

THE RELATION OF HISTORY TO THEOLOGY ACCORDING TO MELCHIOR CANO

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I



It has been repeatedly and insistently pointed out, by Hilaire Belloc,¹ among others, the chief point of modern religious controversy is historical. Herein especially, the Reformation marks a point of cleavage in the history of the Church. Previously the enemies of the Church had based their attacks on her upon a theological or philosophical basis. While it is not contended that there is no theological or philosophical foundation for Protestantism, it is definitely true that Protestantism, in controversy with the Church, uses, or attempts to use, history as dynamite with which to destroy the fabric of the Church so as to be able to use the same site for its own rambling ramshackle structure. This is clearly indicated in the work of the Magdeburg Centuriators who endeavoured to compile a *Catena* of Catholic horrors and frauds which would be so damning that no decent person could longer remain a Catholic. Hence it may be of interest to discuss, however briefly and inadequately, the attitude towards history of one of the greatest Catholic leaders of thought of the period.

Melchior Cano was born about 1505 in Tarancon in New Castile, a small town about fifty miles southeast of Madrid and in the Diocese of Cuenca. Sent to Salamanca for university studies, he there joined the Order of Friar Preachers and was professed August 19, 1523. Here he was a pupil of and greatly influenced by Francis de Vitoria, the great master of the Spanish Dominican School. He became professor at Alcalà in 1542 and succeeded de Vitoria in his chair at Salamanca in 1546. Cano played an important part in the Council of Trent as one of the theologians of Charles V. Upon the suspension of the Council in 1552, the latter appointed him Bishop of the Canary Islands, which See he speedily resigned and devoted himself to re-

¹ Especially in his *The Catholic Church and History*.
Cp. also Guilday. *Introduction to Church History*, passim.

futing the religious of the Reformers. About 1554 he became Provincial of the Province of Spain.² Re-elected in 1559, his election was not confirmed by the then Master General, Father Justiniani, lest it should give offence to the powerful Archbishop of Seville, Carranca, who had been defeated by Cano in the contest for the chair left vacant at Salamanca on the death of de Vitoria. He died at Toledo, September 30, 1560, and was buried there in the Chapter House of the convent of Saint Peter Martyr.³

II

The greatest work of Melchior Cano, and that with which his name is indelibly associated is the *De Locis Theologicis libri duodecim*, which is truly one of the few really epoch-making books since it may be styled the first modern piece of apologetical writing. In it he, the first so to do, systematises and lists the source (*loci*) whence is to be drawn the ammunition for the defence of the Faith. He lists ten such general sources and this enumeration has been followed by all succeeding Catholic theologians and apologists. These *loci* or sources are as follows, using the order of Cano: Sacred Scripture, Tradition, the Catholic Church, General Councils, the Roman See, the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, the Theologians and Canonists, Natural Reason, Philosophy and History. The first seven he classes as proper to Theology, the last three as not proper, that is to say that strictly speaking they do not belong to Theology but may, from time time, be employed by the theologian. Of the twelve books into which the *De Locis* is divided, the first exposes the general plan of the work. Each *locus* is then taken up singly and seriatim, an entire book being devoted to each, while the twelfth and final book is designed to demonstrate the practical application of these *loci* in theological controversy.

The *raison d'être* of the *De Locis Theologicis* is obvious. The attacks of the Reformers on the traditional Faith could no longer be adequately met by the use of older methods. There was a crying need

² Spain was at this time divided, and still is, into several Dominican provinces, one of which, with its headquarters at Salamanca, was known as the Province of Spain, though as a matter of fact, it comprised only a part of the peninsula.

³ Quéatif-Échard. *Scriptores Ordinis Praedicatorum*. Tom. II. Pp. 176ss. Mortier, A. *Histoire des Maîtres Généraux de l'Ordre des Frères Prêcheurs*. Tome V. pp. 384ss.

Touron, A. *Histoire des Hommes Illustres de l'Ordre de Saint Dominique*. Tome IV pp. 193ss.

