

Theology and History

by Michael Richards

447

The interpretation of the historical process is now a major academic industry. Just as we have bibliographies of bibliographies, we have histories of historical writing. Indeed, the day is not far distant when, in history as in metaphysics, the third degree of abstraction will triumphantly be reached: a history of histories of history. The historians, those who of all men should be urging most strongly a return to the sources, are also those who lead us to the most rarefied heights of speculation about our nature and destiny. 'The field of history should be for ever unenclosed, and be a free breathing-space for a pallid population well nigh stifled with the fumes of philosophy.' In the forty years since Augustine Birrell wrote *The Muse of History*, the Green Belt has become a built-up area; the pallid population now suffocates in libraries beneath the weight of reviews and journals whose learned footnotes tantalize with hints and glimpses of pastures long submerged.

When the theologian ventures on to this scene, the historian may well despair. Understandably, he hesitates before subscribing to Professor Toynbee's declaration that history passes over into theology. 'It is a bad habit in historians to take at their face value the hysterical exaggerations of the pulpit'; it is also a bad habit to turn to first causes when secondary ones will do. That may be why ecclesiastical history is reckoned a soft option by those academics who rate hard-headedness as highly as any man of business. Their own kind, they will tell you, have already sufficiently abandoned themselves to the construction of cloudy theories; they do not need the encouragement of the professional dealers on metaphysic and mystery.

If history has thus been theologized in recent years, it must also be acknowledged that it has taken its revenge. A theology which is not historical hardly dare raise its voice. The great crime nowadays is non-historical orthodoxy, an outrage made more sinister still by the fact that nobody knows who has committed it.¹ Now that theology, side-stepping the advances of Professor Toynbee, passes over into history, the earnest reader and the innocent enquirer may well give up the stony search for truth and curl up comfortably once more in their favourite armchairs to dream and doze over their old familiar copies of *The Bible Designed to*

¹Max Seckler's *Das Heil in der Geschichte, Geschichtstheologisches Denken bei Thomas von Aquin*, München, 1964, will no doubt do a little account-straightening.

be Read as Literature.

Before we thus leave the struggle to return to the carpet-slipped ease of the Saintsbury era, it may help if we collect together a few of the simple ideas we started out with before everything became so complicated. Alarm, confusion, or just plain impatience are often cured, they say, by standing still and counting up to ten.

In the first place, historical study has always been fundamental to every attempt to interpret revelation. Theology has not waited for the twentieth century to draw benefit from the collection and critical study of documents. The patristic and historical scholars of the present day would never suggest that they are doing anything more than attempt to emulate their predecessors. There are few centuries of Church history in which scholars have not made their contribution; the work of recording, criticizing and reappraising traditional material goes back, indeed, into Old Testament times. There is nothing novel in the idea of *ressourcement*. What we can point to are certain modern achievements: improved reference books, texts and translations, or the renewal of Trinitarian and Christological thought made possible by new editions of the *Acta* of the Councils, like that of Schwartz. The clearer knowledge we now have of such men as Nestorius or of the monophysite churches has opened the way to new ecumenical approaches; so has the work of the Pontifical Oriental Institute in editing the *Acta* of Florence, together with Fr Joseph Gill's study of that Council. History has given further help to theology; it is normal practice that the theologian should occupy himself in positive as well as in speculative studies. This is because the specific field of study regarded by the theologian as expressive of revelation is entirely historical. He cannot get away from the methods or the categories used by every historian, nor can he possibly have any wish to do so.

Secondly, besides the sector of history which the theologian regards as his special concern, he looks to history in general to help him determine the true Christian doctrine of God and man. Melchior Cano made human history the tenth of his *loci theologici*, without having the time to go deeply into the subject. J.-M. Levasseur has recently examined the use of secular history in theology more closely.² His style is at once coyly chatty and scholastically obscure, but he has made a laudable attempt to introduce precision into the discussion of a difficult subject, and others should certainly be inspired to follow his lead. The relationship of God to historical events outside the realm of Israel is clearly part of biblical faith, and theologians are now tackling the mass of material made available to them by the historians of the world's civilizations. It is not enough simply to repeat in an inflated form what the Bible says about the universal sovereignty and providence of God. We need to discover what exactly this tenth *locus theologicus*, human history, can itself tell us. Just as

²*Le Lieu théologique 'histoire'*. Trois-Rivières, 1960

theologians of earlier generations have elaborated a natural theology by reflecting on the physical world, so we look forward to the construction of a historical theology arising out of a reflection on the historical process as a whole and related to the knowledge conveyed by the particular revelation which is our central concern. The difficulty here will be to avoid being so dazzled by the light of salvation history that we see secular history purely in its terms, or alternatively of diminishing revelation by the application of secular categories.³

Thirdly, we shall however beware of trying to build too much on our knowledge of the historical process. C. S. Lewis wrote penetratingly on this theme in his essay *Historicism*⁴. Although there is something in the way of transcendent knowledge to be extracted from universal history, the vast syntheses of a Spengler or a Toynbee, the philosophical systems of a Hegel or a Marx leave the Christian theologian unmoved and more than a little sceptical. He is too much of a positivist ever to tie himself to an intellectual construction of this kind. If it is God made man who is supremely significant, then we are more concerned with men than with systems. The elements of the Christian faith are extremely simple: one life. The Christian theologian labours most of his time to establish the data enabling us to see that life clearly. To see it is enough. If he secures one or two glimpses into the depth of its meaning, he is more than content.

