

The wisdom of history

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ON THE FACE OF IT, CHRISTIANITY IS A WORLD FAITH critically preoccupied with ‘history’ and deeply embedded in ‘time’. The doctrines of Trinity and incarnation place God firmly at the heart of human history and of the stories of individuals.

By affirming that all ‘meaning’, every assertion about the significance of life and reality, must be judged by reference to a brief succession of contingent events in Palestine, Christianity – almost without realising it – closed off the path to ‘timeless truth’.¹

At its heart, Christianity demands an affirmation of ‘history’ not only as meaningful but also as the context for the process of spiritual transformation. On a more ordinary level, Christianity is a religion that marks special times and seasons, celebrates feasts and fasts. Memory and re-membling are among the most critical hallmarks of Christian liturgy and sacraments. The Church is built around the dynamism of a story. Tradition, *traditio*, is to hand on this story, but also to *hand it over*, so that it may be freely retold by each generation.

Philosophers, historians and anthropologists are also concerned with the importance of a historical consciousness. ‘History’ and, more broadly, ‘time’ are important categories in our understanding of human cultures. Here I am using the term ‘culture’ in the sense understood by anthropologists. That is, ‘culture’ signifies the prevailing world-view of any given society.

Few factors in a culture express the essential nature of its world picture so clearly as its way of reckoning time: for this has a determining influence on the way people behave, the way they think, the rhythm of their lives and the relationships between them and things.²

Contemporary suspicion of history

However, we exist in a time of cultural change when the point of ‘history’ is often questioned. Are we in the West rapidly becoming a history-less and memory-less culture? If this is the case, then in the long term it will surely have a serious impact on our spiritualities. There seems to be a problem in western culture at the moment. It is possible to

detect a weariness with history and with the notion of being involved in a tradition or a stream of continuities throughout time. To base one's life on tradition or to hark back to the past appears to be a distraction. It is much more common these days for people to believe that 'history' only signifies the past and that the past is what happened rather than something that enables our present to come into being or that invites us to reflect on the future and on what we aspire to.

In Booker Prize-winner Pat Barker's recent novel *Another world*, Geordie, the centenarian veteran of the Somme, is dying. He has particularly close relationships with two people. Helen, the professional historian who has recorded interviews with him and other veterans, is a representative of 'modernity' with its strong historical consciousness. She has a fervent commitment to preserving memories for the sake of posterity. Geordie's grandson Nick is a more postmodern character who not only believes that 'history' has no message for us but in fact does not really believe in history at all.

'Well, you see the first thing is I don't believe in public memory. A memory is a biochemical change in an individual brain, and that's all there is . . .'

And secretly, what he wants to say is that raking about in the detritus of other people's memories is a waste of time and energy. The only true or useful thing that can be said about the past is that it's over. It no longer exists.³

This weariness with history probably relates to a number of factors. Rapid social changes and the decline of traditional social or working communities have broken many people's sense of a living connection with the past. Our sense of a living past and our sense of 'place' are intimately connected. Our disconnection from familiar landscapes, places of family origin and 'home' consequently undermine our awareness of continuities. 'History', and its sibling 'tradition', is also perceived by some people as a conservative force from which we need to break free if we are to become a more rational society. The power of 'history' (or, more accurately, of history-as-myth) to sustain entrenched social, religious and political divisions in different places around the world tends to reinforce this negative view in the minds of many people.

History is a battleground because it is a matter of identity. I only have to recall my English childhood experiences of heated exchanges about the *true* ownership of history in the four hundred years since the

Reformation. Our identity as a Roman Catholic minority in a predominantly Protestant country demanded that we wrest 'history' back from the opposition. Once again, history and places were closely related as our wistful attention was often fixed on local medieval churches that had once been 'ours'!

