

THEOLOGY AS INTERPRETATION OF TRADITION: THE ROLE OF HISTORICAL THEOLOGY IN SERVING TODAY'S CHURCH IN AMERICA

In its *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (or more exactly "In Today's World") Vatican II, reviewing "The Circumstances of Culture in the World Today," spoke of the "birth of a new humanism, in which man is defined first of all by his responsibility toward his brothers and toward history" (GS 55: Abbott, p. 261). In his eloquent response to Father Wright's address at the CTSA convention in 1971, Professor David Tracy stated, "I believe it is fair to state that the problem of historical consciousness is *the* problem which every contemporary theology must eventually face . . ."¹ Similar quotations could be multiplied without end. There is, indeed, hardly any need to prove that the historical dimension, which has become one of the distinctive marks of contemporary human existence and self-understanding, is also an integral dimension of any contemporary theology worthy of this name.

Yet, if I am not mistaken, the terms "historical theology," "interpretation of tradition" do not enjoy great popularity on the contemporary American Catholic scene. In our age of rapid and radical change, it is the present, or rather the future, which captivate our attention, so that historical scholarship in theology, especially in Catholic theology, is generally, as it seems, on the decline.

This trend which in varying degrees appears in every country is perhaps even more marked in the United States. Our situation today is neither new nor fortuitous. In the volume on *Religion* in the series of Princeton Studies on Humanistic Scholarship in America, Professor J. H. Nichols begins his summary on "The History of Christianity" between 1930-1960, with the lapidary sentence, "American scholarship in church history does not bear comparison with that of the chief European countries in either quality or quantity." Had he considered Cath-

¹David Tracy, "A Response to 'Meaning and Characteristics of an American Theology,'" *CTSA Proceedings* 26 (1971), p. 34.

olic scholarship (generally neglected in the whole volume) his judgment would not have been more optimistic. Andrew Greeley repeatedly blames "the un-historical and anti-theoretical approach of the American Church in the past century and a half" for the failure of Catholic leadership in creatively confronting the ongoing crisis. "Innovation and change are not rejected but frequently turned in the direction of eagerness to try new gimmicks instead of attempts for more profound understanding."²

The roots of this state of affairs are manifold including, first of all, the relative shortness of North American (white) history. There may be other reasons as well. At the CTSA convention two years ago, Professor Joseph Sittler, following an insight of Sidney Mead,³ developed the thesis that the, for a while, relatively limitless space for expansion enabled Americans to avoid the problem of time and history in depth—but he also clearly stated that this confrontation cannot be postponed any more.⁴

Thus a reflexive confrontation of history, unpopular as it may be, is eminently actual today for us Americans, and especially, I may add, for American Catholics.

The deepening of our historical understanding, however, is not only the demand of the present situation, but an inner exigency of Christian theology. For if theology, specifically Christian theology, is a *fides quaerens intellectum*, a study which, "through participation in and reflection upon a religious faith,"⁵ seeks a deeper understanding of the content of this faith, which in the case of Christian theology is a faith in the self-revelation of God culminating in Jesus Christ, then the

²Andrew Greeley, *An Interpretation of the History of American Catholicism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1967), pp. 302-303.

³Sidney Mead, "The American People: Their Space, Time and Religion," *The Journal of Religion* 34, No. 4 (1954). The stated purpose of her article is "... to suggest that, in the shaping of the American mind and spirit, space has thus overshadowed time in formative significance."

⁴Joseph Sittler, "An Aspect of American Religious Experience," *CTSA Proceedings* 26 (1971), 1-17, esp. 10-17.

⁵Cf. J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Scribners, 1966), p. 1.

interpretative understanding of this revelation as transmitted to us, i.e. of Christian tradition, is one of the essential functions, indeed the central function of Christian theology. In this perspective, historical theology, rightly understood, is not simply one of the disciplines (even less one of the auxiliary disciplines) of theology, but rather an integral and central dimension of the whole theological enterprise.

