

READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES: THEOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS

Anyone addressing this topic—reading the signs of the times—before the Catholic theologians of the United States at this moment in the history of the church in this country is sorely tempted either to preach a jeremiad or issue a ringing call to the barricades. But our President-elect, Jon Nilson, has said that this first plenary address of the convention should “consider the demands of a genuinely theological reading of the signs of the times,” and that is what I shall attempt to do. We must turn first to the urtext for our topic, *Gaudium et spes*, Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World.

To discharge this duty [namely, with the guidance of the Paraclete, to continue the work of Christ who came into the world to give witness to the truth, to save and not to judge, to serve and not to be served], the church has the duty in every age of examining the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel, so that it can offer in a manner appropriate to each generation replies to the continual human questionings on the meaning of this life and the life to come and on how they are related. There is a need, then, to be aware of, and to understand, the world in which we live, together with its expectations, its desires and its frequently dramatic character.¹

According to *Gaudium et spes*, examination and interpretation of these signs of the times are a *duty* of the church because such scrutiny is prerequisite for the fulfillment of its mission to continue the work of Christ. Three points should be noted about the text. First, the goal of this examination and interpretation is to respond to questions intrinsic to us as human beings on the meaning of life now and in the world to come and the relation between them. Second, in order to respond to these questions, the church must understand the character of the world, its hopes and desires. And third, this task of interpretation is never complete but must be done continually if it is to be “appropriate to each generation.” Thus the church is engaged in an ongoing hermeneutical act in which the text is the world. Paul VI described this reading of the signs of the times as a “theological interpretation of contemporary history,” and “not merely a matter of a posthumous reading of the past.” It is, he said, the attempt “to discover, in time, signs . . . indications of a relationship with the kingdom of God.”²

¹*Gaudium et spes* 4; English translation, Norman P. Tanner, S.J., *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990) 2:1070*.

²Paul VI, audience of April 16, 1966.

Some years after Vatican II Cardinal Maurice Roy provided a commentary on the phrase, "the signs of the times," in which he raised three important questions: (1) by what standard is the comparison made between the world at any time in its history and the kingdom of God?; (2) who has the ability to do such an interpretation of history?, and (3) how?³ In light of *Gaudium et spes* and several papal documents, especially John XXIII's *Pacem in terris* and Paul VI's *Ecclesiam suam* and *Octogesima adveniens*, he offered five observations. First, it is the right and duty of each and every person to discern the relationship between events in the world and the moral good which he or she knows through conscience. So the interpretation of the signs of the times is "not a monopoly of Christians."⁴ But second, Christians do have a unique contribution to make to this discernment. They know that reading the signs of the times entails asking whether events and achievements, ideas and discoveries enrich or diminish true humanity. As Cardinal Roy put it, "Is the new event the image or the caricature of human nature?" So one interprets the signs of the times by "discovering correspondences and resemblances" between authentic humanity and the experience of the contemporary world. Lest this seem to presume too static a view of what it is to be human, Roy quickly noted human nature is "in motion." Hence the question that Christians must ask when engaged in this hermeneutics of the signs of the times is whether contemporary events harmonize with "biblical and messianic history" from the Resurrection to the Parousia.⁵ The third observation is that individual Christians will clearly interpret the signs of the times in quite different ways, both because one person has access to data that another is denied and because individual consciences differ. The believer must resist the temptation to identify his reading of the times in which he or she lives with God's judgment. Even allowing for greater clarity on the charism of prophecy, it must be remembered that the prophetic word of God is handed on through the community of God's people and not to any particular individual. So the church as that community is the locus of the Christian interpretation of the signs of the times. Thus—Roy's fourth observation—what saves a truly Christian interpretation of contemporary history from the twin temptations of "pseudo-prophetism and neoclericalism, which consist in wishing to derive directly from Scripture a political system (and one only) at the whim of individual exegesis," is that the Christian community reads the signs of the times with assistance of the Holy Spirit, in communion with the bishops, and in dialogue with other Christians (presumably not in communion with the bishops) and all people of

³"Reflections by Cardinal Maurice Roy on the Occasion of the Tenth Anniversary of the Encyclical 'Pacem in Terris' of Pope John XXIII (April 11, 1973)," #149, in Joseph Gremillion, ed., *The Gospel of Peace and Justice: Catholic Social Teaching since Pope John* (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 1976) 561.

⁴Roy, #152, in Gremillion, p. 562; emphasis in the original.

