

The Papacy and the Historian

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It is easy for a historian to write about the papacy indifferently but very difficult to write about it very well. It is even more difficult to write well about individual popes. If we console ourselves for the inadequacy of the current biographers of Pius xii or John xxiii with the thought that the passage of time will mend matters our optimism is misplaced. There is no outstanding biography of any pope. The first known original literary composition by an Englishman was a *Life of Gregory the Great* : in the thirteen hundred years since he wrote it he has been surpassed but not by very much. Gregory VII is a household name in every ecclesiastical history seminar but there is no modern scholarly biography in any language that I know of. The standard work, Martens' *Gregor VII*, is a collection of foot-notes of incredible pedantry to which the author never provided a text. Even the basic facts of the life of Peter had to wait until 1952 before they were established on a scholarly basis. There is, however, a basic scholarly consensus about the papacy as an institution, a consensus expressed in a brilliant and compelling book, Professor Walter Ullmann's *Growth of Papal Government*. There are, of course, dissenting voices, and distinguished ones, over this or that issue, but most of what is written and taught about Church history still does not stray far from the guide-lines laid down by Dr Ullmann.

This consensus, however, is in fact ideological. It conceives the Church as the publicists of the high middle ages conceived it : what they condemned as heresy modern scholars dismiss as irrelevant or fatuous. In the appropriate place I shall comment on high medieval papalism but for the moment I want to draw attention to the basic tenets of its ideology. The Church is looked at very much as a Roman law type corporation existing here and now. The sense of the Church as a community of the faithful, with the most important part in heaven, and the here and now as pilgrims being sorted out into the wheat and the chaff was largely lost in the high middle ages. The here and now corporation was a clerically dominated institution, hierarchically structured, with the Pope of the day at its head handing down orthodoxy and light to the faithful gathered in descending ranks below him. The medieval publicists might condemn Roman legal theory, especially when it was appealed to by lay rulers, but they still saw the Pope as a Roman *princeps*, his will indeed had the force of law, more so even than a Roman *princeps*, because his, not the people's, voice was *vox dei*. That law was articulated into the Canon Law, of which the most famous exposition is Gratian's *Decretum*, perhaps the most awesome trend-setting work ever written. The Church has a single body of universally valid, binding,

law, without contradiction. That law derives from many places : from Roman legal codes, from the Scriptures or the Fathers, but this does not matter. What holds it together and ensures the absence of contradiction is implicit or explicit papal authority. Those rules or principles that derive from non-papal sources are papally underwritten by the assumption that they are law because the Pope never contradicted them, not because some saint or Emperor promulgated them. All problems of interpretation that arise can be solved, on sufficiently predictable lines to make canon-law a precise science, by having Popes or their delegates look at the law and apply it to the new case.

For the vast majority of Catholics these problems never arose. They took their knowledge of the Church from school and pulpit and for them it was the ideology not the practice that mattered. They never had first hand experience of the system working qua legal system, unless they wanted a marriage annulled, when they discovered that whatever else the Church's legal system was, it was not expeditious. Most simply imbibed an image of the Church and the papacy. A Church always the same, with no essential difference between Peter and the Pius or Benedict of the day. A Church staffed by a clergy of necessity celibate and therefore always celibate. St Peter's mother-in-law was an embarrassment and, incidentally, a prime example of the dangers of Scripture reading. A Church with all the answers, which if they came from parish pulpits were put there by Rome in the first place. Who the Pope was did not matter. How well or how adequately he fulfilled his role were questions scarcely raised and of little meaning. All popes were holy, said nice things to nuns, and gave judicious sums to well-chosen charities. They were not supposed to be original or individual : essentially they were there to carry on the system and apply the rules. If one considers the vast amount of papal legislation recorded in Denziger it is astonishing how at the heart of it all is a basic picture of the Church and the papacy, largely put together in the twelfth century and developed but not much altered in essentials over the centuries.

Of course, it isn't true and it never was. There never has been a single uniform, law of the Church. The 'fact of plurality and the need for local differences', to quote Antony Archer (*New Blackfriars*, May, 1975, p. 203), has always been there. Contradiction has been avoided, not by the exercise of papal authority, but by the more mundane and very efficient means of lapse of memory and sheer inattention. Who would tremble with fear of Hell because Alexander vii once condemned kissing as mortal sin? Who would consider the modern ruling that it is mortal sin to operate a washing-machine for more than two hours on a Sunday as significant of anything other than a canonist's ignorance about the capacities of domestic washing machines? A Pope in Council, no less, condemned the crossbow as a weapon too horrible for Catholics to contemplate as a means of waging war. These are trivial examples at one level but they illustrate an important truth about the inescapable element of relativism in the application and development of canon law.