I. HISTORICAL THEOLOGY AND THE PRESENT PREDICAMENT OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

The preceding rather general picture (open, of course, to discussion) should be completed, I think, by a more concrete consideration of the present Catholic scene in the United States, not only as found in university faculties of theology, but in the Church as a whole. Our convention this year, to use the words of Father Wright in his circular letter announcing the theme, should "be speaking . . . to the educated laity and the pastors trying to bring some measure of peace and mutual understanding at a time when many experience turmoil and misunderstanding."

In considering the Catholic scene in the United States from the point of view of the potential contribution of historical theology to the aims stated above, I would like to put forward two tentative theses for discussion: (1) that the relative weakness of American Catholic historical theology has been to a large extent responsible for the relative unpreparedness of American Catholics (especially the clergy and educated laity) for Vatican II; and (2) that the same accounts in a large part for the extreme polarization in American Catholicism, a polarization which, as we all know by experience, makes dialogue between (to use the often misleading labels) "progressive" and "conservative" Catholics usually much more difficult than dialogue between Catholics and non-Catholic Christians.

As for (1), I can here only briefly recall the important role the so-called "resourcement" or "renewal" movements (biblical, liturgical, patristic) had in the long-range and in-depth preparation of Vatican II. These movements represented historical theology interested not only in a renewed understanding of the riches of early Christian traditions, but

also in putting the insights thus gained in the service of today's Church. (Perhaps besides the ones mentioned, one should list also the scholastic, specifically Thomistic, "renewal"—but with important reservations. For (Neo) Scholasticism and (Neo) Thomism of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries manifested in many of its representatives a sad lack of *historical* understanding and a rather rigid attempt to *return* to a past system, disregarding both preceding and subsequent doctrinal development. For a while, indeed, several historians of Catholic theology gave the impression (see for example the work of Hocedez) that the Catholic attempts in the direction of a fuller elaboration of the historical dimension of theological understanding (e.g. in the Catholic Tübingen school) have been definitely superseded by the Neo-Thomism of *Aeterni Patris*. Also, not only such ambiguous attempts as those of Loisy, but the basically well-balanced ideas of the so-called *Nouvelle Théologie* have experienced the wrath of rigid Thomists.)

Certainly, the biblical, liturgical and patristic renewal was not absent from the American Catholic scene. The impact, however, on the American Catholics—both clergy and educated laity—was much weaker and slower than in Western Europe. The underlying reasons were various, first of all, as it seems to me, the historically and sociologically conditioned pragmatic, largely anti-intellectualist mentality of American Catholicism (as described for example in the work of A. Greeley quoted above) coupled with the generally ahistorical tendency of American Christianity.⁶

Vatican II can be seen as the fruit of the resourcement-movement just described (e.g., Constitution on the Liturgy, on Divine Revelation, on the Church). Surely other currents were also at work: the ecumenical movement (again much stronger in Europe than in the United States) and a more positive approach to contemporary social problems (where the leadership of Europe would need qualifications).

The fact is that the disciplinary and doctrinal "changes" which to those acquainted with the movement of renewal represented a well prepared and often anticipated recovery of the best traditions (most often of early Christianity), to people without the same historical perspective could and often did appear to be shocking innovations.

⁶Cf. Mead and Sittler cited above.

As to (2), one could argue, I think, that the post-Conciliar polarization has been caused again to a large extent by the same lack of historical perspective. The common premise of both extremes is often the same error: that the Council simply innovated to suit modern taste—an innovation which the extreme conservatives detest and thus reject or at least try to retain within the strictest boundaries possible, whereas the extreme progressives welcome and try to extend to all aspects of discipline and doctrine. So-called "Traditionalists" in fact are notoriously ignorant of the extent of changes and pluralism in the early Church and the Catholic tradition in general, whereas "Progressives"—or whatever name one chooses to give to the opposite pole—are prone to dismiss the past as irrelevant, forgetting that continuity with its origins, and thus tradition, in essentials is an integral mark of Christianity. Ironically, those who try to preserve the customary or simply the valuable but historically contingent features of the immediate past as unchangeable tradition do often as much to undermine true tradition in the mind of priests and laymen as the ruthless revolutionaries, for in changeable matters changes will sooner or later most likely occur—to the utter bewilderment and despair of those who mistakenly regarded the matter in question as definitely established for all times.