⁵Roy, #153, in Gremillion, p. 562; emphasis in the original.

good will.⁶ This leads to the fifth observation, that genuinely ecclesial discernment of the signs of the times should prevent any privileging of Christian believers as interpreters in such a way that all other interpreters can be dismissed as necessarily mistaken. Reading the signs of the times is a collaborative effort by Christians and all people of good will, and dialogue with the world must not be allowed to degenerate into "a Christian monologue."⁷

Thus Cardinal Roy answers his three questions. The standard by which one draws comparisons between the kingdom of God and the contemporary world is the moral good revealed by each person's conscience. While all human beings have the ability to apply this standard to the events transpiring around them, the Christian community led by the Holy Spirit and united in hierarchical communion have a unique contribution to make to the reading of the signs of the times. That reading is a collaborative effort among all people of good will in which Christians must be especially careful to avoid any hint of "triumphalism."⁸ This is helpful, no doubt, but I think that there are more fundamental issues that Roy leaves unexamined. Why is it intrinsic to the church's mission that it pursue a theological interpretation of contemporary history? This question is really twofold: why is history necessarily a subject of study for Christian theology (Why a theology of *history*?), and why must history necessarily be studied theologically (Why a *theology* of history?). And then how is such a hermeneutic task possible for contemporary history? I offer a few comments in response to these questions that may move us forward in considering "the demands of a genuinely theological reading of the signs of the times."

I

Theology demands historical study. Time is not a container in which we exist; time is how we exist. Existing in time is not a way of being finite; it is finite being. No one in the Christian theological tradition has thought more acutely about this than Augustine. Indeed, I think it is true to say that time is one of the two "obsessions" which appear again and again in Augustine's work, the other being communication. One of the most famous of his discussions of time is that in *Confessions* 11 where time is treated as both barely existent and constitutive of the human person.

Now, what about those two times, past and future: in what sense do they have real being, if the past no longer exists and the future does not exist yet? As for present time, if that were always present and never slipped away into the past, it would not be time at all; it would be eternity. If, therefore, the present's only claim to be called "time" is that it is slipping away into the past, how can we

⁶Roy, #156, in Gremillion, p. 563; emphasis in the original.

⁷Roy, #158, in Gremillion, p. 564; emphasis in the original.

⁸Ibid.

assert that this thing *is*, when its only title to being is that it will soon cease to be? In other words, we cannot really say that time exists, except because it tends to nonbeing.⁹

Time barely exists. The past is no longer; the future is not yet. Only the present exists, and that barely. For one cannot even say "present" in the present. When one utters "pre-," "-sent" has not yet come into existence, and when one comes to "-sent," "pre-" has become the past and is unrecalable, whether it is gone a fraction of a second or a billion years. All that we have is the present, and the present is the razor-thin edge at which that which is not yet flips to become that which is no longer. And yet in this present which barely is, we can remember the past and anticipate the future, neither of which are. Throughout Book 10 of his *Confessions*, Augustine leads us to realize that that remembering is the way we come to be. (Perhaps inevitably as a person of the late classical world, Augustine is more interested in recalling the past than in projecting into the future.) The rush of the barely existing present into the nonbeing of the past dis-members us. We are spread over the past, and at each fleeting present we remember our selves, re-collect ourselves and re-create ourselves. We are always and endlessly engaged in putting ourselves together from the fragments we rescue in memory. Even our ability to remember is something we rescue from the past and re-member.

So I remember that I have often understood these matters, and I also store in my memory what I discern and understand now, so that later on I may remember that I understood it today. It follows that I have the power to remember that I remembered, just as later, if I recall that I have been able to remember these things now, I shall undoubtedly be recalling it through the faculty of memory.¹⁰

We are utterly constituted by time and yet are able, by this extraordinary faculty of memory, to transcend the present, the only time which exists. We are created transcendence, at which Augustine can never sufficiently marvel.

When we remember ourselves, however, we recall not only what we did and experienced personally. History is always extended biography in the sense that all history brings it about that anyone of us lives. One cannot understand oneself or any other person apart from the history that produced us, and that history is virtually limitless. It is quite literally true that if my great, great, great, great, great (etc., etc.) grandfather had not married with my great, great, great, great, great (etc., etc.) grandmother, *I*—the actually existing *I*—would not be. All that made them who they were led to the mating that makes it possible for me to be. "All that made them who they were" has no limit. The whole web of history is entailed in the existence of anyone. If Alexander had not marched, if Columbus

⁹Augustine, *The Confessions* 11, 14 (18), trans. Maria Boulding, OSB (Hyde Park NY: New City Press, 1997) 296.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 10, 13 (20), p. 250.

had not sailed, if one of my ancestors had decided not to emigrate to the United States, if my father had died in World War II, I would not be here. Each of us is the product of a virtually endless interconnection of choices and accidents, of actions and inactions that make it the case that he or she exists and not someone else. To understand anyone of us it is necessary to understand the whole of history.