It is, however, trivial on no level when this alleged uniformity actively inhibits the Church in its functioning. Look at usury. Laws of impec-

cable pedigree condemn the taking of usury, period. The taking of interest has various consequences. In a rural society with a chronic shortage of capital, lending at interest gives the usurer such terrible power over the poor that the condemnations make perfect sense. When it became possible to put out money at interest without immediate or direct ill consequences—who feels guilty about drawing interest from a Trustee Savings Bank—a different casuistry is required. The demands of uniformity meant that the Church was committed to maintaining a set of moral rules in a quite different situation and faced the emerging world of capitalism with an inadequate and incredible casuistry. In the course of time the usury laws were forgotten. This is to have the worst of both worlds. In many parts of the world the old usury laws make sense and ought to be applied, whether the culprit is a village usurer, old style, or a multi-national company. To place the ITT investment programme in Chile under the same heading as a widow's investment of a few hundred pounds in a Building Society is nonsense. When it is claimed that the one is as harmless as the other is deadly, not only is common sense being exercised but an implicit denial of the fundamental identity of 'Catholic' moral rules is being made. When St Vincent of Lérins said that Catholicism is what is believed by everybody, everywhere, all the time, he was quite simply wrong, on the factual level. It is, however, very important where we go from here.

It is noticeable that the opinion is gaining ground, that the old uniformity of belief and attitude is falling away and in the process of being replaced by different and, up to a point, competing and opposing groups. Antony Archer goes so far as to say: 'No one form of the Church can hold these competing groups together—the things they are looking for from the Church are after all quite different. The solution would be federation and occasional coming together for a joint eucharist' (*loc. cit.*). Denys Turner makes a point, of all the more force because of the very powerful argument that forms its context: 'Just now, too, it may be necessary, indeed seems increasingly likely, that just when the official Christian Churches are drawing together in vertical ecumenical solidarity . . . they will have to split horizontally over the question of the socialist revolution' (*New Blackfriars*, June, 1975, p. 252). When, as in Denys Turner's argument, the old unity and the potential dispersal of authority, are interpreted in the categories of historical materialism, some new and very serious problems appear. He seems to think, if I understand him correctly, that the old authoritarian Church was a remnant of Feudalism and that the Protestant groups are at once the creation and the bearers of a process of bourgeoisification. The ecumenical movement, he argues, 'amounts to the effort to fully bourgeoisify a still remarkably Feudal Roman Church' (*loc. cit.*). If one is very much inclined to agree with him here one is still left with the problems of just how relative can one afford to get without making total nonsense of theology. There is, there must be, something in Vincent of Lérins' rule of faith, even if it is much less than he thought. In some sense Jesus Christ is, and must be, the same today, the same yesterday, and the same everyday.

I take it there is no way backwards that will solve our dilemmas. To take the literal and simple interpretation of Vincent of Lérins' rule will not do because it simply is not true. To go back to this kind of interpretation is to impose *a priori* a distortion of obvious historical reality upon our experience, using faith as a form of moral blackmail to stop us asking awkward questions. We must accept, I believe, with Denys Turner, that the sense in which the Church is a community is a future sense, that it will only be fully realised in the Kingdom, where we shall be rid of priests and churches in the kindest possible way. He is surely right to think of the Church here and now as necessarily a revolutionary movement. But we seem to me to be trembling on the verge of reviving a rather old controversy about realised and future eschatology. I know Denys Turner was not proposing an exhaustive examination of the whole range of problems necessarily raised when the topic he proposed is treated as seriously as he treated it. To say as he does 'Christ, love, community are present in the world, really present, in the form of their absence' (*op. cit.*, p. 250) seems to me to take us to the extremities of neo-Barthianism. I see what he means but I do not think it will altogether do. He leads up to the statement I have just quoted by offering what seems to me a very profound insight into the meaning of sacramental: 'Christ is present to the world only *sacramentally*. By that sacramental present (*recte* presence?) we mean, broadly speaking, the kind of presence which alone love can have in a world the very essence of whose structure is exploitation'. But why should such an insight lead to the conclusion that love is really present in the form of its absence? In this world of exploitation men give their lives for the realisation of justice. If you love, as Herbert McCabe puts it, you will be killed. People have loved and they have been killed. It seems to me therefore that in some sense we cannot put off love until the *eschaton* and if I am right here there is more to be said about the sacraments here and now than Denys Turner has said.

