

HISTORY—THE TRUE VIEW

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It is axiomatic that the best defense against attack is a vigorous offensive. The respective mental attitudes of two opponents have a primary influence on the outcome of their clash. The one fighting on the offensive has assurance in his ultimate victory, confidence in the strength and durability of his weapons, he knows when and where his next move will be; whereas his opponent, while perhaps equally confident and assured, is none the less harassed by a constant mental anxiety—he must ever be alert and vigilant to repel attacks from where he least expects them. It is this continual mental strain that has wearied, exhausted, and finally sent down to crushing defeat countless individuals, societies, institutions, and even whole nations when engaged in struggles that threatened their very existence.

In few phases of Catholic life has this truth been better exemplified than in the field of history, and in no phase has it unfortunately been made use of to a smaller extent by Catholics—with lamentable results apparent to every student of Catholic history. From the outbreak of the Protestant Rebellion to the present day, the chief point of attack on the Church has been her history.¹ Doctrinal teachings, sacramental system, and disciplinary practices have been assailed, it is true, but only secondarily to the flood of invective that has been hurled at the history of the Church. It is beyond our present purpose to enter into a detailed analysis of the nature and growth of the anti-Catholic historical bias, so aptly styled by Cardinal Newman, in his "Lectures on the Present Position of Catholics in England," the "Protestant Tradition." His masterly analysis of it remains as unassailable today as when first it was uttered, 1851, and as true of the present United States as of the England of seventy-five years ago. To those familiar with this work of the great

¹ For a summary of the historical attacks on the Church, see Guilday, "Introduction to the Study of Church History," St. Louis, 1925, especially ch. 6, "The Mission of the Catholic Historian."

Oratorian, this may seem to be an exaggeration, yet when we see pouring from the presses of America, in daily newspapers, magazines, and books an unceasing stream of misrepresentations, half-truths, insinuations, and downright lies against the Church, the time has come for us to realize that Catholics can no longer afford to brook in silence the deliberate campaign of calumny, so trenchantly characterized by Cardinal Newman as "wholesale, retail, systematic, unscrupulous lying." The virulent hatred of the Church which stimulated the early historical attacks has not abated nor been modified with the passing of four centuries. Today it is as bitter and unrelenting as ever in its shameful course. In whatever instances, and they are comparatively few indeed, due recognition has been paid to the history of the Church, the tribute is, with but few notable exceptions, grudgingly yielded.

That any recognition at all is paid, is due in great measure to the herculean labors of individual Catholic scholars, pathetically too few in number for the magnitude of the task which has confronted them. And much of even their work has been dictated by a defensive attitude of mind, rather than an offensive one; they have been concerned chiefly with replying to some baseless attack on the history of the Church rather than with setting forth dispassionately, yet in no hesitating tones, the accomplishments of the Church as a standard for the non-Catholic world to measure up to. From the outset of the conflict with Protestantism in the field of history has this been so, but the time is long past when the only extenuation that can be urged is that this attitude was thrust upon Catholics by the nature of the attacks.

With the rise of the scientific methods of historical research² but few sustained counter-offensives have been launched by Catholics. The want of any such concerted movement, and the great detriment accruing to the Church from that want was most clearly recognized by Pope Leo XIII in his celebrated Brief on Historical Studies, addressed to Cardinals De Luca, Pitra, and

² A brief account of this development in historical work will be found in Allen Johnson, "The Historian and Historical Evidence, N. Y., 1926, ch. 5, "The Evolution of Method." Longer and more detailed accounts can be found in G. P. Gooch's "History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century," 3d revised ed., London, 1920; and Edw. Feuter, "Histoire de l'Historiographie Moderne," Fr. trans. Paris, 1918.