Why does this make history a concern for the Christian theologian? Why does it make a theology of history necessary? One might respond that the history of Christian belief is the history of a believing community and that such a community's history is intertwined with universal history. That would lead us to a consideration of the relationship between salvation history and universal history—no small question whether one casts it as the relationship between sacred and profane history in the style of theologians of a generation ago or as the relationship between Christianity and non-Christian religions, the currently "hot" way of raising the issue. I wish to suggest another, perhaps more fundamental, certainly more classical concern that makes history intrinsic to Christian theology. If time is what we are not and not only the environment in which we are, and if my being who I am is the result of the deeds and misdeeds, the decisions and experiences of all who have preceded me—if that is part of what it is to be a human being—then our doctrine of the Incarnation demands that we affirm the same of Jesus of Nazareth.

If we take the Incarnation with radical seriousness, then the claim that humanity has been united with the divinity in the person of Christ is an assertion not only that the divine has entered time but that the divine has incorporated time into itself: not only has God entered into history but history has entered into God. Much might be said about such a claim, were there world enough and time. I shall limit myself to noting one point: as I cannot understand me apart from the whole of history, neither can I understand the incarnate Christ. If my being this particular person is historically conditioned, so too is Jesus' being the particular person he was. Thus Christology demands a theology of history. Perhaps this is one way of understanding the classic Christian image of the virgin birth: the intersection of the divine self-gift to creation with the historical decision of an historically conditioned human being. The absence of a human father proclaims the Incarnation as a divine inbreaking into history, a disruption of its seamless course. Thus the Incarnation cannot be explained finally and fully as the product of human history. The fact that there is a human mother, however, underscores that the Incarnation is also a moment within history and as such is related to every other moment in history. As with so much of Christian belief, we must assert a "both-and" rather than an "either-or." The Incarnation of the Logos is a divine act which cannot be explained by or deduced from history and also an historical event woven into and emerging from history. As the decision of my great, great, great, great (etc.) grandparents to marry makes it the case that I exist as the unique person I am, so the decision of Mary's great, great, great, great

(etc.) grandparents to marry makes it the case that she existed as the unique person she was and so that her son existed as the unique person that he was. If anyone of my ancestors back to the beginning of the species had decided not to marry or to marry a different person than he or she did, if one of my ancestors had died prematurely or been in the wrong place at the wrong time, I would not be—and if anyone of Jesus' ancestors back to the beginning of the species had been other than he or she was or done other than he or she did, Jesus would not have been Jesus. This is not necessarily to say that, if anything in history had been other than it was, the Incarnation would not have taken place. It does mean, however, that if anything in history had been otherwise, the humanity assumed by the Logos would have been other than it was, and so the incarnate Logos would not have been Jesus of Nazareth. Not only is our encounter with God historically conditioned, so is God's encounter with us. Christology, and so Christian theology, demands the study of history.

II

History demands theological study. One of the first and most influential statements of the requirements of historical study is that of Herder who distinguished three essential concerns in the work of the historian.

Every historian agrees with me, that a barren wonder and recital deserve not the name of history: and if this be just, the examining mind must exert all its acumen on every historical event, as on a natural phenomenon. Thus in the narration of history it will seek the strictest truth; in forming its conception and judgment, the most complete connexion: and never attempt to explain a thing which is, or happens, by a thing which is not.¹¹

These three concerns, on which Herder thought all historians would agree, later became the "principles" of historical study on which Ernst Troeltsch placed so much emphasis: criticism, correlation, and analogy.¹² The historian must recognize that judgments made about the past, like judgments about natural phenomenon, are never final, that they are more or less probable, and that the historian must not put more weight on any given judgment than its level of probability will bear. The historian must seek coherence both among the categories he or she employs and among historical events. (Herder tended to think in terms of coherence among the historian's ideas and concepts; Troeltsch

¹¹Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Reflections on the Philosophy of the History of Mankind*, trans. T. O. Churchill, ed. Frank E. Manuel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968) 214.

¹²Ernst Troeltsch, "Ueber historische und dogmatische methode in der Theologie," *Gesammelte Schriften*, 2 Bd.: *Zur religiösen Lage, Religionsphilosophie und Ethik* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1913; photographic reprint, Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1962) 729-53, esp. 731-34.

stressed coherence of historical events one with another.) And the historian must not appeal to occult principles as causes for historical events. As Herder put it, "This philosophy will first and most eminently guard us from attributing the facts, that appear in history, to the particular hidden purposes of a scheme of things unknown to us, or the magical influence of invisible powers, which we would not venture to name in connexion with natural phenomena."¹³ Troeltsch recast this as a requirement that the historian not appeal to causes for past events which he or she would not admit for present events. Some have understood these principles as ruling out a theological interpretation of history.¹⁴ Herder, however, did not: "The sensual contemplator of history, who in it has lost sight of God, and begun to doubt of Providence, has fallen into this misfortune, from having taken too superficial a view of his subject, or from having had no just conception of Providence."¹⁵ Indeed, Herder thought that one could not study history without employing theological categories.