Volz, J. R. *Cano, Melchior*. Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. III, pp. 251ss.

for a complete overhauling of the Church's arsenal. There must be, to continue the analogy, a new Manual of Arms. To achieve this was the aim of Melchior Cano, to show clearly the various sources of supply of theological arms and ammunition and their proper uses in the defence of the Faith. Of his competence for such a task there can be no question as can be seen from the official judgment of the learned censor of the first (Salamanca) edition who likens him to Cicero and Sallust in purity of style, elegance of diction, perspicacity and veracity, calls him second only to Aquinas as theologian and philosopher, esteems him a profound canonist and a master of Exegesis and Patristic Theology.⁴ It is not difficult to evaluate the work itself since it is admittedly a masterpiece of apologetical writing and an exceptional treatise on theological method, but it is more difficult to estimate its immediate effect, apart from the fact that the ten *loci* have become classical. That its influence was not inconsiderable can be judged, in part, from the fact that it was speedily reprinted and broadcast throughout Europe. Quétif-Echard⁵ lists the following early editions: Salamanca, (1562); Venice, (1567), Louvain, (1564, 1569); Cologne, (1574, 1585, 1603, 1605); Lyons (1704); Padua (1715). The Paduan edition, edited by Father Hyacinth Serry, with a "Prologus Galateus" defending Cano against his critics, is the standard edition and has been followed by most of the subsequent editions, some twenty in all.⁶ It is a Viennese reprint (1754) of this, which we use in this article.

The eleventh book of the *De Locis Theologicis*, with which we are chiefly concerned, and which treats of the tenth and last *locus*, occupies, in the Viennese edition which we use, one hundred and eight closely printed pages and bears the general title *De Historiae Humanae Auctoritate* i. e. "Concerning the Authority of Human History," and is divided into seven chapters. Human History is so designated in contradistinction to Divine History as found in the Sacred Scriptures. Of the seven chapters, the first is rather irrelevant, treating, as it does, of the death of Cano's father news of which had reached him since he had completed the previous book. It is a splendid tribute of filial affection and admiration towards a worthy father. The second chapter is headed *De Historiae humanae in Theologia utilitate*, or "The Usefulness of History in Theology." The

⁴ *Censura F. Roderici Vadiæi, Benedictini*. Dated Madrid August 15, 1562, in the Viennese (1754) edition of Cano.

⁵ *Script. O.P.* II, 177.

⁶ Volz. *Cath. Enc.* III, 252. who, however, gives the date of the Paduan edition as 1714 not 1715 as Quétif-Echard.

third chapter contains eighteen more or less lengthy arguments tending to show that history is of little or no use to the theologian. In the fourth chapter, certain fundamental distinctions are placed as a preliminary to the solution of the difficulties. Herein he points out that, while, as a general rule, the testimony of profane historians is only probable, occasionally it can induce certitude. The fifth chapter contains the solution of the first fourteen difficulties, while the sixth, preliminary to answering the remaining objections, lays down certain rules for determining the trustworthiness of an author. The final chapter is devoted to the detailed solution of these last objections.

We have stated above the provocation for the volume as a whole. Here it is only necessary to show the precise point of this tenth *locus*. From the outset the Reformers made great play with argumentation from history, as witness the Magdeburg Centuriators who first realized just how valuable a means of anti-Catholic propaganda could be derived from falsified or distorted history. This fact, while it created difficulties for Catholic theologians, also provoked in some timid souls such a dread of the historian that they were desirous of ignoring his existence altogether. Hence Cano begins with a treatise on the usefulness of historical knowledge in general of which the following is the gist.

"All learned men agree that those theologians are thoroughly unerudite in whose writings history is mute. To me it seems that no men, not merely theologians, can be called truly learned who are ignorant of past deeds. For there are many things which history supplies from its treasury, which lacking we should very frequently discover ourselves poor and unlearned both in theology and every other branch of learning."⁷

He points to his own use of history in other books of the *De Locis* in proof of this. He proceeds to point out the grievous errors into which so many early ecclesiastical writers have fallen through lack of accurate historical knowledge and shows the apt use made of reliable history by such as Tertullian, Cyprian, Jerome and Augustine.

"Wherefore, he concludes, not only ecclesiastical history but also that which has been written by profane authors is most useful to the theologian against the adversaries of the Faith. Consequently, to be altogether ignorant of profane history comes either from the most inert idleness or from a too delicate fastidiousness."⁸ "Since, then, the books of historians are so useful to the theologian in many ways, they should be read by him with real care lest he sinfully err in matters which pertain to him, or be ignorant of those things of which men cannot be ignorant without revealing either imprudence or lack of required skill."⁹

⁷ *Opera Melchioris Cani*. (Vienna, 1754), p. 520.

