

Catholic Historians and the Reformation—I¹

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It is not my intention to attempt a systematic examination of what Catholic historians have had to say about the Reformation in England. Such an examination, beginning, perhaps, with the work of Dr Nicholas Sander and Fr Edward Rishton in the sixteenth century - *De Origine ac Progressu Schismatis Anglicani* - and working through to Fr Philip Hughes' three volumes on *The Reformation in England* would indeed bring the enquirer into contact with a large number of fascinating personalities and would incidentally, provide him with a number of examples of prejudice and propaganda, as well as with models of painstaking and disinterested scholarship. Nor am I concerned only, or even mainly, with Catholics who have written historical works, but with all Catholics who have in one way or another to deal with history and with historical problems, particularly with historical problems which still arouse religious prejudices and which may be the occasion of religious propaganda.

Whether they like it or not, Catholics have to concern themselves with history. They belong to a church which claims to have been founded by an historical person at a particular point of time in history. They claim that there is continuity between the Church founded by Christ and the Church today. They claim that the line of supreme pontiffs is not eventually lost in the twilight of fable but can be traced back to St Peter. The Catholic explaining or defending the claims of his Church must continually have recourse to history, not only because his Church makes particular historical claims but because in a great many of the attacks made on that church, the arguments employed are arguments from history. The opponents of the Church will claim that it does not in fact teach the same doctrine as the primitive church, that in the course of time errors crept in, that at the Reformation efforts were made to remove those errors. In England, the Catholic will continually come up against the claim that the Church of England is essentially part

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of the Catholic Church, even though it has parted company with the Roman Church. He will meet the argument that Anglican orders are valid orders. Moreover history can be, and has been, used to create an atmosphere, a climate of opinion, that will prevent people from taking at all seriously the claims of the Catholic Church. There has been in the past a black legend in which Foxe's Book of Martyrs, Bloody Mary, intriguing Jesuits directed by the sinister Fr Robert Persons, not to mention equivocation and Gunpowder Plot, have made a witch's brew which English children have imbibed with their mother's milk. And although the cruder manifestations of this anti-Catholic tradition have more or less disappeared, the tradition still goes on and even shows itself in a polished and sophisticated form in the essays of a Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Oxford.

Since the Catholic must be continually concerned with history and with historical problems, the question arises what should be his approach to that discipline which we call the study of history. The business of the historian, I take it, is to find out what he can about the past, to ask what happened and why it happened, and to reconstruct that past as best he can. In this, he uses various methods and techniques, and his aim is, or should be, the pursuit of truth. His job as historian is not to look for evidence to support a particular thesis which he believes to be true, but to investigate the past and to present as truthful a picture of it as he can from the evidence which is before him.

Now it may be argued that the historian ought to approach his subject, as far as he can with an open mind, just as the scientist engaged in a particular experiment should not decide beforehand what conclusions he is going to draw from that experiment. But the Catholic does not, and cannot, approach historical studies with a completely open mind. He has in fact prejudged a number of historical questions. It is not for him an open question whether Christ existed or whether He founded a Church. He has not got an open mind on the desirability of the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century or on the question of whether the Church of England is part of the Catholic Church. He may indeed go to history to find evidence to support his views, but he does not go to history uncertain as to what the answer will be. In a sense, therefore, and to limited degree, Catholic historians are prejudiced. They are committed men. In this, of course, they do not differ from non-Catholic historians. The Catholic historian does not really expect that one day, as a result of his historical studies, he may conclude that the Church is untrue. If he does, the light of faith is already grow-

ing dim within him. But for that matter, few non-Catholic historians expect that as a result of their historical studies, they will one day find themselves compelled to accept Catholicism. They are, in fact, committed for various reasons to the belief that the Church of Rome is a purely human institution, and for most of them, at any rate, it would mean an agonizing reappraisal if historical investigation led them to a different conclusion.

Now, although the Catholic historian on certain points has not got an open mind, and although he may be anxious to present his Church in a sympathetic light and to defend it against attack, he must nevertheless treat history and historical truth with proper respect. Here one might quote Pope Leo XIII who wrote 'Above all, the historian should ever bear in mind that the first law of history is that the historian should never dare to write what is false and the second that he should never lack the courage to say what is true. The third law is that he should never write to win favour or to satisfy his spleen'.² One might perhaps elaborate this a little and say that the Catholic historian, believing as he does in the truth of the Church and having a natural sympathy with and loyalty to the Catholic cause, must recognize that history is an organized body of knowledge, with its own methods, its rules of evidence, its own techniques and its own discipline, and that it must not be misused, even in a good cause. He must beware of turning it into propaganda in the worst sense of the word, or of suppressing evidence, or (what is probably a great danger) of not giving it its proper weight and proportion because it does not serve his particular purpose. He must not try to minimize or explain away facts which do not fit in with his particular views. If he is engaged in controversy, he must accept his opponents arguments honestly and frankly if they seem to be historically sound, and he must not let his own pride prevent him from admitting defeat on a matter where he has been proved wrong. He must not imagine that if he concedes a point, he has somehow let the Catholic cause down. In his judgments, he must beware of the temptation to give the benefit of the doubt to some historical character just because he was a Catholic and to deny it to another because he was hostile to the Church.

