

Looking Back

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The elderly must often be sad when they look back. There is no escape. In those long-gone days they were fresher and more alive. Today energies are failing and powers of perception lack the briskness and sharpness that were theirs when the experiences they remember first occurred. It is possible to catch the excitement of those earlier times—so exciting, compared with the present—but it is a difficult task. As soon as comparison finds its way into present consciousness sadness tends to make its entry. Yet views of the past change as variously as do the views as one climbs up a hill, some thrilling, some depressing, according to light and angle of vision. Now, for example, the picture of the world of 1908 (the year in which I was born) and onwards looks like a picture of increasing physical violence, of death and hideous human slaughter. And yet, on the other side of the page, we can find another picture, in which intellectual violence seems to be decreasing just as much.

In the late 1920s, when studying first philosophy and then theology in preparation for the priesthood, we used to agonize about those passages in the Bible when the Lord seemed to interfere with the workings of the entire material universe in order to procure some victory for a rather unimportant leader of the Israelites. The sun would stand still for a number of hours while the enemies were chased and slaughtered. An event of this sort occurs in Isaiah, when the Lord gives a sign to Hezekiah: "Behold, I will make the shadow cast by the declining sun on the dial of Ahaz turn back ten steps" So the sun turned back on the dial the ten steps it had declined"'. (Is. 38, 7—8). In fact the selections of readings for Friday's Mass in the 15th week of the Church's year (when the story of Hezekiah appears) have shuffled round the verses so that the account of this miracle comes last! Could that *possibly* be because they were anxious to console the elderly who studied theology in their early years? For then we understood the literal sense of the Word of God to imply that the Bible taught scientific truth, as its author was the Source of all Science.

It is curious that, while we began by learning to despise the “first degree of abstraction”, from which we could learn scientific facts and principles, nevertheless these facts and principles received the same accolade of the glory of *truth* which we were learning to bestow on the absolute inhabitants of the third degree of abstraction. As philosophers, “being as being” was what we were setting forth to track down. When we had triumphed in the world of abstraction we were then in a position to study the words of the Church in the definitions of the General Councils, after which we could move on to consider the Word of God in the Bible. By that time we had reached a world populated by truths, the enemies of which could be slaughtered by a *via negativa* which disclosed that all arguments to the contrary were the fruit of absurdity.

The weaknesses of this form of instruction are evident in the late years of the 20th century. And perhaps the most treacherous thing about it was the assumption that the truths of science were vested in the same holy garments as the absolutes with which we had grown familiar. It was only as the years passed that we began to realise that these “truths” of the first degree of abstraction were in fact hypotheses, and that even such shattering advances as Rutherford’s splitting of the atom were largely the result of “hunches”. Philosophy, theology and scripture studies did not admit “hunches” as evidence for truth.

Of course, it is easy to get the focus wrong and therefore the picture distorted, but, looking back to those far-off years, it would seem that the study of philosophy had become undermined by the subsequent study of theology. Theology began with the data blessed with the certainty of faith. Faith was God-given unchallenged and unchallengeable certainty. Truly, we followed St Thomas’s method of beginning with the arguments against truth, but these seemed rather trivial put-up bogies with no substance. The hard-core truths were there at the centre of the science firmly established in the surrounding frame of certainty. Our philosophy was to prepare us for this theological study, and for that reason I suppose it had acquired the same assurance. We were, to some extent, besieged by the armies of science, but to give us confidence we were led to assume that all the truths of their aggressive armoury were in fact devoid of any certainty themselves. For we took it that the scientists claimed the same assurance of certainty that we did for the foundations of our philosophy and theology. There is nothing like certainty as an instrument for closing the mind. To have reached certainty appears to be the conclusion of an investigation into truth. The manner in which Christian belief is presented can be a mind-closer. The creeds are presented as a series of factual statements; the catechisms offer direct and final answers to the enquiring mind. Listen, hear the truth; these

words show you what is what; God has spoken: it is not only ill-mannered to challenge him, it is also dangerous!

So we used easily to slip unobserved into a world of dogmatism. We were taught how to think, and presented with remarkably accurate instruments, such as the “medieval disputation”, which used logic as an intellectual machine with an accuracy (possibly deceptive) in mental gymnastics.