⁸ *op. cit.*, p. 520.

⁹ p. 521.

However, the objection is immediately raised that history and historians are not to be trusted because they contradict the Scriptures or one another or, being men, are fallible and prone to deceive. Cano, therefore, draws up eighteen strong arguments in support of this objection and, since he is in the Scholastic tradition, they lack nothing of force in his presentation. Three of these we shall present later, confining ourselves for the present, to certain conclusions drawn from a general principle which Cano lays down as preliminary to the discussion of the objections.

He first insists that history must enjoy at least some degree of authority whether it be only a probable one and not always a certain one.¹⁰ History is human testimony and

“it is necessary that men should believe men unless life is to be spent in the manner of animals. . . . It is necessary for human life that men believe the sayings of men without doubt.¹¹ . . . Wherefore he concludes, those who strive to pluck out human faith from the hearts of men are not only foolish . . . they fight against nature.”¹²

Admitting, then, that history enjoys some authority, how far does that authority extend? Here Cano outlines three conclusions which are as follows:—

I. “Apart from the Sacred Authors (i. e. the Sacred Scriptures) no historian can be accounted certain, that is to say, capable of producing certain faith in matters of Theology. . . .”

II. “Grave and trustworthy historians, of whom, doubtless, there have been not a few, both among ecclesiastics and laymen, provide the theologian with a probable argument both to corroborate his own opinions and to refute the erroneous opinions of his adversaries. . . . It is not the part of an educated man, thoroughly adapted for life as a human being, to disbelieve a worthy man stating a credible thing. I say a credible thing for there are many things related by Pliny and other trustworthy authors which if we deny, since they are hardly credible, we do not, in consequence, harm the authority of history. It is reprehensible both to be too ready to believe and to be too reluctant; more so, in the latter case, if one dissents from many grave and trustworthy authors. . . . Many, in our day, perversely, if not impudently, call in doubt those things which the most trustworthy authors testify to have happened. If these produce suitable and probable reasons they are to be given a hearing, but, if they adduce none, they are to be despised as having cast aside the common sense of men; rejected the most powerful instrument of human judgment, that is to say testimony; neglected history which is the mistress of life, the aid of prudence and the light of truth.”

¹⁰ To avoid confusion, it should be clearly understood that *certain* and *probable* are used in this article in their philosophic sense. That is *certain* which carries conviction so that there remains not the slightest fear that the contrary may be true. That is *probable* which, while inducing some degree of conviction, implies at least a possibility that the truth may be otherwise.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, p. 529.

¹² p. 530.

III. "If all proved and serious authors agree as to the same past fact, then from this authority a certain argument can be drawn that the dogmas of Theology are conformable to solid reason. . . . History is to be held as certain when all the authors agree in the same matter. . . . History . . . is written not to prove but to narrate; however without doubt, it does prove some things, generally with probability, but sometimes even necessarily."¹³

IV

In the sixth chapter Cano discusses the weight to be attached to various historians and, after a skillful analysis of the merits of certain celebrated historians of the past, in the course of which he resolves several difficulties arising from contradictory statements on the part of historians in whom he has confidence, he lays down three rules or norms by which can be ascertained whether a given author is or is not worthy of credence. These we summarize as follows:—

1. "The first law is derived from the probity and integrity of men. This especially holds good when historians testify either that they have themselves witnessed the things they relate or have received the facts from eye-witnesses."¹⁴

He then insists that sanctity is to be considered, on the part of historians fulfilling this condition, as giving them a high authority. Hence when Augustine or any of the Fathers qualify under this rule, their testimony should be accepted by all reasonable men. But, he continues,

"this first rule also holds in the case of profane writers . . . for some of them, led on by love of the truth . . . so hated falsehood that it is perhaps to be shamefacedly admitted that some of the pagan historians were more truthful than are our own."¹⁵

Referring to a class of writers of Christian history, ecclesiastical and hagiographical, of doubtful veracity and uncertain critical judgment he gives utterance to a thought later to be that of the Bollandists and, in our own time, of Leo XIII, when he says bluntly

"I consider such men to have bestowed upon the Church nothing of utility and much that it harmful. . . . Those who attempt to stir up the minds of men to honour the Saints by false and lying writings seem to me to accomplish nothing except to destroy true faith because of their lies and to bring it about that even those things which are soberly written by authors of undoubted veracity be called into doubt."¹⁶

II. "The second rule is that we should prefer before the others those historians who join to soberness of genius a certain both in choosing and in judging. This rule has special force in those cases where the writers have

¹³ p. 530-1.