Before asking why theological categories are necessarily invoked in the study of history, however, the first point to note is that the historian self-consciously employs categories. This is what distinguishes history from chronicle, the mere listing of events without seeking to relate them to one another causally, the "one damned thing after another" notion of history.¹⁶ History properly so-called is the attempt to discern the intrinsic relations among events so that patterns of meaning emerge from the data which the chronicler is content simply to collect. Discerning relations demands that the historian select some data as important and deemphasize others as insignificant, and this inevitably involves employing categories which, while they cannot be arbitrarily imposed on the data, cannot claim simply to be data themselves. Even chroniclers have, in fact, imposed at least one category on the events which they recount: narrative. Narrative, however, is perhaps a necessary but not a sufficient category for history.¹⁷ I suggest that the study of history always carries within it

¹³Herder, 214.

¹⁴A particularly interesting and insightful such reading is that of Van Austin Harvey, *The Historian and the Believer: The Morality of Historical Knowledge and Christian Belief* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1966).

¹⁵Herder, 112.

¹⁶Leonard Krieger, *Time's Reasons: Philosophies of History Old and New* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 11: "Prominent in the characterization of history as a western discipline has been the requirement that there be some kind of coherence, whether explanatory or generalizing, among the facts. Without this quality, history by definition is no longer history; it becomes chronicle."

¹⁷Krieger, 11: "Far from being resolved by narration, the relationship of coherence in history to narration has been as problematical as its relationship to the separate facts of which the narration was composed."

elements which push us to employ categories which can only be described as theological because history is not a problem but a mystery.

In part, the mysterious character of history is due to the fact that we are *in* it, not just students *of* it. History always has a provisional character. This is the point of Troeltsch's principle of criticism. The historian cannot escape provisionality in his account because the historian him- or herself is always an historical being and so incapable of an "objective" view of history. Historical judgment is always marked by the situation of the historian making the judgment. When we read Livy or Otto of Freising or Edward Gibbon, we not only learn about the eras they have studied, we also learn what those eras looked like to a Roman man of letters in the reign of Augustus or an Austrian bishop in the twelfth century or a skeptical Englishman of the Enlightenment. It is true, of course, that some historians have forgotten or chosen to ignore the uncomfortable fact of their own participation in history. This is done by the implicit or explicit claim to stand at some point "outside" history, usually at the end of history. Religious apocalyptic, the Enlightenment's confidence that it had attained the universal method of scientific knowing, the Hegelian "absolute philosophy," and the Marxist classless society have one thing in common: they allow the historian the comforting illusion of viewing history "from the outside" and so objectively. The end of history has been announced many times, and usually the announcer is an historian. The historical investigator is never at the end of history, however; he or she is always right in the middle of it, and all the historian's judgments are themselves historically conditioned. This is one reason that history is marked by a sense of "something more," a not quite sayable quality which continually escapes even the best historians.

There is a still deeper element of mystery about history, however. It can be glimpsed in what is presumed but unstated in Bernard Lonergan's description of the historian's work:

It is in the field of meaningful speech and action that the historian is engaged. It is not, of course, the historian's but the exegete's task to determine what was meant. The historian envisages a quite different object. He is not content to understand what people meant. He wants to grasp what was going forward in particular groups at particular places and times. By "going forward" I mean to exclude the mere repetition of a routine. I mean the change that originated the routine and its dissemination. I mean process and development but, no less, decline and collapse. When things turn out unexpectedly, pious people say, "Man proposes but God disposes." The historian is concerned to see how God disposed the matter, not by theological speculation, not by some world-historical dialectic, but through particular human agents. In literary terms history is concerned with the drama of life, with what results through the characters, their decisions, their actions, and not only because of them but also because of their defects, their

oversights, their failures to act.¹⁸

The historian does not only investigate what people meant, that is, what the historical subjects intended, desired, attempted, but also what was "going forward," which is as much—perhaps more—the result of what was unintended, unexpected, undesired by anyone. The historian is concerned both with what historical actors intend and what they encounter, undergo, struggle against or submit to. He or she studies both what persons in history do, what they originate, what they choose, and with the circumstances in which they find themselves and within which they act and make choices, in short, with both their freedom and their destiny. That is the polarity which marks history: freedom and destiny. We are all situated beings; we find ourselves in a set of circumstances and within those circumstances we make decisions and act—or fail to act. What we choose and whether and how we act affect the ensuing set of circumstances in which we and others are situated. We can only exercise freedom in a context, but the results of our freedom shape the context. As Langdon Gilkey has written,

