

PAST VERSUS PRESENT

By GERALD O'COLLINS

ONE OF THE MORE perplexing issues in the late twentieth century is our relationship to what has gone before us. How should we deal with the various messages we have inherited from the past? What stance can we take towards those historical events and persons that have helped to shape our present existence? The ways of coming to terms with our history and its meaning differ hugely. We may feel trapped by our past or we may quietly ignore it. We may consider our past abolished or we may falsely idealize it. We may reject talk of 'the past *versus* the present', because we want to bypass apparent developments and insist on the essentially unchanging nature of reality. Or we may admit fundamental changes, and yet look to our past for norms of judgment, a source of identity and a promise for the future. Some reflection on negative and false moves may best introduce the discussion of ways to interpret creatively our past history and christian tradition.

At worst, the message which breaks through from my past can look like an unfortunate curse on myself or my group. Hateful things done to me twenty or thirty years ago can rise up in my memory to blight my present life with bitterness. The horrors of hell or the slippery ease of sin proclaimed at me from pulpits or whispered to me in the confines of the confessional box may now seem both unreal and unhealthy, but the old dread of a punishing God can linger on. I may feel trapped by my psychological past. If Sigmund Freud discovered the unconscious, it proved no liberated zone but a storehouse of unresolved conflicts that inhibit my present freedom. Whether I kneel in prayer, lie on my psychologist's couch or sit musing at my desk, memory may throw up old failures and re-open wounds to confuse or even torture my life today.

The past may curse our country, our church or our group. Economic, racial and religious injustices committed either against our ancestors or by our ancestors can oppress our present existence. Contact with other christians may require us to expend enormous energy merely on mending fences broken by our ecclesiastical predecessors. Past decisions by church leaders to block the free discus-

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sion of sensitive topics can revenge themselves on our generation, as christians quietly disengage themselves from their communities or explode in unproductive rage. Failure in the nineteenth century to accept scientific progress, align the Church with democratic movements and support working-class demands for justice left catholics of the twentieth century frequently saddled with the image and reality of an obscurantist, right-wing Church that has leant towards fascism and shown greater indignation at minor indignities it occasionally suffered than at systematic exploitation imposed on millions. There should be little need to labour the point further. In countless ways the past can act as a curse on our lives today. The message coming through from our christian predecessors may sound more like bad news than good news.

There remains also the gloomy possibility that we may be so trapped by our past that we even fail to recognize our dismal state. Both Jesus and Paul passed that kind of verdict on some of their contemporaries. Luke reports how Jesus mourned the way a murderous heritage had hardened the holy city of Jerusalem. 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you that kill the prophets and stone those who are sent to you! How often have I longed to gather your children, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you refused!' ¹ A tradition of legalism had left scribes and pharisees trapped in absurdity and vain hypocrisy. ² The apostle Paul knew how pre-occupation with the mosaic law as *the* way of salvation rendered it more difficult to acknowledge that Christ was the end of that law. ³ Here God's gift from the past led men to miss the new divine scheme for human redemption. Our history may just as much silently imprison us as seem like a curse against which we consciously but vainly struggle.

We might, however, try to lessen or even remove the pressure of the past on the present by ignoring what has happened and deciding that for us history begins in 1974. Meursault, the hero in Albert Camus's disturbing novel *The Outsider*, lives without anxiety in a continuous present. This well-meaning office-worker from the Algiers of the 1940s is not even sure how old his mother is when she dies. Shortly afterwards he kills an arab and faces a charge of murder. At the trial the public prosecutor makes no sense to Meursault when he harps on the accused's failure to show regret. Meursault reflects:

¹ Lk 13, 34.

² Mt 23.

³ Rom 10, 4.

Of course I had to own he was right; I didn't feel much regret for what I'd done. Still, to my mind he overdid it, and I'd have liked to have a chance of explaining to him, in a quite friendly, almost affectionate way, that I have never been able really to regret anything in all my life. *I've always been far too much absorbed in the present moment, or the immediate future, to think back.*⁴

For the Meursaults of our world the past neither opposes nor supports our present lives, because contact has been lost. If our link with the past has been broken, it seems more than likely that anticipation of anything beyond 'the immediate future' will also have gone. In their own fashion there was more than a touch of such a 'now generation' about the corinthian christians whom St Paul took to task. In the climax of his first letter to them the apostle battled on two fronts. He called on his readers to remember their *past* deliverance from sin which faith in the crucified and resurrected Christ had already brought.⁵ But he went on at once to recall their *future* destiny when Christ would overcome death, 'the last enemy', and raise them to a 'glorious', 'spiritual' existence.⁶ Any retreat to a timeless present represented for the apostle nothing better than a dead end.