¹⁴ p. 605.

¹⁵ p. 605.

¹⁶ p. 606.

neither themselves been eye-witnesses nor have they heard the facts from eye-witnesses truly worthy of credence."¹⁷

III. "If the Church attributes authority to any historian, he undoubtedly merits that we also should hold him as an authority. On the other hand we justly and deservedly refuse credence to him to whom the Church refuses credence."¹⁸

V

We now propose to take up three of the objections proposed and solved by Cano, using, as far as is compatible with brevity, his own words. It should be borne in mind that Cano was one of the masters of Scholasticism and a profound and subtle exponent of its method. To the Scholastic, the clearest way of exposing a doctrine is to state general principles and to particularize these principles in solving the difficulties proposed against the thesis. Hence the importance of the solutions to the difficulties in determining the true opinion of any Scholastic. Cano proposes his difficulties with skill and it is doubtful if his opponents could improve upon them. We regretfully pass over all but three of these eighteen objections, three which are not only of interest in themselves, but whose answers show most clearly his balance and judgment. These three are the thirteenth, fourteenth and eighteenth.

(13) "If any history is approved for historians it should be that which is celebrated by the unanimous voice of the Churches, but there are many of this nature which create absolutely no certitude in Theology."¹⁹

And this he proves by many examples, among others certain of the Breviary lessons which, occasionally, due to lack of accurate historical knowledge on the part of their compilers, present a remarkable medley of fact and fiction or even of diverse persons not distinguished. The classical example of this latter is to be found in the Second Lessons for the Feast of Saint Denys (October 9), wherein Denys the Areopagite, converted by Saint Paul in the First Century, Denys, the first Bishop of Paris, in the early Third Century, and Pseudo-Dionysius, a Syrian theologian and philosopher of the Fifth Century, are treated as if they were one and the same person.

¹⁷ p. 612. It is of interest to note his comments upon certain Dominican historians on this score. He gently censures the credulity of Blessed James of Voragine in his *Legenda Aurea*. Later he says: "Concerning Vincent of Beauvais and the Blessed Antoninus, I judge more generously, since each laboured, not so much to describe true and certain things, as not to omit anything which he discovered in any sort of a document." p. 614.

¹⁸ p. 614, but see the answer to the fourteenth objection *infra*.

¹⁹ p. 526.

To this Cano replies as follows:—

“The thirteenth objection involves us in but slight difficulty. For one does not have to hold or defend all the histories read in the Church. . . . The advice of Gelasius seems to be very sound that, when Catholics read histories of this sort (i. e. lives of the Saints full of the marvelous), they should hold fast to Saint Paul’s saying (I. Thess. 5, 21) ‘Prove all things; hold fast that which is good.’”²⁰

The fourteenth objection is thus phrased:

“Those historians seem to outrank the others which are approved by the Roman Pontiffs. The Donation of Constantine, his leprosy, baptism and cure, however, are not only celebrated by Church historians but are also approved by the Supreme Pontiffs. But many thoroughly learned men maintain that these are fictitious. Therefore no ecclesiastical history supplies the theologian with suitable arguments.”²¹

The answer is as follows:—

“They fall into the greatest error who receive the reports of past things as oracles of the Church because the Roman Pontiffs have sometimes made use of them in their letters and decrees. If I am to be believed, the approval of a history and the use of it are not the same thing. For the Pope may make use of accepted opinions, decisions and common report in order to persuade, but it does not follow that, because they are so used, they are therefore approved by the judgment of the Apostolic See. For the process of suasion is one thing, that of definition another. He who defines adduces true things, he who persuades verisimilar. When I was a boy, I learned from my teacher that no argument was to be altogether neglected in which any trace of the truth appeared, but that was to be embraced which was most apt to cause conviction . . . consequently he would be an imprudent man who accepted all sorts of histories adduced by the Popes, in passing and for the purpose in hand only, in the same way as those approved by the certain judgment of the Church.”²²