Then there is the desire for immediacy sustained by consumerism (and reinforced, to some extent, by information technology) that tends to encourage a memory-less culture without a sense of historical identity. Perhaps the most powerful factor of all is the death of a notion of 'history-as-destiny' that was dominated by faith in the inevitability of progress after a century of industrial growth and imperialistic expansion. This belief in 'history' as a progressive force evaporated during the twentieth century in the face of the multiple hammer blows of the mass slaughter of the 1914-18 war, the horrors of mid-century totalitarianism, the Holocaust and Hiroshima.

A recent parable

The recent story of the John Lewis Partnership in Britain is an interesting parable of our times and of the contemporary decline of belief in the value of history. The Partnership is a chain of department stores and sophisticated supermarkets that is owned by the people who work in it. This arrangement was intended by the founders to preserve the advantageous and secure conditions of work for future generations. Because of their sense of common ownership, their title as 'Partners', and the employee benefits, the shop staff have a well-deserved reputation for friendliness and high quality service. However, the whole enterprise is built on a sense of altruism. The tradition of the past was created to maintain standards for *every* future generation of employees in perpetuity. The difficulty is that the current climate of what has come to be called 'demutualization' is hard to resist. Other mutual organizations in the housing, insurance and banking sectors have recently rushed to become public companies. As a result, employees have gained immediate cash benefits even if they risk their long-term job security at the same time. Despite pressure from some members, the Partners of the John Lewis stores have recently voted to maintain their traditional arrangements. But for how long? How hard it is for individuals to turn down the prospect of a large money payment *immediately* in favour of maintaining a tradition aimed at protecting future generations of employees. Here is an example of how a sense of history concerns an experience of continuity not just with past time but

also with future time. In a profound sense the survival of altruism depends on a belief in history.

Narrative and the reconstruction of history

So, is history dead? The influential French philosopher Paul Ricoeur (unusual in his intellectual world by being a Christian) has been greatly preoccupied with the importance of reconstructing a viable sense of 'time' and 'historical consciousness'. These, he argues, are vital to our individual and collective identities – and, implicitly, to our spiritual well-being: '[T]ime becomes human time to the extent that it is organised after the manner of a narrative; narrative, in turn, is meaningful to the extent that it portrays the features of temporal existence'.⁴

At first glance, Ricoeur appears to be something of a paradox. On the one hand, he shares a postmodern scepticism for meta-narratives and is profoundly suspicious of 'giving in to the temptation of the completed totality'.⁵ Ricoeur shares with postmodernist thinkers the belief that we must renounce any attempt by history 'to decipher the supreme plot'. However, he also rejects a tendency to equate this renunciation with the impossibility of seeing history as a form of narrative at all. In fact he argues that the former search for a supreme plot or meta-narrative actually undermined true narrative because it reduced history to 'the totalisation of time in the eternal present'.⁶ To reject the possibility of mediating narratives altogether is not the liberating experience that it may appear. On the contrary, it is profoundly oppressive. The reason is that without narrative we risk two things. First, we undermine a key element of human solidarity (we bond together by sharing stories) and, second, we reduce or remove a key incentive for changing the status quo as well as an important means of bringing this about. 'We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative.'⁷

Narrative is a critical key to our identity for we all need a story to live by in order to make sense of the otherwise unrelated events of life and to find a sense of dignity. It is only by enabling alternative stories to be heard that an élitist 'history' may be prised open to offer an entry point for the oppressed who have otherwise been excluded from public history. 'Without a narrative, a person's life is merely a random sequence of unrelated events: birth and death are inscrutable, temporality is a terror and a burden, and suffering and loss remain mute and

unintelligible.’⁸ Rather than abolish narrative we need to ask ‘whose narrative is told?’ ‘Who belongs within the story?’