Marcion, that cat among the early christian pigeons, exemplifies excellently a third stance towards the past – the attempt to abolish it and denigrate its message. He gave us the expression 'the New Testament'. But for Marcion the new order which Christ had brought was not simply new. It was totally new. Everything which had existed before looked evil and pernicious when seen in the light of the fresh situation and the fresh future which had arrived with Christ. Marcion radicalized Paul's thought. Where the apostle had proclaimed a new creation,⁷ Marcion spoke of a new God. He dismissed Israel's deity, Yahweh, as some evil demiurge of the Old Testament, instead of acknowledging that the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob had identified himself as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

A marcionite solution to the question of the past versus the present can fall out two ways. Like that early heretic we might try to sever present christianity from our israelite past. In that case there would be no lessons to be drawn from Old Testament reflections on the human condition, struggles with the problem of innocent suffering,

⁴ Trans. S. Gilbert (London, 1961), p 101. Italics mine.

⁵ 1 Cor 15, 12-17.

⁶ 1 Cor 15, 26. 42ff.

⁷ 2 Cor 5, 17.

rich tradition of prayer and repeated experience of both divine judgment and divine mercy towards a sinful people and their corrupt leaders. The effort to maintain such discontinuity between the two Testaments does worse than impoverish the christian message. It leaves Jesus Christ less credibly human. He becomes a man without a past, a Messiah who inherited nothing significant from his people or his family.⁸

Another option remains open for a latter-day marcionite – namely, to adopt the fashionable attempt at a complete break between the past history of the Church and the current challenges to christianity. This modish procedure may be defended through the need to find truly radical solutions for the radical problems of the late twentieth century. Let us not offer yesterday's answers to tomorrow's questions. We may wish to appeal to the present promptings of the holy Spirit and our obligation to read the signs of the times which seem everywhere signs of an unprecedented global crisis. We may rightly point to the dizzy rate and profound extent of scientific, technological, economic and demographic changes which place this generation on the threshold of a fearful and fascinating future. We face the choice: one world or no world. Yet, no matter how correct our motives are, the attempt at *absolute* revolution and the refusal to allow any present significance for our christian past form an impossible position. We will only once again illustrate the axiom attributed to George Santayana, to the effect that 'those who refuse to learn from history are compelled to repeat it'.

A fourth way of relating our present to our past takes an opposite tack to Marcion. 'The good old days' form a golden age from which everything has degenerated. All history, including our present age, represents a history of decline from some idyllic period of primitive man's classless society, graeco-roman civilization, early christianity, early buddhism, the middle ages, the glories of the renaissance or the reformation, the flowering of confucianism or whatever shape our particular golden age takes. Yearning for such an idealized past leads many to withdraw emotionally or even physically from the modern world of political and technological revolution. Revulsion at the condition of our urbanized society and despair at its future prospects can evoke terrifying negative utopias like those of Aldous Huxley and George Orwell. In a note at the end of his *Comrade Don Camillo*, Giovanni Guareschi dismisses 'the present generation of

⁸ See further my *Foundations of Theology* (Chicago, 1971), pp 103–12.

italians' as 'not a generation at all, but a degeneration'. He assures us that 'the wind that blows among the skyscrapers of the 'economic miracle' stinks of sex and sewage and death. In the prosperous *dolce-vita* Italy all hope of a better world is dead'.

In a 1970 interview, cardinal Lorenz Jaeger deplored mankind's decline from an age when people were 'most religious'. Having lost their power to think of the world above, 'men can no longer believe, no longer pray'. Cardinal Jaeger stands in a long line of churchmen who in fact stretch back as far as the end of the apostolic age. They both ignore the scandals and dissensions of early christianity (which Paul's letters reflect), and make renewal a matter of retracing our steps. My own favourite among such churchmen is the seventeenth century divine, Cotton Mather. He expected in New England a return to the early days of christianity: 'The first age was the Golden Age; to return unto that will make a protestant, and I may add, a puritan'. However their particular version runs, those who support a history-of-decline theory share the same basic solution: the restoration of some idealized origin. The process of degeneration must be arrested. We must regenerate. The message from the past is simple and direct: Return!