II. THE TASKS OF HISTORICAL THEOLOGY IN THE SERVICE OF TODAY'S CHURCH IN THE UNITED STATES

To these tentative theses concerning the present situation I would like to add a sketch of the main tasks of historical theology today as I see them, a sketch which should be, obviously, expanded and if needs be corrected by our discussion.

As a preliminary remark, I would like to say that even though historical theology in America should, if true to its very nature, serve the American Christian community, it would be a mistake, I feel, to promote artificially a distinctive American historical theology. I said "artificially" for if we theologize with all the intellectual gifts and resources available in America, that will surely be a distinctive American contribution, but in order to be a real contribution to theology, it should *aim* at an understanding which is valid beyond our temporal and

geographical boundaries. Thus the following points will refer to historical theology as such.

The Nature of Historical Theology. First of all the very nature of historical theology needs some clarification. As a start, one can accept Professor J. Pelikan's preliminary description: "The genetic study of Christian faith and doctrine."⁷ As he points out, this study has been designated in various ways, the most important of which are "historical theology," "history of dogma," "history of theology," "history of Christian thought," and "history of doctrine." "Historical theology" often designated Church history, and this is surely included in the historical dimension of the theological enterprise. In a certain sense one could even argue that this is the widest sense of the term, for it includes the history of the (Church's) doctrines as an integral part. From another point of view, however, a genetic study of Christian doctrines—where doctrines could again be taken with J. Pelikan as "what the Church believes, teaches, and confesses"—transcends general history in the direction of the historical understanding of doctrine, or rather of what doctrines are about: God as revealing himself in Christ. Historical theology, however, as I envision it, may refer also to an integral dimension of what is usually called dogmatic or systematic theology. For an understanding of the genesis of doctrines is not only a preliminary task to the understanding of these doctrines themselves, but rather an integral dimension of their understanding. Thus, in my judgment, a truly comprehensive systematic or dogmatic theology should integrate the historical and the "speculative" (philosophical) modes of understanding in a dialectical synthesis (where, of course, "speculative" would be in need of further distinctions and clarifications).

Such an understanding of historical theology would, first of all, obviously transcend the obsolete but still tempting dichotomy of post-Tridentine "positive and speculative" theology where the "positive" part was generally conceived as proving (apologetically) a doctrine from Scripture and tradition, leaving the deeper understanding of the same doctrine to the "speculative" part.

Secondly, it would correspond to that deeper insight into the nature of historical understanding to which contemporary philosophy

⁷ Jaroslav Pelikan, *Historical Theology* (New York: Corpus, 1971), p. xiv.

of hermeneutic, especially H. G. Gadamer's *Wahrheit und Methode*, has called our attention: that the understanding of a tradition, the self-understanding of the present interpreter, and the deeper understanding of the "object" with which both the tradition and the interpreter should be concerned, are achieved in a dialogical fusion. In agreement with Schillebeeckx I am convinced that this "New Hermeneutic"—of course not without important corrections and expansion—could serve Catholic theology even more fully than what its uses in Protestant exegesis would indicate.