We are faced with the difficulty the sheer facts of the human condition offer to any attempt to talk seriously about human problems. We are simply forced for many purposes to talk as though humanity were made of discrete individuals with a gift, or even a necessity, for combination, but at the end of the day essentially solitary and single. Or we have to talk as though human beings were essentially social, essentially members of something; totally without meaning (as they would be without the means of living) outside a social context. Both these approaches throw some light on our experience, both are also sources of confusion. Denys Turner is, I think, taking the point made by the whole tradition of Catholic theology that Christians are members *per se*, and producing a wholly socialised view of the sacraments. One could place against this the kind of opposite view most powerfully presented by Kierkegaard. We are solitary individuals who make sense of things by becoming contemporary with Christ. We do not, as with Denys Turner, refer everything forward to the last days but backwards to the life of Jesus. We are solitary by Nature, by sin, we lose our solitariness by recognising the other people around as neighbours. It is essential that

the neighbour is given by God, not chosen by us. If we love our neighbour truly, as ourselves (Kierkegaard meant this very literally), then we open up the world for the love of God. It is as though God's love were like the electricity supply, useless, absent if you like, until it is switched on. Loving one's neighbour is what makes God's love available and at the same time what limits the capacity to take God's love into the world. It seems to me that this kind of view plainly points to something, amongst other things to reservations about the way Denys Turner talks about love and the sacraments. But equally the other view illuminates weaknesses in Kierkegaard. In particular he cannot produce a viable theory of the Church. Of course he never did, but I mean he could not have done even if he wanted to. His polemics against the local bishop and his savage treatment of the notion of an episcopal succession or a chain of witnesses show that. Plainly, however awful some or most of the chain of witness is, we only receive knowledge about Christianity from other people, from other generations, and in some sense the notion of a succession, of witness as a kind of transmission, is part of the human condition.

I do not think the difficulties can be overcome by a formula. It is perhaps, to use a dangerous analogy, as though Denys Turner is using a map with a mercator's projection and Kierkegaard is using a geometric projection. (The only significance of the choice of projections is that they are the only two whose names I can remember.) Only at the end of time can we take the obvious step of using a globe, avoiding distortion by using a representation in an extra dimension. What we need to do here and now is to find out what kind of projection will serve in this or that situation, and to remember that whatever we do our conclusions are always going to be distorted by an excessive individualism or an excessive concern with groups. What I should like to contribute to the debate is a discussion of an institution, in some sense a single institution, or at any rate a continuous one, namely the papacy, which has lasted throughout at least three of Marx's historical epochs, and to try and discuss some of the more general problems raised by modern talk about the Church *ambulando* in a historical context.

Before I do this I must say something briefly about what I mean by historical here. I do not suggest that a simple empirical study of the papacy, or anything else for that matter, will produce an accumulation of circumstantial details which will gradually take on a shape, and *hey presto*, by purely empirical study, a solution, an agreed, view will emerge. What comes out depends on what sort of mind the historian started with. When the late Sir Frank Stenton set out to study the Norman Conquest he had nothing in his mind but a muddled mish-mash of Stubbs's, Maitland's, and Freeman's theories; wholly conflicting interpretations; when he finished his study some sixty years later he left books full of muddle, very learned muddle, but muddle none the less. You must have questions to ask. When studying something like the papacy naturally a Catholic will have different questions to ask from a non-Catholic, and with respect to Denys Turner, a Marxist historian period, will have different questions from a Catholic Marxist. Now this

does not imply that a historian has *carte blanche* to produce the history he wants or his situation needs. The History of the C.P.S.U. Bolsheviks, is a very bad history not because it is Marxist (it isn't) but because it is a scissors and paste job, after the fashion of the *Tales of the Martyrs for Young Protestants* on which I was brought up. It fails at the very lowest and crudest level. What is said is not true, what is true and important is suppressed. Its main aim is not to tell the truth but to apply labels for approval and disapproval and in the end exhort conformity to the leaders of the day. 'Trust your leaders where mistakes are almost never made', from the Phil Ochs song, might well be its epigraph.

