History in Perspective

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Today, we must be honest about it, the case for a historical dimension has got to be argued. So many new things seem to be happening to humanity so quickly that the past may well be regarded as something that we simply do not have time to take into account. And there may be even more to it than that. It might be argued that the past is increasingly irrelevant, because, whether we like it or not, we are in fact developing a culture quite alien to any previous one. There is a good deal to this consideration. In the field of education, for example, we can see it in the decline in studies such as the classical languages and ancient and medieval history, and the increased interest in those that are seen as more directly relevant to life as we live it now, such as sociology and modern history – and here 'modern' is inclined to be interpreted as very modern indeed, not reaching back beyond a world recognizably like the one we live in, the world of industrialization and technology. A new study called 'industrial archaeology' is beginning to command attention. The steam-engine belongs to pre-history.

I am not at all sure that I am the kind of person best able to evaluate these developments. I have spent my life studying history and this may have distorted my judgement and led me to overemphasize its significance. However, I can only speak, or begin to speak at any rate, from my own experience. This, I suppose, makes me an 'existentialist'. Today we are all existentialists, in that we have a new realization of the individuality and uniqueness of each human being. That this development should have taken place can only be welcomed. Yet human experience suggests very strongly that every new insight carries with it an

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inbuilt risk. Here it would seem to be a risk of underestimating the fact that while every human being is a unique person his very humanity links him closely with others. Both the individual and the community of which he forms part are continuously growing out of the past and developing into the present. 'Now' is only our name for the line that divides them: the past is a factor in a continuing process. The existentialist vision can liberate us, but it can also imprison us. If pushed to the extreme, it may leave us thinking we are talking about God when in fact we are only talking about ourselves.

Now this may well be accepted as an abstract truth, without however having much bearing on the practicalities of life. A practical example may help, and no example could be more practical for our purposes than that of a Christian troubled by the new problems thrown up by his own time. In his time, John Henry Newman had had some misgivings over the definition of papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council, though his mind rested in the nuanced definition that actually emerged from the council. Some time afterwards he wrote to a friend who was still troubled. In this letter his sense of history produced a striking theological analogy. He recalled that the early Church had needed a whole succession of councils to deal with the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. 'They were not struck off all at once', he wrote, 'but piecemeal – one council did one thing, another a second, and so the whole dogma was built up. And the first portion of it looked extreme, and controversies rose upon it, and these controversies led to the second and third councils, and they did not *reverse* the first, but *explained and completed* what was first done. So it will be now. Future popes will explain and in a sense limit their own power'. It took perception – and courage – to write this a century ago. Much less of either virtue is demanded of us, and yet there can be few even now for whom Newman's words do not provide a genuine flash of intuition, a real deepening of understanding of the problems of our own day and age. They help us to realize that we have just lived through the second of the ecclesiological councils, and that there is no reason to believe it will be the last of them.

Two opposed reactions to the problems of our times may be summarized, fairly crudely, as follows. For one, I will simply borrow the title of a recent book: *Has the Catholic Church Gone Mad?* The other is a temptation to think that now things are

really moving that one big push will see permanently-effective techniques of evangelization being established (the stress on techniques may be getting a bit old-fashioned, for we are beginning to question the assumption that technology has the answer to everything). No doubt few would confess to holding either view in the crude way I have set it out. All I can say is that I have met people – on both sides – who came close to it.

Here again I can think of no better inducement to moderation than some knowledge of history, especially of the Church's history over the past two centuries. Two hundred years ago Catholics lived in a world of privileged and established Churches, with the monarchy and the nation at the centre and the papacy by comparison at the periphery. The French Revolution effectively ended this pattern of life. It was only a natural human reaction that the papacy should move back to the centre, and this centrality of the papacy found solemn theological expression in the definitions of the First Vatican Council.

But a great deal more was happening, much of it not so much because men were thinking differently as because they were living differently. In particular, the great development of modern communications had begun. The railway and the steamship drew the world together. They made possible a cheap and efficient public postal system. In consequence, all kinds of things that were not theology began to be mixed up with the theology of the papacy. To take again a concrete example. It is impossible to spend much time in any nineteenth-century Roman archive without being struck by the number of letters coming directly from priests all over the world and concerning quite small matters, seeking faculties, for example, to bless beads for five years. The way we think now, all kinds of theological questions spring to mind. Surely, we say to ourselves, a priest should have this faculty to bless from his priesthood itself? and in so far as he may have to seek it from another, surely his bishop should come into the chain somewhere? The questions are legitimate, but to set them in perspective we have to know something of history. A renewed consciousness of the position of the papacy had left Catholics in a mood to welcome a great centralization and uniformity in matters of detail. This could never have taken place to the degree it did were it not for such mundane developments as the railways and the public postal system. A sense of history will help towards a judgement of value. The definitions of the First Vatican Council are

not on the same theological level as the practice of writing directly to Rome for faculties to bless beads for five years. History of course will not come up with the answer – it is no substitute for theology – but it will give some indications of the direction in which the answer may lie.

One thing it will certainly indicate, that the answer is seldom simple. We are heirs to a long tradition linking us to the preaching of Jesus Chirst. There are very few questions about the meaning of Jesus Christ that have not been asked before, sometimes in terms very close to those in which they are being asked now. Pelagianism is not dead, because the human mind can never quite break free of a temptation to think in terms of the man who goes after God rather than in terms of the God who comes after men. I do not think I am wrong in my suspicion that there is a good deal of Arianism about, but I know from history that Christians have always tended to settle for a Christ who was either God *or* man. They find it hard to live with the fact that he was both – that God was so prepared to come after men that his Word became flesh to redeem them.

