, however, is needed. The historian studies the contingent expressions of the Christian community's life, its thought and its worship. He/She puts the results of that study at the service of the larger body of theologians. It is a co-operative venture, in which none should be a monologist.

What practically does all this mean? Does the historical, or inductive, method of doing theology make any difference in how we apprehend the Great Tradition, or even lesser tradition?

Perhaps the recent history of Ireland can start us off. The rigidity in Irish religion that some observers have noted has often and without further ado been attributed to a Jansenistic spirit learned by Irish priests trained in French seminaries. A contemporary Irish historian has another explanation. He concludes that

the Irish Catholic's life was governed by the God of justice and not by the God of love and mercy ... not in fact by the God of Catholic tradition in Ireland, but instead by the God of Victorianism, a British and Protestant God.

He explains:

the social norms of 19th Century Britain became entangled with a fervent and essentially non-intellectual form of Catholicism. The resultant mix became the religion of the Catholic Irish, who imagined it to be the faith of Patrick, Brigid and Columkille.³⁵

On a more theological note, historians are looking carefully at the sacrament of reconciliation. Studies have made us aware of the difference between the older "Mediterranean" and the later "Irish" forms of the sacrament. In the earlier form, reconciliation was infrequent, sometimes possible only once in a lifetime, and practiced when there was question of major sins like murder, apostasy and adultery. Confession, contrition and forgiveness took place in the face of the community. Penance was public. There was no secrecy, no seal of confession. There is no evidence in the early centuries of one-on-one auricular confession of sins. Canon 11 of the third council of Toledo in the year 589 prohibited frequent confession. There were other similar decrees. Then, under the influence of the Irish monks who in the sixth and seventh centuries recovered for Christianity so much of Europe, new forms came in. They promoted frequent and secret confession, combining it with spiritual direction. The theory of the seal of confession was developed. Penitentials were written to assist the priest in calculating and assigning penances for the wide varieties of faults that were now confessed.

What is the conclusion? Addressing the drop off in confessional practice of recent decades, Ladislav Orsy has put in this way:

Perhaps people are rightly longing for other ways of receiving forgiveness for their ordinary weaknesses. After all, the biblical tradition does not tell us more than Christ has given to the apostles the power to forgive sins As far as we can tell, he left it to the wishes of the church to determine how pardon should be granted. Since the church has known different ways of doing it in the past, there is no reason why new ways could not be found today.³⁶

Another area in which interesting conclusion can be drawn is that of church government. Most people today will not dispute that the form of government in the Roman Catholic church, even after Vatican II, is highly centralized. We have a monarchical structure. Has it always been that way? How essential are the details of the structure?

Early in the present century, the great church historian Louis Duchesne pointed to church government in later apostolic times by councils of elders and not by a single bishop. He found that bishops were clearly assisted by colleges of priests, "who shared the rule of the Christian community." The bishop did not "always stand out very prominently ... nor were the clergy always differentiated from the rest of the congregation All that was said or done was the affair of the whole body, rather than of the leaders." Duchesne followed this with an appeal for greater collegiality and less authoritarianism in the church of his own day. Unfortunately for the distinguished historian, the church of his day was caught up in the great modernist scare, and he found his work on the Index.³⁷

The choice of the church's leaders is another area in which historical research has lately been making some contributions. "In the third century in the west," Philip Kaufman has written, "not only did the people elect their bishops, but it was considered important that they do so." He cites the Apostolic Tradition of St. Hippolytus and also St. Cyprian in support of the position, then narrates how election of bishops passed to the clergy, was pre-empted in places by the metropolitan bishops, then reverted to cathedral canons, who again had to cope with the interference of neighboring bishops and then finally lost out, in great part, to civil authorities.³⁸

It is interesting to note that when John Carroll became our first bishop 200 years ago, strictly papal anointment of bishops was obtained only in the Papal States and in mission countries. Much of Carroll's seemingly anti-Rome rhetoric is explained by his insistence that the church in the new United States was not a "mission," but "an ordinary national church," with the inherent right to choose its own bishops and present their names to Rome for confirmation.³⁹

These historical facts, and there is ample confirmatory evidence available, throw some light on recent developments around the Catholic world as in our day Rome, more and more, asserts to name bishops everywhere. In any case, at least the veteran missionary was in error who, apropos of protests about the way in which some appointments lately have been made, wrote to a clerical magazine that "for two thousand years the pope has named bishops."⁴⁰ It just did not happen that way. Pope John Paul II is well aware of the fact. He explains the present situation as the logical consequence of historical development, as he forcefully informed the bishops of Austria.⁴¹ But development is not always rectilinear.

There are many other areas for exploration. Richard McBrien thinks that the "primary and most immediate experience of church is at the parish level. For most of us, the parish is the church."⁴² I do not quarrel with that. But McBrien's Notre Dame colleague, John Van Engen, has written that organization of the parish was a relatively late medieval phenomenon, while Giuseppe Alberigo pointed out that, even when they did begin to function, parish churches had come to compete for people's custom with a plethora of monastic and conventual churches, oratories, sanctuaries, chapels of nuns and lay confraternities and the like. It was, he remarks, "a context that lacked uniformity."⁴³ And perhaps one not without instructive value today.

The history of Christian marriage is another fascinating topic. "Marriage," wrote Van Engen, "was not brought literally into the church until the end of the middle ages, through Christian guidelines began to transform the institution in the ninth century and its sacramentality was established in the 12th."⁴⁴ I What no earlier centuries? We know that Ignatius of Antioch at the end of the first century declared that "when men and women marry, it is desirable to have the bishop's consent."⁴⁵ Little was said in subsequent centuries about the form of marriage, although Pope Siricius did in the 415 insist that the marriages of priests and deacons should be solemnized before a priest. It seems that it was not until the 11th or 12th century that church marriage as we know it became common.⁴⁶

We could go on and on. But enough. There is indeed an authentic tradition. There are norms that define the Catholic church. But there are supposed absolutes that can profit from a skeptical eye. Some we will want to maintain because they are helpful in building up the Body of Christ. Others are better consigned with respect to the museum of antiquities. A discriminating and critical intelligence is needed to determine which is which.

Jan Timmerman, writing in *The Way*, suggested that contemporary theologians, having turned to historical consciousness, now think of theology's formulations "in terms of their culture-bound and historically contingent character." In a change from the classical point of view, interpretation is now considered essential. This shift has had major consequences:

The church, in its reflection upon its knowledge regarding the compatibility with the gospel of human practices like slavery, usury and freedom of conscience, made this shift toward historic consciousness when it interpreted its previous traditions regarding those questions in term of its present self-understanding.⁴⁷

Where else the church's reflection will lead it, remains to be seen. I close with some words from Etienne Gilson:

... the substance of Christian faith is not immobile, but eternal. ... in the eternal there is no beginning. God has no history, and neither has faith Nevertheless, people of faith and the world in which they dwell have one. They are history in their very essence.

The historian studies the life, the thought and the worship of those people of faith and the world in which they dwell, and from that study makes a contribution to our understanding of the Great Tradition, the continuing presence of Christ in his church.

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