Fourthly, as E. H. Carr, says, it is improper 'to treat religion like the joker in the pack of cards, to be reserved for really important tricks that cannot be taken in any other way.'⁵ We do not range God among the other historical causes, invoking providence as a way of making things tidy when other evidence fails. We believe in God because the existence of the historical process itself needs explaining, just as does that of the physical world. Curiously enough, E. H. Carr recognizes that one can be a serious astronomer and believe in God, but not a serious historian. And yet the fundamental argument is really the same in each case.

Fifthly, and this is a development of the previous point, it is true that there is one particular pattern in history which the Christian takes to be especially significant. The historical movement centred on the New Testament events and gathering millions of people into a single coherent and organized way of life does not appear to be self-generating. It is considered by those who take part in it to be under external creative control. When we say this, we do not deny that when the scientific historian takes this or that segment of human history for his special study he will be able to discover an intellectually satisfying pattern within it. We do not expect him to drag in super-historical forces all the time. Even the Church his-

³E. C. Rust's *Towards a theological understanding of history* (O.U.P., 1963) appears to me to fall into the first of these excesses, and Alan Richardson's *History Sacred and Profane* (S.C.M. Press, 1964) into the latter.

⁴*The Month*, IV, 4 (1950), 230–243

⁵*What is History?* Penguin, 1964, 74

torian can really only study the human side of his subject-matter. What we do maintain is that the historical process as a whole is not self-explanatory (and I do not see why E. H. Carr need quarrel with that), and that attempts to find a more satisfactory rationale of the existence and activity of the Church than that provided by the Christian faith itself have not so far met with much success.

In the sixth place, Pope Paul told the observers at the Second Vatican Council that 'Your hope that "a theology" will be developed "that is both concrete and historical" and "centred on salvation-history", is one which we gladly support.' The central place of the salvation-history theme in biblical studies, in the liturgy and in catechesis, is solidly established. So is the importance of the recent work done on this topic, with which many of the great names of modern theology are associated. But it must be borne in mind that essential as this concrete and historical sort of theology is, it does not represent all that must be said on the subject, and belongs in fact principally to the sphere of catechesis, to the basic and elementary formation of the Catholic mind. Professor Cullmann, the Pope's interlocutor in this meeting with the observers, does himself in his theology stop short of the reflective stage. But the biblical writers themselves are not exclusively concrete and historical; and after catechesis there rises up the whole range of problems which biblical vocabulary and salvation history do not solve. The mystery of the Incarnation itself has had to be defined in non-biblical terms. The human mind asks metaphysical questions about creation and liberty and knowledge and existence; speculative theology often has to be abstract because that is the only way of doing justice to legitimate scientific demands. And beyond this lies the fact that revelation has at its centre a non-temporal order; the economy of salvation is certainly historical, but theology properly so called must use abstract concepts simply because it is focused upon something more than concrete, material realities.

Under the seventh heading it should hastily be added that there is of course also a need for reflection on the economy of salvation itself. We do not move directly from catechesis about temporal realities to conceptual thought about non-temporal ones. From Daniel to the Apocalypse and from there to Augustine's *City of God* and onwards to the present day there have been interpretations of sacred history. But these interpretations are never to be identified with the complete content of faith itself. That has been a constant temptation: to substitute an ideology for the theological virtues, to live by one's own or some other version of what the Church is doing in history. It is certainly felt strongly today, when partisans of this or that social movement proclaim their faith in terms of their right or left wing attachments, and when Catholic belief is regarded as an alternative to a philosophy of history like Marxism and so lowered in men's minds to the same level. Within the faith, there can be

many theories of history; Auguste Luneau has just reminded us of the fact in his *Histoire du Salut chez les Pères de l'Église*.⁶ Incarnationists and eschatologists continue to give battle; the present state of contestants may be learnt from Fr Besret.⁷

Eight: even if variety is allowed and detachment to be preserved, it is none the less essential for Catholics to keep up their thinking about sacred and secular history. It may well be that we neglected the subject just at the very time when the great modern historical ideologies were constructed. Luther was able to part company with us because he saw church history differently,⁸ and today the different approaches to ecumenism also imply different ways of understanding the work of God in history.

Ninth, a thought for liturgical meditation. The historicists have been suggesting that the only true feast of the Church is the celebration of an event in the history of salvation. An essay by Professor Jungmann himself, in his *Pastoral Liturgy*⁹ rescues us from such a restriction. We recall the past and look to the future; and we contemplate the timeless mysteries of God.

Tenth, and we must make an end. The Church is herself the meaning of history. That is what we believe, and that is how we are brought back all the time from the construction of our theories to the facts of the world we are living in. That is the principle which takes us out of the muddle with which we started. We explain history by working out our own salvation-history in the Church. And in the Church, we need both theologians and historians. The same Spirit, but diversity of gifts; neither confusing the disciplines nor confounding the disciples.

⁶Paris, 1964

⁷*Incarnation ou Eschatologie?* Paris, Cerf, 1964

⁸J. M. Headley, *Luther's View of Church History*, Yale University Press, 1963

⁹Challoner Publications, 1963