To approach these questions as if they had never been asked before is, first of all, to expose oneself to a quite unwarranted and unnecessary risk of coming up with the wrong answer. This, of course, is not to claim that the final answer has been given. But the questions have been reflected over by Christians quite conscious of what was at stake, some of them more conscious than we can be. If we do not have the intellectual humility to listen to Athanasius or Augustine, we are in a bad way. Guidelines have been laid down, advances have been made. Each generation must make them living and real for its own problems as it sees them, and in this sense reinterpret them. It cannot ignore them.

The argument might be taken further. The thoughts we derive from present experience may very well be true, but if we do not look beyond this immediate experience they are likely to be poor, narrow and constricted. Every generation of living men has its own preoccupations, its own particular assumptions. There never was a generation that did not find some aspects of Christianity more remote than others, seemingly of less immediate concern for the affairs of a particular day and age. Yet we must not pick and choose, for if we do we impoverish our response to the full truth. As the late C. S. Lewis wrote: 'The doctrines which one finds easy are the doctrines which give Christian sanction to truths you

already know. The new truth which you do not know and which you need, must, in the very nature of things, be hidden precisely in the doctrines you least like and least understand. A "liberal" Christianity which considers itself free to alter the faith whenever the faith looks perplexing or repellent *must* be completely stagnant. Progress is made only into a *resisting* material. ... We are not at all likely to be hidebound; we are very likely indeed to be the slaves of fashion. ... Our business is to present that which is timeless in the particular language of our own age. The bad preacher does exactly the opposite: he takes the ideas of our own age and tricks them out with the traditional language of Christianity.'

These are pretty searching words. Every generation faces the danger of heresy. The word may be unfashionable, but in its root sense of picking and choosing, of opting to be a sect, it is precise and accurate. To come back to Lewis again, 'the standard of permanent Christianity must be kept clear in our mind, and it is against that standard that we must test all contemporary thought. In fact, we must at all costs *not* move with the times. We serve one who said "Heaven and earth shall move with the times, but my words shall not move with the times".' No generation has the privilege of straying from the centre, or future generations will rightly hold it to blame. And this task of holding the centre is too important to be left to a professional elite of theologians, for this 'permanent Christianity' is something the Church must always be striving to live, not just something for the cerebration of a minority. Of course the theologian has a special responsibility, but everyone with any teaching function in the Church bears what can only be described as a special responsibility – to learn to draw on the past to know when he must resist and the sense in which he must *not* move with the times. He has more to do than answer the questions his times may be asking within the framework of current assumptions. He should be questioning these assumptions and suggesting the questions that should be asked. Christianity is not a soother to confirm our prejudices. It is always a challenge. It stretches the mind.

So far, I have been talking only about the historical dimension of theology. Closely linked with this is the aspect of Christian living normally studied as the history of the Church. This concentrates on problems of Christian living as they work themselves out in practice in different communities at different times and in

different places. It lives on a lower level than historical theology, but it provides an essential complement to it. I feel sure that many people remember of it is the impression of one long untidy mess. It may not be altogether a bad thing that they should retain this impression. As anyone who had really worked with people knows, life is in fact an untidy mess. The good priest in a parish was always an existentialist, though he might never have heard of the word. He took people as he found them. He did not expect to tidy things up overnight, or indeed that they would ever be tidied up. He may have smelt this wisdom first from a study of history, but his own history, his own life, reinforced the lesson powerfully. He came to realize that 'the Church is ever ailing, and Christ all but coming'. That is fairly close to the heart of a rather profound theology. On the whole, we learn it from life, but a study of history can speed up the process, especially, I think, when we are young.

To try some kind of summing-up. We are human beings with problems, and we believe that the answer lies in Christianity. This is faith in the strictest sense, because a God who so loved the world as to send his Son Jesus Christ is not demonstrable even to the extent that the God of the philosophers may be – and Scripture agrees with the philosophers that he is demonstrable. If I were asked to state in one sentence why I believe in Jesus Christ, the answer would have to take the form 'because I believe in the Church', for it is within the Church that I must meet Christ and through him his Father. To induce someone else to believe I can only invite him to share an experience. Two things assure me that this is not an unreasonable request. The first is that it is not in the theology of faith alone that one can only invite another to share an experience: the process is built into human living, it is part of the terms we get life on. The second is that the experience I wish people to share is not just my own experience, which may well be subjective and a delusion. It is the experience of the Church.

We keep coming back to the Church, and its long meditation on the preaching of Christ that has gone on down the centuries, where progress in understanding has always been made with such difficulty, where danger always threatens from the limitations of the individual mind and the current assumptions of any particular society. Of course we must begin with ourselves, but we must get out of ourselves to find the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus

Christ. Christ we must find in his Church: if he were present as a living man to each successive generation he would not be fully human. And his Church is a communion of shared experience, not just in one generation but down the centuries. The sum of this experience provides an assurance against imprisonment in the limitations imposed on us by the experience of our own times. It is not any assurance of finality. Men of the past, like men of today, have lived at the centre in some things, in some things at the periphery. That there are 'lessons of history' in the sense of ready-made answers to present problems is a delusion. But we must keep seeking the centre, and that means we must take account of the past.

One last word. I should scarcely have to make the point that knowledge in itself will not make a man a better Christian. What I have done is to argue the need for a historical dimension to our Christianity, and to suggest that it is more urgent today than it has been for some time past, especially for anyone who has a teaching function in the Church. Otherwise, in the deadly words of C. S. Lewis, we run the risk of being 'the bad preacher', 'who takes the ideas of our own age and tricks them out in the traditional language of Christianity'.