Narrative and history are closely related. Ricoeur seeks to overcome the absolute dichotomy between history as ‘true’ and stories as ‘fiction’.⁹ Both history and fiction refer to the historicity of human existence. Both share a common narrative structure. Both employ a ‘plot’ to suggest a pattern for otherwise episodic events. Any and every plot chooses a sequence for events and characters that suggests a direction or movement. This is shaped by a particular point of view. Ricoeur rejects the positivist view of history (that is, history is only what is scientifically verifiable) in favour of one that allows for the presence of ‘fiction’. That is, history as a form of literature does not simply recount events in a disconnected or disinterested way but *organizes* them in a form that seeks coherence. Equally, fiction can be *truthful* in that, while not slavishly tied to the mechanical details of an event, it is capable of addressing something equally important about reality – the realms of possibility and of the ‘universal’. History and fiction are both narratives that seek to describe either what reality *is* or *is like* with the purpose of making human existence meaningful.

Ricoeur may be said to be attempting to retrieve history as something more than merely a disconnected set of cold, objectified ‘events’ emptied of the warmth of human stories. ‘History’ once again has something to do with people’s vision. It is an act of interpretation and all interpretation is necessarily an act of *commitment*. History implies continuities and continuities in turn imply responsibilities. Commitment and responsibility point to the important fact that ‘history’ is not merely about the past but also about the present and future. A historical consciousness opens us to possible action rather than to a passive acceptance of ‘the way things are’. In this way of understanding, ‘history’ becomes a critical spiritual issue.

Augustine’s theology of history

It is not surprising that Ricoeur’s preoccupation with time and history draws him to engage with the theology of St Augustine. Augustine’s theology of history, expounded mainly in his *City of God*,¹⁰ has probably been the single most influential historical theory in Christianity. Augustine’s thought has also been pervasive in a more implicit way in western culture in general. The particular context for the work was the sack of Rome by the Visigoths in 410 CE. This event critically undermined a perception current among many Christians after the conversion of the emperor Constantine that the Roman Empire was

a divinely willed, and even divinely guided, framework for human existence. To use the terms of Richard Niebuhr's classic typology of relations between religion and culture, *Christ and culture*,¹¹ there had been a shift from a pre-Constantinian conflict between Christianity and public history to the absorption of the faith by the political and social reality of the Empire. This corresponded to the type Niebuhr refers to as 'The Christ of culture', about which he was highly critical. The origins of early monasticism undoubtedly lie in a variety of motivations and influences. However, there can be no doubt that the rapid expansion of monasticism in the fourth century CE was partly a prophetic, spiritual and social reaction to the perception that the Church was becoming over-identified with public imperial history.

In the context of a fragmentation of empire in the first part of the fifth century CE, Augustine redefined the relationship between the kingdom of God and human history in terms of two communities or forces, the City of God and the Earthly City. Like the tares and the wheat of the gospel parable, the two cities cannot be perfectly differentiated within time. Ultimate meaning and stability cannot be found in the Earthly City, which is a context of incessant change. Nevertheless, states and empires may be said to have a 'historical role' in that they have an impact on the advance of the City of God. Thus, the Roman Empire may be said to have had a 'mission' to unify people in order that the gospel might spread more easily. However, in itself the empire had no eternal significance and its historical decline was inevitable.

Augustine's distinction between the City of God and the Earthly City threw into sharp relief a tension at the heart of Christian spirituality. If the origins of Christianity involve an affirmation of history, there has always been a siren voice that suggests that what is fundamentally important spiritually lies *now* in a parallel dimension alongside or outside historical events and *ultimately* in an eternity on the far side of time. Augustinian theology and spirituality may be a reaction against a dangerous and theologically dubious association between God and the state. But is there a place in Augustinian thought for the kingdom of God to grow *within* human history? Does human history in time and space have meaning?