Hergenroether, August 16, 1883.³ This letter was in effect a command to Catholic historians to wrest the weapons of history from the hands of hostile assailants of the Church and turn them against the attackers. The Pontiff's words are: "For, since hostile attacks on the Church are, as We have already stated, based principally on history, the Church should meet them with kindred weapons, and where she is attacked the more bitterly, she should gird herself with greater diligence to repel the assaults."⁴

The Brief marks a turning point in Catholic historical scholarship, and within the past forty years, there has been a gradual awakening of the Catholic historical consciousness. A mere awakening, however, is but a beginning; the movement must be brought to fruition with a flood of works written from the Catholic standpoint to offset the baleful effects of the long-in-trenched "Protestant Tradition," for nothing less than a veritable flood will suffice to produce any general modification of the hatred, jealousy, and suspicion harbored for centuries past against Catholics and their Church. These works must be produced, not by authors who are Catholic in name only, but by scholars inspired by the Catholic philosophy of history, which is thus succinctly expressed by Pope Leo XIII: "For all history cries out in a certain way that it is God Who by His all-wise Providence directs the varying and continual changes in mundane things, and turns them, even in spite of men, to the glory of His Church."⁵

The schools of the so-called "new history" have been striving confusedly to identify and isolate some single, continuous, unifying thread around which to weave the story of mankind. At present there are eight such theories maintained⁶ most of them supplementary to one another, yet all united in one particular, a complete, unqualified rejection of all consideration of the Catholic viewpoint. Indeed, the latter is fortunate if in some

³ "Acta Sanctae Sedis," vol. XVI, 1883, pp. 49-57. An English translation appeared in the "Ave Maria," Notre Dame, Ind., Sept. 22 and 29, 1883, vol. XIX, pp. 741 ssq. and 761 ssq.

⁴ "Etenim cum hostilia tela, uti diximus, potissimum ab historia peti solent, oportet ut aequis armis congrediatur Ecclesia, et qua parte oppugnatur acrius, in ea sese ad refutandos impetus majore opere muniat." I. c. p. 55.

⁵ "Clamat enim quodammodo omnis historia Deum esse qui rerum mortalium varios perpetuosque motus providentissime regit, eosque vel invitit hominibus ad Ecclesiae suae incrementa transfert." I. c. p. 56.

⁶ Cf. H. E. Barnes, "The New History and the Social Studies," N. Y. 1924, p. 31 ssq.

instances it is merely set aside; in most cases it is the butt of supercilious sneers.⁷ All of these theories of history are attempts to find a satisfactory and workable substitute for the Catholic doctrine of the Providence of God working in and through mankind to carry out Its designs. This philosophy was first expounded systematically by St. Augustine, in his "*De Civitate Dei*" (*The City of God*), written during the years 413-426, to refute the anti-Christian scholars of the day who were attempting to show that the breakdown of the Roman Empire was being caused by the diffusion of Christianity. In a few words, Augustine's thesis is that Divine Providence rules the affairs of men, and that God moves all things to accomplish His designs in the world. The decline of the Empire and the growth of the Church did not follow as an effect from cause—a thesis reiterated thirteen centuries later by Edmund Gibbon in his brilliant but thoroughly fallacious "*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*"—but as the fulfillment of God's Providence.

This, the only true concept of history, was universally accepted for over a thousand years during the Middle Ages, till the religious cleavage of the sixteenth century, when the Protestant theory was brought forth, besmirching and blackening by every conceivable means the history of the Church, in a desperate effort to show the Church as an ever-increasing degradation from, and corruption of, Apostolic Christianity. A century and a half later, Bossuet, the illustrious bishop of Meaux, while tutor of the son of Louis XIV of France, during the years 1670-1681, penned his immortal "*Discours sur l'Histoire Universelle*" (*Discourse on Universal History*), primarily for the benefit of his royal pupil. He repeats in clear and vigorous terms the thesis of St. Augustine, particularly in the second part, "*La Suite de la Religion*." To St. Augustine, however, belongs the credit for formulating the Catholic concept of history. In the words of Pope Leo XIII: "The great Doctor of the Church, Augustine, was the first to formulate and perfect the plan of the philosophy of history. Of later writers, those who have made any noteworthy contributions to this art have followed Augustine as their leader and guide, drawing their inspiration from his commentaries and writings. Those on the contrary, who forsook his guidance have been led into a multitude of errors, because when they turned their attention to the rise and fall of states, they lacked

⁷ Barnes, op. cit. p. 27; Jas. H. Robinson, "*The Mind in the Making*," N. Y., 16th ed., 1925, pp. 117-150.