It seems to me that a serious historical re-examination of the career of the late Joseph Stalin is a very important requirement for the present day Left. So far as I can see on most of the matters on which he disagreed with Trotsky before Trotsky's exile, he was right and Trotsky was wrong. What is more, the kind of criticisms of Stalin and Soviet Russia Solzhenitsyn makes appear much more deadly than they really are because the *History of the C.P.S.U.B.* approach is wholly useless as an intellectual weapon. The very fact that it exists, moreover, makes it impossible to produce something useful because that would destroy the comforts of the simple faithful. Why does not one of the Western Communist parties produce a Marxist history of the Russian Revolution of a serious kind, at once filling a need and demonstrating an independence?

Such a history would be perfectly intelligible to a non-Marxist, because though he would not ask the same questions as a Marxist he could understand them all right. In medieval history Marxists have seen that from their point of view the important question is: how was the capital accumulated that made possible the take off into sustained economic growth and the bourgeois revolution that followed. They have answered this question as much to the satisfaction of non-Marxists as of Marxists. The difference is that non-Marxists want to ask other questions and even Marxist medieval historians tend to feel that there are other questions that can profitably be asked and answered. But the important point here is that after the questions have been posed the answering is partly an empirical process, the examination of sources, whose conclusions can be criticised and understood both by those who posed the original questions and those who think other questions more significant. Some pre-war Marxists were inclined to produce a theory of bourgeois origins derived from the late Henri Pirenne's work on towns. Urbanisation arose, and with it the accumulation of capital, on the margins of feudal society. Outlaws and outcasts undertook trade as a desperate means of earning a living when the normal source, the land, was not available to them. In general Marxist terms this is a perfectly plausible thesis. Unfortunately it just isn't true because the evidence shows that capital was accumulated within agrarian society and many towns started as villages. The present teaching on the subject is very much more profound than anything the Pirenne school produced and more important, more plausible, because based on better research.

Again a whole thesis can be destroyed, not because it can be dis-

proved in the way simple statements of fact can be but because it gets less and less plausible and involves more and more epicycles to make it work. To take Professor Ullmann's view of the medieval papacy, it can be criticised on two levels. Dr Ullmann is saying: This is how the theorists of the high middle ages viewed the Church and the way they thought it pope-centred. Not everyone is as convinced as he is that the middle ages were quite as monolithic as that. Much more important, however, is the view itself, which is a coherent and comprehensive account of the ecclesiology of the seminaries of a generation ago. If this is the theory, it is false, it will not work. The whole theory is supposed to be contained in some passages from St Paul; then by 'iron logic' a succession of popes deduced the appropriate canons for the needs of their day like Euclid deducing his geometry. Thus when something new was needed and something new appeared all novelty was hastily removed. Authority, agreement, unanimity, tradition were all harmonised by the staggering con-trick that law is essentially deductive and not created. Of course if this view of the Church were right there would be no place for a pope. A computer, whilst less picturesque, would be a good deal more efficient (just recall *Humanae Vitae*).

This is the kind of historical enquiry I am proposing. The questions will be set by me because of what I believe to be true and what seems to me to be important just now. But the enquiry will be to some extent empirical, straightforward academic history, but none the less theological if you like, for that. Some of the conclusions, if true, must have serious theological consequences. I must, with this kind of topic, put on the agenda for discussion at least, questions such as how much papalism is residual feudalism, etc. I want to suggest that some kinds of recent progressive theology, notably that of Cardinal Suenens, is simply an attempt to make the Church the Common Market at prayer. Some proposals about the reform of papal elections are designs for a bourgeois papacy. I want to argue against these and I will not pretend that my arguments are simple empirical arguments, though I will also point to simple points of fact that create difficulties for the views I am criticising. I am trying to operate in a field where historical study and theological enquiry overlap. I shall pay particular attention to the 'feudal' papacy partly because much of the papalism we have now is a product of the feudal era, in Marxist terms, partly because it seems to me that arguments such as Denys Turner lead one to think very seriously about this aspect of the question. I am not writing in any sense a Marxist study of the papacy because I do not know what a Marxist history of the papacy would be like. I do intend to criticise very severely some attempts by East German Marxist historians to produce one but I do not intend to offer an alternative. I want to ask some very old-fashioned questions in a new way and above all I want to try and throw some light on the way we have to be both in and out of the age we were born into at the same time. But most of all I propose to take for granted that 'traditional' papalism is dead, not only no longer plausible—it never really was—but no longer credible, and to seek a new kind of papalism appropriate to the much more dispersed Church to which so many think we are moving.