The world of dogmatism was particularly treacherous whenever there were religious discussions between rival religious denominations. Such conflicts led to entrenched positions like the military strategy of the first world war and the construction of the Maginot line as we approached the second. One set of closed minds was erected against another, to continue and deepen divisions between religious bodies. In the 1980s it is quite difficult to realise the severity of Roman Catholic authority that forbade us in the early 1940s to share in anything more than the Lord’s Prayer when we gathered for religious purposes with other Christians. During the period of air raids in London the Cardinal gave the author permission to appear in a joint prayer service for the large group of shelterers in one place on condition that it was made clear that he appeared exclusively on behalf of the Roman Catholics. And so it went on. Divisions were absolute and permanent. In those war years the author, to his utter shame, published an article claiming that the only possibility for unity among Christians was “total surrender” to Rome.

All such demonstrations of certainty fitted easily into the belligerent atmosphere of the war years. They did not shock Catholic Christians because of this dogmatic form of education. We were, I suppose, taught to acquire truth rather than to admire truth. I am suggesting that whereas the mind of philosopher, theologian or simple Christian should always be open to truth, the way in which certainty had penetrated into the key position in our thinking produced this tendency to close up on what we had “made our own”. What was lacking, of course, was the attitude of wonder and admiration in the presence of truth and reality. What was needed in the twenties and thirties of this century as we prepared for the priesthood was a concerted effort to integrate the life of prayer with the life of study. Of course, we had both, the two between them occupying the greater part of the day, but they seem to have moved along parallel lines rather than to have swamped each other. A deepening life of prayer would have given us a deeper humility in the presence of the certainties we were seeking, would have given us a more truly overwhelming admiration of what the Lord had done and was doing before us. At the sight of truth perhaps we might have caught our breath with a greater sense of astonishment.

Admiration will develop the awareness of the infinitude of

creation in everything we look at. Kenneth Clark opened *Civilization*, his brilliant survey of the work of man's hand, with a description of what he saw standing on the Pont des Arts in Paris—the Institute of Paris, the Louvre, Notre Dame, the houses, the open-air bookstalls—and one could stand there with him, drinking in more and more of the reality of God's creation mediated through the hands of men. Prayer consists basically of wonder and admiration, developing into thanksgiving, praise, petition. And in the monastic tradition the study of scripture and theology was carried on under the title of *Opus Dei* as integrated in the prayer life of the community. Ever-increasing specialization broke up this pattern of prayer and put it into departments.

However, we should leave this gloomy story, because the picture has so profoundly changed in the past twenty years; dogmatism has been faded out; the era of the open mind has arrived. How this came about is not quite certain, as no official announcement has appeared. It is difficult to allocate cause and effect, but the rapid development of interest in ways of prayer must surely have some association with the new intellectual atmosphere. I should avoid, perhaps, the word "interest", for it is more than a superficial cerebral concern; more and more people have set out to devote their lives to the discovery of the depths of prayer—think of the armies of young people who have turned up year after year at Taizé, and the throngs who have set out for the Far East. And everywhere the uncertain vision of peace has emerged as a shining cloud in the centre of the contemplative life.

Prayer, then, has been at work as an opener among the armies of mental clams. Obviously the calling of an ecumenical general council lies at the heart of the era—a council called not in order to condemn errors in doctrine, not to produce anathemas, not to define dogmas, but "to impart an ever-increasing vigour to the Christian life of the faithful; to adapt more closely to the needs of our age those institutions which are subject to change; to foster whatever can promote union among all who believe in Christ; to strengthen whatever can help to call all mankind into the Church's fold". (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* n.1). It was the first council of its kind. Rome teemed with those thousands of bishops and their theologians, settling down to the discussions about the truths of Revelation—as it were, to stand and admire afresh the wonders of re-creation in the Word, to consider and admire firstly the marvellous work of Christian prayer. The reasons why the Council decided to postpone its consideration of Revelation are well-known, and it was doubtless "politically" necessary. All the same, it seems probable that a mistake was made in considering first of all the formal, institutional prayer of the liturgy. More fruitful would have been the prayerful consideration of the wonderful work of Re-creation in the Word made flesh—the

discussions which in fact followed later. Of course, the very elaborate and detailed work on the liturgy, which had become for modern Catholics rather what the Law was for the Jews in the time of our Lord offered a clear and direct entry into a reappraisal, an *aggiornamento*, in the life of the Church. But the weakness of this approach was that it did not allow time for the appearance of a *new mentality*—something which was absolutely basic to a new approach.