that true knowledge of the causes by which human affairs are directed.”⁸

To the Catholic no other concept of history is admissible. For the sake of convenience in study, we readily admit that history may be viewed with political affairs, the rise and fall of nations, kings and cabinets, generals and armies, in the foreground; or we may admit that the geography of the world, its oceans and rivers and mountains and plains has been the determining factor in its history; or that cultural factors, the rise and progress of the arts, and of intellectual pursuits—the so-called “anthropological interpretation of history”—have been foremost in the story of mankind; or that the history of the human race is essentially concerned with the struggle for the means of subsistence—the “economic interpretation of history”; or we may accept the “new,” dynamic, synthetic concept of history, which in the words of one of its most ardent exponents⁹ maintains that “nothing less than the collective psychology of any period can be deemed adequate to determine the historical development of that age, and it is the task of the historian to discover, evaluate, and set forth the chief factors which create and shape the collective view of life, and determine the nature of the group struggle for existence and improvement.” We can admit each and all of these theories as far as they go, yet even at their individual and collective best they are but partial explanations. from which the most essential element is missing. They omit or neglect proper consideration of the all-pervading influence of religion in the affairs of men. Yet so all-embracing is the influence of religion, that man has not inaptly been defined by keen philosophers as a “religious animal.” With the advocates of the “new” history we declare that the life of man is an organic whole, and cannot be parcelled out into the time-honored fundamental institutions, religion, economics, education, politics, and social life after the manner of a plot of ground being cut up into house-lots. The various elements, factors, and influences which go to

⁸ “*Artem ipsam historiae philosophicam magnus Ecclesiae doctor Augustinus princeps omnium excogitavit, perfecit. Ex posterioribus qui in hac parte quiddam sunt memoria dignum consecuti, Augustino ipso usi sunt magistro et duce, ad cujus commentata et scripta ingenium suum diligentissime excoluerunt. Qui, contra, a vestigiis tanti viri discessere, eos error multiplex a vero deflexit, quia cum in itinera flexusque civitatum intenderent animum, vera illa scientia causarum, quibus res continentur humanae, caruerunt.*” I. c. p. 55.

⁹ Barnes: op. cit. p. 30 ssq.

make up the composite whole of man's life are so interlocked that it is impossible to isolate any one of them. Yet religion is more than merely one of many factors that go to make up the history of mankind, for either positively, by its presence, or negatively, by its absence, it is *the* factor which shapes and colors and influences all the other activities of men. It is not merely a co-equal factor with climate, and occupation and culture and social status, it is superior to all these, embraces all, pervades all, and moves all to good or evil, in greater or less degree, according to the efficacy and intensity of its presence.

It is not to our present purpose to demonstrate the fact that there is and can be but one true religion, Catholic Christianity. Of this we are sufficiently assured, and no amount of argument, ridicule, or vituperation can alter the objective fact. But it is our contention that there has been, in the past life of humanity, only one religion which can be accepted and set up as a standard by which to judge the influence religion has had on history. No historian can undertake to study the past life of humanity accurately, impartially, and comprehensively except through a vision adjusted to the Catholic doctrine of Divine Providence, the central fact of which is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. This is by no means to say that only Catholics can be true historians but it does mean that no man can interpret the past life of mankind without giving full consideration to Divine Providence working in the affairs of men.

The complaint is often raised against some Catholic historians that they have sought to glorify the Church at the expense of historical truth. The justice of the accusation is fully recognized by Catholic scholars, yet it must be noted that the same complaint was voiced by Catholics themselves long before it was broached by any of their opponents. In 1563, before the Protestant historical attack on the Church was fairly launched, the great Dominican theologian, Melchior Cano, in his celebrated work "*De Locis Theologicis*," published at Salamanca, in Spain, decried the practice of Church historians who had not told the story of the saints with the same fidelity and candor as some pagan authors had related the stories of their heroes, as for example Suetonius, in his lives of the Roman Caesars.¹⁰ For this