Thirdly, it would also invite a critical reflection on one of the most stimulating recent attempts of a general theological methodology, Lonergan's *Method in Theology*.⁸ Of the eight functional specialties in theology proposed by Lonergan the first three would, it seems, correspond roughly to "positive" historical theology: (1) research, (2) interpretation and (3) history. It seems to be, however, problematic to separate from this historical dimension the other functional specialties: (4) dialectic, (5) foundations, (6) doctrine, (7) systematics, aiming at deeper understanding. Professor Lonergan shows himself to be fully aware of contemporary hermeneutic literature. I am, nevertheless, not (yet) convinced that his methodology takes adequately into account the very special "object" of theology (God revealed himself in the concrete historical person of Jesus Christ) and the implication of its peculiar nature for theological hermeneutic.⁹

Historical Theology and the Periods of the Development of Christian Doctrines. A whole series of questions should be discussed concerning the peculiar nature and tasks of the study of doctrinal development in different phases of Church history:¹⁰ (a) the relationship of histori-

⁸Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

⁹Cf. in this sense K. Rahner, "Kritische Bemerkungen zu B. J. F. Lonergans Aufsatz: Functional Specialties in Theology," *Gregorianum* 51/3 (1970), 537-40. These notes of Rahner's refer to Lonergan's brief presentation of his ideas in *Gregorianum* 50 (1969), 485-505 (= *Method in Theology*, Chap. 5) and should be re-examined in the light of the complete book).

¹⁰Cf. E.G. my art. "Recent Surveys of the History of the Early Church and the Tasks of the Historiography of Early Christianity," *Church History* 41/4 (1972), 444-451.

cal theology to biblical studies (unduly separated in the customary division of specialties; (b) the special significance of the early (patristic) period and the danger of one-sided models in explaining (and often dismissing) doctrinal development in the early Church (e.g. the "Hellenization of Christianity" model of Harnack and followers, M. Werner's theory of frustrated eschatological expectation, etc.); (c) the particular problems and fruitful tasks of the study of medieval, modern and contemporary developments.

Historical Theology and the Ecumenical Dialogue. An aspect, however, of historical theology to which special attention should be called is its ecumenical potential. History of the Church, and perhaps even more history of Christian doctrines would require, on the basis of the very principles of sound historiography, an inclusion of the whole Christian tradition, not only the Roman Catholic. The same approach would be implied on the basis of the theological principles enunciated by the Decree on Ecumenism of Vatican II. If this understanding of historical theology is right, then the study of the genesis of Christian faith and doctrines and their development in non-Catholic Christian Churches and ecclesial communities is not simply a means to understand our "separated brethren" better but rather an integral part of our effort to understand God's self-revelation better.

Historical Theology and the Ongoing Reform. Historical theology, as we have seen, is demanded by the very nature of God's self-revelation, and not simply by the particular circumstances of the contemporary Catholic situation in America. By fulfilling, however, its proper vocation within the Church, historical theology will also contribute to that "continual reformation" to which Christ summons her always, but now perhaps with special urgency. For by revealing to us both continuity and change, unity and pluralism in the course of the development of Christian doctrines (and life) it helps us (in cooperation with other factors, to be sure) to find the way to authentic renewal and reform. Both the history of Christian doctrines and contemporary hermeneutic reflections teach us that true understanding of past traditions always involves a certain reinterpretation in which our present horizon with all our intellectual resources and vital experiences is

brought to bear upon the questions and answers of the past but is also at the same time stimulated, corrected and enriched by those questions and answers.

If this is true in every interpretative understanding of a past tradition, it is true in a higher degree in theological understanding of the Christian tradition. For theology as an *intellectus fidei* presupposes faith, and thus in listening to tradition the theologian is—in a sense to be qualified in various ways—listening to God's Word. Moreover, he is listening not as an isolated individual but as a participant in the community of faith, under the authority and guidance of a magisterium that is animated by the Spirit of Christ. Surely, the relationship between the magisterium and historical theologians is not at all simply that of the latter being guided by the former. It is nevertheless important to realize that historical theology in order to serve today's Church in America will have to be not only good history but also true theology, faithful to the Word of God alive in the Church.

DAVID L. BALAS O. CIST.
University of Dallas