Because Augustine believed that the full explanation of 'history' lay in the ultimate 'event' (the consummation of God's kingdom), his history belongs in the eschatological category. This concept of divine control of history continued among Christian writers in a fairly uninterrupted way until relatively modern times. In the course of the last two hundred years or so this became absorbed into a post-

Enlightenment belief in 'progress' – that the world was inexorably moving towards greater rationality, greater justice, greater civilization and greater economic development. Augustine himself must be exonerated from such confusions. He did not identify divine control of history with the concept of social, political or economic success. No historical age grew closer to God, perfection or eternity than any other. In that sense, the City of God operates in a realm distinct from everyday history. Conversely, a providential understanding of history does not involve a triumphalistic theology but a theology of hope glimpsed through tragedies and failure.¹² This is just as well because the Enlightenment interpretation of history as the triumph of progress died on the Somme and at Auschwitz.

Dimensions of history: the significance of every moment

An important key to Augustine's theology of history is that his *City of God* is based upon his own experience. Indeed some see it as an application on a wider canvas of Augustine's sense of God's providence in his own life as expressed in the pages of the *Confessions*.¹³ Fundamentally, the lesson of Augustine's chequered career and of world history is that out of all things comes good. Although the City of God operates on a level distinct from the events of ordinary history, the distancing is far from absolute. True, Rome (or any other human *imperium*) is not the kingdom of God in human form. The Earthly City, and thus human history, is always contingent. But human history is God's creation and is not, therefore, to be condemned as merely evil, or treated as an illusion. For Augustine, the lessons of history lead him to be calmly confident about the future even *in and through* the ambiguities and darkness of human events and experiences. If contingent 'time' and 'history' are to end, it is an ending which is the fulfilment of history, not its destruction.

Even if Augustine rejected a progress model of human history, and believed that no age could be said to be closer to God than any other, he also possessed a deep sense that *each and every moment in time* was equally filled with God's presence and activity. Augustine's theology of history essentially describes two dimensions of history: the history of contingent events and, running through it, the thread of sacred history that alone tells us what God is *really* doing.¹⁴ Therefore, every moment is significant, even if that significance is presently mysterious. Such a view seems close to Paul Ricoeur's understanding of 'narrative' which is not descriptive of the time-space world as it is, and therefore of 'history' in a positivist sense. Narrative *redescribes* the world rather

than describing it. Narrative brings together and harmonizes the otherwise discordant and disparate elements of the experience of time and history.

In an important sense, Augustine's distinction between sacred and secular history does not render the history of time and space meaningless. Rather it liberates it in its contingency from any need to be tidied up. It is only when a providential version of history collapses into an Enlightenment version of 'history-as-progress' that we end up with a re-editing of human history that becomes exclusive and sanitized and therefore oppressive and dysfunctional. I have taken pains elsewhere to describe how the history of Christian spirituality has been edited in this unhealthy way.¹⁵ What we can nowadays detect in studies of Christian spirituality is the effort to take its history seriously *precisely as history*. This is not purely a pragmatic or methodological point. It has theological and spiritual resonances, as such an attitude recognizes that Christian spirituality is not a perfect seamless robe but is associated with contexts, viewpoints, world-views and experiences. The history of spirituality is a record of attempts, and no more, to live out the gospel, by fits and starts, in the complexity of human events.

Eschatologies and history

An eschatological model of history is not per se bound to empty the history of human events of significance by suggesting that meaning is to be found only in some indefinable future after the death of time. There are indeed excessively future-orientated eschatologies, just as there are excessively realized ones. To suggest blandly that God *has* redeemed the world despite visible evil, or to suggest that God's redemptive love merely awaits us on the other side of history, leaves us with a God cruelly detached from the here-and-now realities of human suffering and violence. In terms of Niebuhr's typology, interpreted in terms of eschatologies, it is perhaps his fifth type, 'Christ the transformer of culture', that approaches an ideal balance. This type, as Niebuhr himself suggests, would seem to come closest to Augustine. This eschatology suggests that the beginnings of the kingdom of God lie in history, through the process of spiritual transformation. Yet the process is always to be completed and so there is perpetually an impulse to press on towards a final completion.