Two fundamental mistakes lie behind such calls to retrace our steps to some lost golden age. Firstly, cardinal Jaeger, Cotton Mather and the rest falsely idealize our origins. They hope we might return to a past which *never* actually existed. Secondly, they ignore that critical message from the past suggested by the title of Thomas Wolfe's novel *You Can't Go Home Again*. In the course of this story the hero, George Webber, comes back to the United States from a stay in old Europe, where he has learned that one can only go forward to a new future, not back to a dead past. Let us return later to this link between our past and our new future.

Finally, we have those who take any sting out of relations between the past and the present by insisting with Qoheleth that there is nothing new under the sun.⁹ They neither idealize nor denigrate the past. They refuse to join either the Cotton Mathers or the Marcions. They believe we live in a world of static essences and fixed natures. They assure us that man's religious instincts have remained unchanged since the last ice age. A swing of the pendulum accounts for the disturbing trends of today. But the pendulum will swing back from a society that has been described as permissive, maternal,

⁹ Qoh 1, 9.

secular and the rest to one that is authoritarian, paternal, sacred and – presumably – safe.

Our contemporary Qoheleths gloss over the many ways in which scientific progress and technological advances have been transforming profoundly the conditions of human life. They take lightly the effects of industrialization and urbanization, the population explosion and that universal diffusion of news which turns Santiago and Sydney, London and Los Angeles, Kyoto and Kampala into one global village. They must reject as quite unthinkable Marshall McLuhan's notion that electronics may be changing our central nervous system. There could be nothing so new under the sun as a new kind of man.

What the protagonists of Qoheleth's principle fail to acknowledge is the relative *discontinuity* between present and past. Rejection of the marcionite thesis of absolute revolution does not automatically call for our endorsement of an essentially unchanging order of things. Understandably, if regrettably, the early Church reacted against Marcion by insisting on continuity in man's religious history to the point of failing to do justice to the 'newness' of christianity. St Augustine could even write: 'What is now called the christian religion existed in former times. It was there from the beginning of the human race up to the time when Christ himself came in the flesh. From that time on the true religion which had already existed began to be called christian'.¹⁰ The revolutionary newness of the love, hope and salvation which Christ brought is here all but denied. The past is taken as adequate grounds for understanding the present.

What all Qoheleths unconsciously desire is to suppress real history. To admit that the present (or the future) can bring genuinely new events would upset an externally fixed order. The only 'new' cases to be accepted are those which exemplify old truths and which may be treated according to rules which are tried and, therefore, true. In these terms the history both of mankind and of the christian Church becomes a kind of holding operation.

But let us turn from the aberrations of the Marcions, the Meursaults, the Cotton Mathers, the Qoheleths and the others who fail to relate satisfactorily the message of the past to the open possibilities of the present. Ultimately, it seems to me, past history and – specifically – the good news concerning Jesus Christ function today as (1) norms of judgment, (2) a source of identity and (3) a promise

¹⁰ *Retractions* I, 13, 3.

of the future. In maintaining such a view I want the past to make sense, but I am not insisting on the kind of simple sense typical of the approaches which have been rejected. Let me take up the three points in turn.

Israel's prophets confronted their contemporaries not only with God's present will and promises for the future but also with the divine words and deeds from the past. Amos and his successors disturbed settled ways of piety or impiety as much by presenting the challenge of what God had *already* done as by inviting their hearers to set their hopes on those promises which had *not yet* been fulfilled. Jesus stood in this prophetic tradition. If he proclaimed God's coming kingdom, he also thrust before his audience the critical implications of Israel's history and scriptures. Past generations passed judgement on his contemporaries for their lost opportunities.

On Judgement day the Queen of the South will rise up with the men of this generation and condemn them, because she came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon: and there is something greater than Solomon here. On Judgement day the men of Nineveh will stand up with this generation and condemn it, because when Jonah preached they repented; and there is something greater than Jonah here.¹¹

The divine purpose in creation showed up later attitudes towards divorce as a cheapening of standards.