His disquisition on the examples alleged is lengthy and we therefore summarize. He thoroughly realizes the difficulty of establishing the Donation of Constantine, but, without giving a clear, definite opinion of his own as to its authenticity, insists that in any event the Pope’s claim to the Patrimony of Peter is not affected, since, even in default of any other title, that of prescription is sufficient, especially as there is no one who can produce an even colorable counter title. He holds definitely that the weight of evidence is against the legend of Constantine’s leprosy and cure and rejects it, but, in the matter of the Roman baptism, Cano holds that the story of Arian baptism at Nicomedia, the sole rival claim, is *a priori* false and cannot therefore be alleged against the constant tradition of the Roman Church, which, in consequence, stands. He insists that it is incredible that the Bish-

²⁰ p. 579.

²¹ p. 526.

²² p. 580.

ops at Nice would have permitted the presence of an unbaptized emperor at the Council.²³

The eighteenth and last argument

"impugns all histories generally, both ecclesiastical and profane, and is as follows. Aristotle excludes human faith from the number of the intellectual virtues because it inclines both towards the false and the true. Theology, therefore, which is weighed by that which is wholly true should not receive aid from human faith nor should the true contract an alliance with the false. This is principally confirmed by the fact that all men are liars and all, without exception, can deceive and be deceived. Therefore, whether few or many historians affirm anything to be so, all argumentation which is based upon human testimony is of the very weakest. Consequently, whatever argument is drawn from human history is altogether too weak to cause any manner of faith whatever in matters of theology."²⁴

Cano refutes this objection by saying, in part, that

"the theologian makes use of two kinds of argument. One is certain, the other probable . . . it is not always necessary that the theologian make use of certain principles. From uncertain ones, provided that they are probable, he may sometimes evolve arguments which are suitable, if not to convince, at least to persuade. For that theologian would be foolish who should wish, in his every syllogism, to establish necessary things by necessary things. For there are many things so involved and obscure that it pertains to theological prudence to desire not to demonstrate them but to adduce suasions thereto, not to illustrate them clearly but as far as is possible. In argumentation of this kind, if any one shall make use probably of human faith, though he may sometimes be deceived, he cannot be blamed without injustice. However . . . human faith may render some things so certain that to call them in doubt would be a most convincing demonstration of folly. If, then, the theologian makes use of them he achieves not a thing fallacious, foolish or inadequate but something true and stable and in accordance not only with human reason but also with divine."²⁵

He finishes the book with a modest request to others who may wish to treat of this same general topic that, if they are able, they should strive

"to write more accurately (than he has done), add better arguments, remove superfluous data: in a word if they know anything more accurate than what has been written here, let them candidly impart it."²⁶

VI

The twelfth and last book of the *De Locis Theologicis* is devoted to a discussion of the proper use of the *loci* in scholastic and theological disputation, in the course of which he sagely remarks.

²³ p. 580-4.

²⁴ p. 528.

²⁵ p. 622.

²⁶ p. 623.

"I do not wish anyone to be led into the error of thinking that if the *locus* be certain all the arguments drawn thence are to be considered as demonstrative, nor, on the other hand, that all the arguments drawn from an uncertain *locus* lack the power of demonstration. For sometimes only probable arguments are drawn from Sacred Scripture . . . while from the authority of human history, weak though it be, certain arguments may sometimes be drawn up."²⁷

Speaking of the need of art in choosing argumentation, he insists also on the need of judgment and discrimination, without which, though

"there may be a facile and handy supply of arguments, these will have no value except among those who are in the habit of esteeming things by number and not by weight."²⁸

It may be said, and not without justification, that there is nothing novel in any of the statements in the preceding pages, at least to modern ears. But the fact remains that, in the sixteenth century, they were novel, at least to a very large degree. Melchior Cano's fundamental contribution is that he, first of all, presented to the world a really practical treatise on the proper value and application of an almost indispensable auxiliary science to the scientific study of Theology. It may be added, however, that his principles, platitudinous though they are to the trained historian, have not yet won universal practical acceptance, especially among would-be hagiographers.

²⁷ p. 725.

²⁸ *ibid.*