Historical events . . . result from the polarity of destiny and freedom, from the given and the new human response; it thus unites given and "necessary" actuality with possibility in creating new events. Actuality is in each case the new result of preceding actuality and possibilities presented to freedom. Being is temporal and comes to be as destiny is actualized ever anew by freedom.¹⁹

Any attempt to negate or diminish one of these poles—to reduce history to impersonal laws understood mechanically or organically on the one hand or to absolute and unconditioned freedom of the individual will on the other—distorts our understanding and wreaks havoc in life. But freedom and destiny are not easily reconcilable notions. In order to protect the reality of freedom, spontaneity, the unpredictable, the never-quite-expected, some historians have registered deep suspicion about anything that smacks of a theology or philosophy of history because they understand such approaches as attempts to uncover a "deep structure" in history which freedom is inevitably marginalized or evaporated. In order to rescue history from being reduced to an ensemble of individual acts rooted in the impenetrable interiority of individual historical agents, others have tried to discern patterns which operate beneath or around or through agents whose freedom is more apparent than real. It is impossible to study history without appealing to the categories of freedom and destiny, but how to relate the two categories to one another without dissolving one into the other is an enormous problem, possibly after the problem of the one and the many of which it is a variant, the most persistent problem in western thought.

¹⁸Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) 178-79.

¹⁹Langdon Gilkey, *Reaping the Whirlwind: A Christian Interpretation of History* (New York: Seabury Press, 1976) 97.

This polarity of freedom and destiny is further complicated by the fact that we experience both as distorted. The situation in which we find ourselves is often encountered not as an array of possibilities for developing our intelligence and creativity but as an implacable and inscrutable determinism which dooms us to frustration; destiny is experienced as fate. We can use our freedom in ways that are destructive of ourselves and of others and that mysteriously end by negating freedom itself; freedom is infected with sin. Sophocles' Oedipus and Kafka's K know what it is like to live in a world where every choice is the wrong one, where destiny has become fate; Augustine's is the classic account of the discovery that one has freely given away one's freedom, that one is a sinner. Historians have to deal not only with destiny and freedom but with the fact that both are ambivalent, easily and often skewed, destructive rather than constructive. History is not only shaped by destiny and freedom but by the frightening fact that neither work quite right. A historian whose narrative dealt only with concrete possibilities for growth and flourishing and the particular choices made by individuals to realize one or other of those possibilities would be a Doctor Pangloss insisting that all is for the best in the best of all possible worlds; a historian who sees only the self-deluding and self-defeating efforts of human actors within a chaotic world be a "chronicler of futility."

Both the structure of freedom and responsibility and the bondage consequent on the warping of that structure must be spoken of, since to obscure either side is to ignore real aspects of the concreteness of historical experience. For those who are primarily aware of the negative side of history, therefore, history appears as chaotic and incoherent, without rational or moral structure. If they are aware of history's concrete actuality, they feel unable to understand history's essence, and are conscious only of the fated, grim "given" of history and the wayward freedom that responds to it. They can only see history . . . as meaningless. For those who are aware predominantly of the creative side of history, the structure of destiny and freedom is plain. But as in the present case of the optimistic scientist conscious only of the future possibilities of freedom in history, history itself will reveal soon enough how abstract and inaccurate was their grasp of history's actuality.²⁰

It is impossible to tell the story of meaninglessness. Narrative *structure* is, after all, structure, pattern, the connecting together of elements in such a way that pieces fit. If the historian tells a story of freedom in conflict with itself and circumstances that seem to foreclose any hope or initiative, he or she nevertheless tells a story which is not simply "a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." Inevitably it will be a story about distorted freedom which is still, often surprisingly, effective at least in part and destiny which, however bleak, provides opportunities which continually surprise. To a theologian such a story sounds remarkably like a tale of sin and redemption. If one takes account

²⁰Gilkey, 126.

of the reality of *both* the exercise of freedom and possibility of promise in history *and* the depth of tragedy and sense of being trapped by fate, one must use categories expressive of transcendence, categories that can only be described as religious. Obviously historians do not—or, at least, do not often—work with the categories of sin and grace, fall and redemption, but if they are to speak about the experience of freedom and destiny, the deep structure of history, then they will end up working with categories which are broadly describable as religious and may be mythological. Sometimes the religious categories employed in interpreting history are clearly and directly mythological—the *hybris* which provokes nemesis, the Deuteronomic pattern of blessing, sin, punishment and repentance—and sometimes they are less obviously so—the Hegelian “cunning of Reason,” the Whig historian’s inevitable march of “progress.” The attempt to put some kind of control on language always straining toward mythology is a theological task.