¹⁰ "Dolenter hoc dico, potius quam contumeliose multo . . . longeque incorruptus et integrius Suetonium res Caesarum exposuisse quam exposuerint catholici non res dico imperatorum, sed martyrum, virginum, et confessorum." "*De Locis Theologicis*," edition of 1613, Salamanca; lib. XI, cap. VI, p. 373.

particular case, the answer is writ large in the monumental labors of the Bollandists, which have produced the "*Acta Sanctorum*," still, after three hundred years in course of completion. On the other hand, for the Catholic historian, the interests of truth demand far more than simply a "*chronique scandaleuse*," or recital of various disciplinary abuses within the Church and of the private vices of popes and bishops and priests. Fortunately, this method of writing history is gradually becoming discredited but old prejudices die hard, and we must continue to insist vigorously that candor, truth and impartiality in history demand more than merely a list of scandals.

The time-honored division of historical study into ancient, medieval, modern and contemporary has been so long and so generally accepted that to many it will come as a novelty to be told that there can be but two grand divisions in history, separated by the Nativity of Jesus Christ. However strenuously men may oppose the fact, through ignorance, passion, or prejudice, it cannot reasonably be denied that the appearance of God on earth in human form for thirty-three years, with His unparalleled pronouncements concerning Himself, His nature, and His work, forms the one dividing line in history that is not arbitrary. The ancient world cannot be viewed adequately except insofar as it was but one vast preparation for the coming of Christ. If the obvious objection be raised, how treat the history of the immense pagan world in a period when the knowledge of God and of the coming Messiah was confined to a tiny portion of the earth's surface, perhaps twelve thousand square miles in extent, the answer is, first that all these pagan nations or their progenitors had received a primitive revelation concerning God and the Messiah, and their subsequent history is that of nations which either wilfully or through ignorance had lost all trace of such revelation. In the second place, all these nations of antiquity at some time or other came into contact with the Israelites, either as conquerors and oppressors of the Jews, or being in turn overcome by them, the whole interplay of religious forces being but the workings of Providence preparing the world for the coming of the Messiah.

This thesis, proclaimed with relentless logic and compelling force by St. Augustine and Bossuet, has been the bane of non-Catholic historians. They have advanced all sorts of theories in an effort to refute or disprove it—theories varying from a flat

denial of the existence of God and His revelation to pseudo-scientific appeals to the study of comparative religions, yet none of these can approach, in convincing argument, the unadorned, straightforward reasoning of St. Augustine and Bossuet.

The Incarnation of Christ "in the fullness of time" did not bring the curtain down on the stage of the ancient world, to have it rise again immediately on the Christian world. Centuries were to pass before the full import of the Incarnation was to be realized, yet the heaven was always at work, and the history of the world since that time can be studied properly only in the light of the doctrines and disciplines of Christianity. The stories of arts and sciences and letters, education, industry, social life, kings, and statesmen, and nations are in the last analysis stories of individuals or institutions either themselves Christian, or influenced directly or indirectly by contact with, or knowledge of Catholic Christianity.

What, it may be asked, are the advantages to be derived from studying history in the light of these great Catholic principles? A recent English Catholic writer¹¹ sums them up as follows: first, an admiration for the Church that is full of child-like love and loyalty. History shows the Church as the mother and mistress of the nations, the saviour of Europe, the great civilizing power in the world, the great teacher and educator, inspirer of true morality. Second, an assurance of mind that is undismayed however grievous the accusations brought against the Church, even if these charges be true, for Catholics stand on such secure ground that what might otherwise be a scandal tends to strengthen faith rather than undermine it. In the third place, the study of history from the Catholic viewpoint gives us a clue to a right understanding of the problems connected with the Church in the present day. Finally, there comes a width of sympathy and outlook that leads to cultivation of the mind. History ceases to be a mere chronicle of events and becomes a living reality; it shows in perspective the stately procession of the centuries, each one indissolubly linked with the other, and points to the Church as giving the key to the whole.

¹¹ "The Teaching of History in Catholic Girls' Schools," Paper read at the Twentieth Annual Conference of Catholic Colleges, Ushaw, June 16, 1916. By a Religious of the Sacred Heart, Roehampton, England, 1917.