Some pharisees approached him and asked, 'Is it against the law for a man to divorce his wife?' . . . 'Moses allowed us', they said, 'to draw up a writ of dismissal and so to divorce'. Then Jesus said to them: 'It was because you were so unteachable that he wrote this commandment for you. But from the beginning of creation *God made them male and female. This is why a man must leave father and the two become one body* . . . So then, what God has united, must not divide'.¹²

The past did not, however, lie beyond reproach. Jesus could also recall the indifference towards God shown in the bad old days to warn his audience of the judgement which could befall them also.

As it was in Noah's day, so will it be also in the days of the Son of Man. People were eating and drinking, marrying wives and husbands, right up to the day Noah went into the ark, and the Flood came and destroyed them all. It will be the same as it was in Lot's day: people

¹¹ Lk 11, 31-2.

¹² Mk, 10, 2-9.

were eating and drinking, buying and selling, planting and building, but the day Lot left Sodom, God rained fire and brimstone from heaven and it destroyed them all. It will be the same when the day comes for the Son of Man to be revealed.¹³

Nor did the apostle Paul allow any romantic idealizing of Israel's history. If the people on the exodus 'all passed through the sea' and 'all ate the same spiritual food', nevertheless, 'most of them failed to please God and their corpses littered the desert'.¹⁴

Neither from Jesus nor from Paul do we hear a call to return to some golden age of Israel's past. No cry came from them: Back to Moses! Return to the desert! But they recalled and interpreted the past to criticize evils in the present and allow growth for the future. Their aim was to summon men forward to a new future, not back to a dead past.

In the second place, the past functions to offer us an *identity* today. Eugen Rosenstock-Huussy once remarked: 'Before we can think, it is our obligation to give thanks'. We can usefully enlarge this sentiment to read: 'Before we can think about our present identity, it is our obligation to give thanks for our blessings from the past'. The israelites gratefully recapitulated their past in ancient confessions of faith:

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; and there he became a nation, great, mighty, and populous. And the Egyptians treated us harshly, and afflicted us, and laid upon us hard bondage. Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction, our toil, and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror, with signs and wonders: and he brought us into this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.¹⁵

And these and similar *credos* the Old Testament crystallized. The people found their identity by recalling their past with gratitude.

No less than the israelites, Christians identify themselves through their memory, above all in remembering Jesus Christ. They identify the community to which they belong, and explain both the meaning and value of the way they have chosen to follow by recalling the events of A.D.30. They recognize their fellow Christians as those who join them in faith and baptism. This faith finds common expression in creeds, those thankful confessions for God's saving actions 'under

¹³ Lk 17, 26-30.

¹⁴ I Cor 10, 1-5.

¹⁵ Deut 26, 5-9.

Pontius Pilate'. Baptism is nothing less than a sacramental assimilation now to Christ's death and burial which took place 'then'. The central action of christian worship, the eucharist, forms a joyful and grateful re-presentation of what Jesus did once and for all on behalf of all mankind. Where a christian identity crisis exists today, might it be nothing more nor less than a memory crisis? If christian existence now has become insecure and problematic, could it be that the christian past has been forgotten?

Thirdly, the message from our judeo-christian past challenges our present state by mediating to us the divine promise. That past does not offer us a finished story, an account of things quite over and done with. The creeds press on to the promised aftermath of what happened once 'under Pontius Pilate', the expected resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Our baptism into Christ's death expresses the hope that 'we shall also imitate him in his resurrection'.¹⁶ In celebrating the eucharist, christians are not playing at being disciples in the upper room. This is a meal for hopeful missionaries who proclaim once again the death of the Lord *until he comes*.¹⁷

Nowhere else does the New Testament more strikingly illustrate the promise of the future to be found in the past than in the Book of Revelation. To remember the lamb who was slain means recalling God's promise of a new heaven and a new earth.¹⁸ Looking back to the past entails hoping for the new things which have not yet happened. The God who was there in the death on calvary is the same God who is to create the new Jerusalem. The past stands over against the present by forcing our eyes towards God's coming kingdom and our new future. One day there shall be a supremely new thing under the sun. It is this which calls us home – to our future.

¹⁶ Rom 6, 5.

¹⁷ 1 Cor 11, 26.

¹⁸ Apoc 5, 6 etc.; 21, 1ff.