The consideration of history nudges us into theology. Theology, like history, demands coherence among its fundamental categories and requires that those categories be appropriate to the experience they are used to describe. There is, however, a demand placed on theological categories which is not required of historical categories (although some schools of historical thought, for example, Marxist historiography, have claimed something similar, thereby demonstrating how theological they unintentionally are). Theological categories must be transformative, that is, that they not only describe but alter events. Theology is always in service to a Gospel which is not only information but proclamation, and as such its categories not only explain but change. In traditional Catholic theological parlance, they are sacramental in the sense that they make real what they signify.

The biblical understanding of language is relevant here: to name something is to change it, to make it become what it is called. Perhaps the classic instance is Genesis 2: 19. God creates all the animals and brings them before the first human being so that they may have their names assigned to them. They become what the human being calls them. The name both reveals what the thing is and makes it to be what it is. Throughout the Hebrew and Christian scriptures naming is revelatory and creative, in short, sacramental. So, too, in the recounting of history, to name an action in history is to reveal it for what it is. The “historian,” that is, the historical explainer, is also the proclaimer, the one who reveals and constitutes the meaning of historical events by calling them what they are. His categories are sacramental. So, in 2 Samuel 12:1-15, the prophet Nathan draws an analogy between David’s arrangement of Uzziah’s death and his adultery with his wife Bathsheba and the rich man’s theft of the poor man’s one ewe lamb. When David denounces the injustice, the prophet reveals that the king has condemned himself: “You are the man” (v. 7). The categories which Nathan has employed to describe events cut through the royal obfuscation and both show David what he is and lead him to acknowledge the truth of the depiction. In doing so, they lead David to the truth and bring him to repentance and so alter

the context of the events described. Nathan's recounting of events name and transform; they effect what they signify.

III

Reading the signs of the times is a theological interpretation of contemporary history. As the image of "reading" suggests, this is a hermeneutic task. I have no intention of launching into a discussion of hermeneutical theory, which is both a growth industry in theology in the past thirty years and a vast swamp into which many have wandered never to be heard from again. I must content myself with three brief observations. The first is that interpretation is like conversation. Charles Taylor has described conversation as

not the coordination of actions of different individuals, but a common action in this strong irreducible sense; it is our action. It is of a kind with—to take a more obvious example—the dance of a group or a couple, or the action of two men sawing a log. Opening a conversation is inaugurating a common action.²¹

Neither dancing nor sawing a log comes easily to most of us. Conversation is a demanding, time consuming, and difficult activity. We all know how easily we can misunderstand the words and actions of people with whom we share basic beliefs and attitudes, people with whom we are fundamental agreement, people who are "like us." How much more difficult then with those with whom we fundamentally disagree, who speak and act from traditions of thought and value which are foreign to us? Indeed, it is not surprising that misinterpretation is frequent and that some might regard it as impossible. Much recent thought has emphasized precisely historical and cultural conditionedness, the fact that we live at particular time and places, speak particular languages and are shaped by particular circumstances. The postmodern critique of the universal abstract model of reason that emerged from the Enlightenment and dominated much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries has helpfully underscored the strenuousness of conversation across cultural and traditional lines. But has it rendered such conversation impossible? If it has, then I fear that it has also made history into a rhetorical exercise in which past events are plucked from their (largely unknowable) context and made to serve the purposes of the historian—which may not be far off what many of our contemporaries think history is. Conversation is possible only if it is possible for the participants to experience the contexts in and from which others speak and act as possible for them. This does not mean that we accept the other's framework as true, merely that it can be imaginatively possible for us. If we find it simply impossible to fathom how any human being can live within that framework, then conversation has become

²¹Charles Taylor, "Cross-Purposes: The Liberal-Communitarian Debate," in *Philosophical Arguments* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) 189.

impossible, and so has history.²² The capacity to conceive of the other's world as a possible world for human beings even though not the world in which we live or would ever want to live is an act of empathetic imagination.

An appeal to empathetic imagination may suggest an appeal to the tradition of Romantic hermeneutics, and in one important respect it is. I do not mean that the historian must be gifted with some sort of heightened intuitive faculty which allows him or her to penetrate the experience of other times and cultures. Nor do I mean that the historian imaginatively becomes or enacts the other. What I do mean is that the historian by painstaking investigation of the multiple aspects of the age, by becoming immersed in the material and intellectual remains of that age, can conceive of that world as a possible world for human beings even if he does not regard it as a desirable one. The careful, patient student of an historical period notes similarities and slowly discerns the coherence among material artifacts, economic patterns, social organizations, political structures, artistic creations and intellectual achievements of the period and so begins to discern what Vico wrote of as the determining characteristic of the age, what Herder termed the *Zeitgeist*. By thinking across disciplines and specialized areas, by seeking what Dilthey described as the human intentionality of a past age, the historian imaginatively constructs a worldview which may be foreign, uncomfortable, even threatening but *possible* as a context within which human beings might live. The need for such empathetic imagination is no less in interpreting contemporary history than in studying the remote past. The recognition of the pluralism of the present has made us acutely aware of the difficulties of speaking to those with whom we share a time and a place but not a worldview. The same patient listening and observing that the historian brings to reading past history must be employed in reading contemporary history so that we can imagine the worlds of our radically different contemporaries as possible human worlds.