As it was, the clipping and pruning of the old rites led to the construction of “new rites” based on the premises of the old, and the result was a great deal of unrest. It would surely have been more practical to have allowed a new liturgy to develop from the renewed Spirit in the Church. The spirit of regeneration had been working at depth very soon after the war. For instance, ten years before the opening of Vatican II Spode House, recently founded as a Catholic adult education centre, held its first conference on adaptation of religious life. After the Council this would have been called “renewal”, but in those early days the Church was beginning to try to “adapt” itself to the new Spirit abroad. The conference was limited to superiors, and so generals and provincials as well as ordinary superiors came piling in (the conference was soon overbooked and for that reason very uncomfortable!). A change of heart had already begun.

The change of mind and heart which has led to the introduction of a new life style among committed Christians must assuredly have also had some of its origins in the effective advance in scientific studies. For one thing, the sheer success of the modern natural sciences over the years revealed that they were in touch with truth, in fact in touch with the way God had made things. Science had discovered in 100 years more about Creation than scholastic philosophy had managed to acquire in a thousand. And the reason, as has already been suggested, is that it made no claims to absolute truth, no claims to certainty and assurance, but proceeded along the lines of guess-work and hunches, hypotheses and individual, particular inventions or discoveries. Philosophy (in the Church) and theology had assumed that science made the same “dogmatic” claims to truth and certainty, and of course the persecution of science by religion (as in the case of Galileo) and of religion by science (as in the case of most secularists over the past century) did indeed lead to dogmatic stands on both sides—firm barriers and an accompanying sad fading of wonder and admiration. However, in my lifetime many of those set attitudes have been undermined.

Obviously, the advance in ecumenism is one of the most striking examples of the great revolution that has occurred in these years. Now we stand—or should stand—beside one another as Christians, no longer suspicious of secret heresies. We declare what beauties and wonders we can observe in divine revelation, but should enquire of

our neighbour what does *he* see? After all, his position is different from mine, he stands at a different angle. He walks with the Lord along a path I had not previously noticed, so I should be keen to share his experiences, not to condemn his utterances. Love casts out fear, and if I love my fellow Christian, whatever his particular allegiance, I am no longer afraid that he might mislead me. Of course, traces of the former rivalries and fears still linger; the change will not happen overnight. But fears are manifestly disappearing.

Another advance under the auspices of the same spirit of wonder and admiration is the extraordinary progress in Scripture studies. From the turn of the century the sciences of biblical archaeology and palaeography have developed, unimpeded except by the fear of certain Church authorities who suspected that truth might mislead—and (just about the time I was born) scare of “modernism” started up innumerable heresy hunts. How is it, then, that today volume on volume appears with approval, even though they carry many of the same statements, phrases, conclusions that were called “modernist”? The reasons usually proffered do not properly answer the question. The deep reason presumably is that the scientific sense of admiration and wonder has permeated men’s minds and driven out the enemy! It is marvellous to experience at last how it is the truth that makes us free.

The new Christian freedom leads us beyond the confines of the West. Writes Dom Bede Griffiths: “Every genuine religion bears witness to some aspect of the divine mystery, embodied in its myths and rituals, its customs and traditions, its prayer and mystical experience, and each has something to give to the universal church. The narrow-mindedness which has divided the Christian churches from one another, has also divided the Christian religion from other religions.” (*The Marriage of East and West*, p.200)

I am now getting old, and one of the failures of the elderly is to slide into unsubstantiated generalisations—especially when looking back. All the same, it seems to me certain that we have already made genuine progress, along this road, which has meant a deepening of humility, and a greater freedom and trust among Christians. But this does not mean we can afford to be complacent. Peering into the future, at what we can discern of the Church of the coming generation—the Church of the period just beyond my own lifetime, the Church of the turn of the millennium—it is clear that this growth in freedom and trust is not going to stay unchallenged. There is a need for constant sensitivity and vigilance, and we must pray continuously that this progress be not impeded by the evil one.