A balanced eschatology opens every 'present moment', and indeed history as a whole, to what is beyond it or more than the present instant. History, and the 'present moment', is thus not reduced in importance, let alone annihilated, but actually *expanded and enhanced*. Every

moment not only contains the presence of the past but also the hope of the future. Every moment is also decisive. An eschatological perspective makes chronological time *kairos* time. Each historical moment is an 'end moment' that makes whatever we do now an act of commitment to what is final or decisive. One might say that every moment is 'eucharistic' in a broad sense. The eucharist is the characteristic action of the Christian community. We give thanks. We re-member the saving events of Jesus Christ. We anticipate in joyful hope our ultimate destiny.

Theologically and spiritually, celebrations of the eucharist are moments of concentration and intersection that both gather all time – past, present and future – into that here and now and also bring human time into transforming contact with the 'epoch-making event of Jesus Christ in its once and for all character'.¹⁶ However, a spirituality of eucharist also involves an act of commitment. Every time we celebrate eucharist together we commit ourselves not to succumb to despair in the midst of the world's misery but to convert this time and place into a laboratory of ultimate hope. To celebrate eucharist also commits us, even more radically, to cross boundaries of fear, prejudice and injustice in a prophetic embracing of other people, *all* others, in whom we are challenged to discover the Real Presence of an incarnate God.

Conclusion

The contemporary climate of postmodernity may suggest that we have reached the end of history in the sense that 'history' has become fatally associated with ideology, structures of control and the dominance of certain élites, whether in society or in the Church. In its more extreme forms, postmodernist theory is indeed anti-historical. However, more moderate voices do not reject a historical consciousness and its positive values but seek to refine it. If 'history', and its wisdom, have been oppressive because associated with dominant economic, social or even spiritual groups, it must now be reconstructed as a liberating force by giving space to the stories of forgotten or rejected minorities. History becomes truly wise when it is a narrative that is capable of including women as well as men, the whole of humanity as opposed to merely the economically powerful nations, the material earth as well as humankind. As Augustine still reminds us, 'history' is also truly wise when, by opening every contingent moment to infinite possibility, it offers a holistic spiritual vision rather than a limited vision of fulfilment conceived in terms of purely material enhancement.

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NOTES

- 1 Rowan Williams, *The wound of knowledge*, revised edition (London: Darton, Longman & Todd/Boston: Cowley Publications, 1990), p 1.
- 2 A. J. Gurevich, *Categories of medieval culture*, ET (London/Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), p 94.
- 3 Pat Barker, *Another world* (London: Penguin Books, 1999), p 85 and p 87.
- 4 Paul Ricoeur, *Time and narrative*, volume 1, ET (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), p 3.
- 5 *Time and narrative*, (TN) volume 3, p 103.
- 6 TN 3, p 202.
- 7 TN 1, p 75.
- 8 Mark Wallace, 'Introduction' to Paul Ricoeur, *Figuring the sacred: religions, narrative and imagination*, ET (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p 11.
- 9 See the three volumes of *Time and narrative*, but especially volume 1, Part II, 'History and narrative'.
- 10 See *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, volume II (Edinburgh: T&T Clark/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993 edition, or the translation in Penguin Books, London, 1984).
- 11 H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and culture* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952).
- 12 See, for example, remarks in John McManners, 'Introduction', pp 1–18 in John McManners (ed), *The Oxford history of Christianity* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
- 13 See John O'Meara, 'Introduction', p vii, in Henry Bettenson (trans), *St Augustine: City of God* (London: Penguin Books, 1984).
- 14 See the classic work on Augustine's theory of history, R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: history and society in the theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), especially Chapter 1, 'History: sacred and secular'.
- 15 See my *Spirituality and history: questions of interpretation and method*, revised edition (London: SPCK, 1995/New York: Orbis Books, 1998), especially Chapter 4.
- 16 David Ford, *Self and salvation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p 163. Although Ford's precise phrase concerns baptism, his wider context is the theology of the eucharist.