My second observation is that the "common action" which Charles Taylor describes as conversation is a mutual questioning between the historian and the human event that he or she is investigating. To ask what a human expression of the past or present—an action, an institution, an organization, a written or spoken text—means is simultaneously to ask what it meant to the historical actors and what it means *to us*. Thus an act of historical interpretation may reveal something about the event studied but always reveals something about the historical interpreter. Conversation always changes the participants because it is never guided entirely by them. As Hans-Georg Gadamer reminded us,

²²For a more thorough discussion of the possibility of authentic conversation, see Michael J. Himes, "Public Theology in Service to a National Conversation," in Edith L. Blumhofer, ed., *Religion, Politics, and the American Experience: Reflections on Religion and American Public Life* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2002) 123-40.

We say that we "conduct" a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will "come out" of a conversation.²³

This suggests that a theological interpretation of contemporary history will inevitably impact not only the contemporary event but also the theological interpreter. One of Cardinal Roy's points about reading the signs of the times was that the church is the locus of the theological interpretation of contemporary history. As such, when the church reads the signs of the time it is changed in ways that it cannot anticipate in advance. In its interpretive task the church learns as well as teaches. This is a very salutary reminder.

Because it is entrusted with the proclamation of the Gospel, the church as the community of the believers has a unique and precious gift to communicate to the world. It witnesses to the world the deepest truth of the world's existence which is tragically obscured by sin. It sacramentalizes the true meaning of human history, the grace at the roots of the world. But the church is also the recipient of gifts from the world. It not only interprets and teaches; it listens and learns. There is a tendency at times to forget how much the church has learned from the world. The Christian churches, including the Catholic community, came late to the struggle against the evil of slavery in the western world. It learned from movements of life and social organizations outside its pale that slavery is incompatible with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In our own time, the church can scarcely claim to be in the vanguard of the movement for full liberation and recognition of the gifts of women. The language of human rights, which has now become the accepted vocabulary of Catholic social teaching, was learned from the secular culture and did not originate within the church. I am struck by the "Enlightenment bashing" which one sometimes hears in church circles, even in theological circles, as though the church had and has nothing to learn from the movement of modern thought and life. Need we be reminded that, when we criticize the political, social, economic and educational structures characteristic of modern western culture since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, we are doing so as beneficiaries of the freedoms of speech and publication and assembly which are the gifts of that culture?

The forgetfulness of what the church learns from its reading of the signs of the times is an instance of what might be called "ecclesiological monophysitism."

²³Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1995) 383.

As in Christological monophysitism the divine nature swallows up the human so that one ends by emphasizing the divine nature of Christ to the virtual exclusion of the human, there is a tendency in ecclesiology so to stress the divine in the constitution of the church that its reality as a human society is eclipsed. The church is both a divine mystery in its foundation, its final goal and the means by which it realizes that goal, and a human community. As such, it can be studied from all the angles and by all the methods which apply to human communities, e.g., history, sociology, anthropology, politics, economics, social psychology, and so forth. For example, if Catholic social thought speaks of the importance of the principle of subsidiarity in societies, the church cannot be exempted from the range of that principle on the ground that it is a divinely grounded mystery. To be sure, the social sciences cannot say everything that needs to be said about the church but what they can say is valid and important. This ecclesiological monophysitism becomes especially destructive when it leads to a denial of social sin in the church. This has been phrased as the difference between speaking of a church of sinners and a sinful church. Certainly no one questions the first: the church is a society of sinners all of whom stand under God's judgment and in need of conversion, repentance and forgiveness. But can one say that the church itself is sinful? To be sure, the church's foundation, its final adherence to the Gospel, and its sacramental celebrations cannot be corrupted by sin; the prayer of Christ and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit preserve the church from ever falling finally away from holiness. Yet the church—the community, not only the individual members—always requires reformation. This is especially important at this tragic but pregnant moment in the history of the Catholic community in the United States and throughout the world. The church *qua* church as well as all the members of the church needs to examine its life, confess its sinfulness, do penance and reform its actions and structures. If it hears the call to repentance from the secular press and communications media, so be it. The truth is the truth, no matter the speaker. When the church discerns the signs of the times, it not only teaches; sometimes it learns.

How does one know that a reading of the signs of the times is true? The third observation I offer is that any interpretation of history which lays claim to be true, that is, not historical fiction, must exhibit coherence and adequacy. Its categories must create a systematic organization of data by means of a method which can give some account of itself. This is what allows history to be a *Wissenschaft*, if not a "science" in the usual sense of the word in English (that is, a body of knowledge developed and organized by the "scientific method" of hypothesis, experiment and recording of results). The adequacy of an historical account is shown negatively by demonstrating that alternative accounts are less comprehensive and coherent and so "fit the facts" less well. The positive demonstration of its truth, however, is its practical efficacy in human life.

History has always been directed to practical purposes.²⁴ It may be rooted in the pure desire to know but its truth is shown by its enrichment of life, its helpfulness in defining problems and its fruitfulness in resolving them. The correct response to any reading of contemporary history is, "So what?" It is all well and good to insist that one has been thorough in one's examination of the data, rigorous in one's method of interpretation, and systematic in one's application of explanatory categories. That may justify the claim that one's reading is meaningful, but is it true? There is, I think, only one way to reply to that question, and it is not an appeal to the authority of the reader or the privileged status of the framework of reference of the reading. The truth of an interpretation is shown in that one lives more fully by living in accord with it than in contradiction to it.

Truth is luminous. When we come to the truth, it strikes us with a sense of rightness, aptness, facticity, self-evidence that renders argument superfluous. Certainly one may come to the truth by argument; that is why reader of the signs of the time must be able to demonstrate that he or she has been rigorous in searching out the relevant data, systematic in his or her handling of the data, and consistent and coherent in organizing the data. Conviction of the truth of a reading or interpretation, however, only comes when the reading appears to us with the luminous matter-of-factness which elicits the response, "But of course!" That luminosity may strike us immediately, but more often it is the result of a

²⁴Note the practical concerns of the two "fathers" of historical writing, Herodotus and Thucydides:

I, Herodotus of Halicarnassus, am here setting forth my history, that time may not draw the color from what man has brought into being, nor those great and wonderful deeds, manifested by both Greeks and barbarians, fail of their report, and, together with all this, the reason why they fought one another.

(Herodotus, *The History* I, 1, trans. David Grene [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987] 33.)

The absence of romance in my history will, I fear, detract somewhat from its interest; but if it be judged useful by those inquirers who desire an exact knowledge of the past as an aid to the understanding of the future, which in the course of human things must resemble if it does not reflect it, I shall be content. In fine, I have written my work, not as an essay which is to win the applause of the moment, but as a possession for all time.

(Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War* I, 22, 4, trans. Richard Crawley, *The Landmark Thucydides: A Comprehensive Guide to the Peloponnesian War*, ed. Robert B. Strassler [New York: Free Press, 1996] 16.)

Herodotus records the great deeds of his time so that they can inspire others in the future to equal them. Thucydides offers his account of the events of his time as a warning so that others in the future will not repeat them. Ever since, historians have been motivated by one or other or some combination of these concerns. Historians interpret the past in order to affect the present and the future.

convergence of instances when the interpretation works with, fits into, makes sense of our lived experience. To appropriate a term from Newman, the self-evidential quality of a reading of the signs of the times is discoverable by something very like the illative sense. In an argument the illative sense provides the comprehensive view that grasps the chain of argument in a single moment and so sees it as true.²⁵ In an interpretation of history, remote or contemporary, the illative sense enables us to see that the proffered reading and the experiences of our life intersect so that each lights up the other. This mutual illumination of life and historical interpretation can only occur if one actually lives in accord with the interpretation. The test of a reading of history is that one live on the basis of its truth and see what happens. If the community of believers wants to know whether its reading of the signs of the times in the theological categories of the Christian tradition is true, the community must live in accord with that reading and attend to its fruits.

In summary, then, I have suggested that Christian theology is not possible apart from the study of history, that the study of history implicitly or explicitly appeals to theological categories, and that a theological interpretation of contemporary history—a reading of the signs of the time—requires an empathetic imaginative act by which we recognize the worldview of others as possible for us, demands that the church as well as the world be converted and transformed, and is shown to be true by being lived.

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²⁵John Henry Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1979) 271: "I have already said that the sole and final judgment on the validity of an inference in concrete matter is committed to the personal action of the ratiocinative faculty, the perfection or virtue of which I have called the Illative Sense, a use of the word 'sense' parallel to our use of it in 'good sense,' 'common sense,' a 'sense of beauty,' &c.;—and I own I do not see any way to go farther than this in answer to the question."