All this may seem obvious enough, but it seems to me that even today a number of Catholics writing about the history of Catholicism in England do not always find it easy to avoid the dangers into which they

²Cited in David Knowles, *Cardinal Gasquet as an Historian*, The Athlone Press, 1957, p.26.

are tempted by their very natural sympathy with their co-religionists, and in the past it was perhaps even more difficult when the enormous weight of hostile propaganda inclined them, as it were, to present Catholicism in the best possible light and to ignore the awkward skeletons in the cupboard. Thus Charles Butler, writing in 1818, confessed: 'I find my history of the English Catholics a work of greater delicacy. The claim of truth on an historian is imperious - on the other hand one does not like to expose failings which in some degree affect the whole body'.³ This is a very dangerous position and might easily lead to *suppressio veri*. One must not conceal part of the truth because it is not edifying.

An excellent example of the very conscious attempt by a Catholic historian to present the truth about the Reformation as he saw it is provided by the great John Lingard. Treating of a subject which, as he said, had been fiercely debated by religious polemics, he wrote in his preface: 'The great event of the reformation, while it gave a new impetus to the powers, embittered with rancour the writings of the learned. Controversy pervaded every department of literature: and history, as well as the sister sciences, were alternatively pressed into the service of the contending parties . . . My object is truth: and in pursuit of truth I have made it a religious duty to consult the original historians'.⁴ That Lingard presented the truth as he saw it, no-one would deny, yet was there not a danger to which a lesser man might have succumbed of mixing propaganda with history when he wrote to a correspondent asking him to supply various documents and added: 'In short, you see what I want - whatsoever may serve to make the Catholic cause appear respectable in the eyes of the British public. I have the reputation of impartiality - therefore have it more in my power to do so', or again, was he not potentially exposing himself to the dangers of wishful thinking when he wrote of Cardinal Allen's *Admonition to the Nobility and People of England and Ireland* which was printed for the purpose of being dispersed in England as soon as the Armada forces had landed: 'It is perhaps the most virulent libel ever written. I would give anything to prove it a forgery for his honour and that of the Catholics. After such a publication I am not surprized at anything that Elizabeth might do against the Catholics'.⁵ It is indeed an awkward document in which Elizabeth is spoken of as 'an incestuous

³Quoted in Martin Haile and Edwin Bonney, *Life and Letters of John Lingard*, p. 27.

⁴*Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

⁵*Ibid.* pp. 180, 198-199.

bastard, begotten and born in the sin of an infamous courtesan' and in which Catholics are invited to rise against this 'infamous, depraved, accursed excommunicate heretic . . . the chief spectacle of sin and abomination in this our age; and the only poison, calamity and destruction of our noble Church and Country'. The point for the historian is not, of course, whether Allen's honour or the honour of Catholics was at stake, but simply whether or not he was responsible for the work. Even Fr Philip Hughes seems to me to play it down as far as he can. He gives the details of it, and he adds 'The mask has indeed slipped off, *we may imagine the other side proclaiming . . .*'⁶ This seems to me to be put in such a way that it carries the suggestion that it was unreasonable of the other side to do so – just the sort of thing these nasty suspicious chaps would do. Fr Hughes' criticism of Conyers Reed for saying that Allen published the work whereas in fact he did not, does not really meet the point Conyers Reed was making that 'the charge against the priests on political grounds was greatly strengthened . . .'. The thing was after all in Burghleigh's hand and it was, very naturally, taken as showing Allen's real views, his long term plans as contrasted with sending of missionary priests who in the short run were told to keep clear of politics.

Whatever may have been his predilections about showing Catholicism in a favourable light, John Lingard did not shrink from facing the facts as he saw them and he could write with reference to some of the priests who were tried with Campion: 'Their hesitation to deny the deposing power . . . rendered their loyalty very problematical in case of an attempt to enforce the bull by any foreign prince. It furnished sufficient reason to watch their conduct with an eye of jealousy, and to require security for their good behaviour on the appearance of danger, but could not justify their execution for an imaginary offence . . . The proper remedy would have been to offer liberty of conscience to all Catholics who would abjure the temporal pretensions of the pontiff.'⁷ This seems to me a remarkable passage, even granted that Lingard was writing for a potentially hostile Protestant audience brought up in the belief that Elizabethan Catholics were traitors, and it is one which we do well to reflect on even now when a very proper zeal for the martyrs may very easily result in our being less than just to those who put them to death – a point to which I will return later.

The danger to which a Catholic historian, or for that matter any

⁶Philip Hughes, *The Reformation in England*, III. p. 380.

⁷John Lingard, *The History of England*, sixth edition, 1855, VI. p. 169.

historian, is subjected is admirably illustrated in that brilliant lecture by Professor Knowles on 'Cardinal Gasquet as an Historian'.⁸ Part of the very heavy indictment which Professor Knowles has to make against Gasquet is this: 'He rarely approached an historical topic with an open mind; in other words he rarely approached it as an historian. Either he wrote to convince others of what he believed to be the truth, or he set out a discovery which he held to be significant. In other words, he started with a conviction or a fact, and went to other documents to find confirmation . . .', or again: 'Evidence, whether old or fresh, did not impinge on his consciousness with the cogency which it in fact possessed', or yet again: 'Gasquet was not an intellectually humble man . . . He lacked that passion for absolute intellectual chastity, which is desirable in any man, but in an historian is as much an occupational requirement as is absolute integrity in a judge'.⁹ And, finally, Professor Knowles produced evidence which seems to suggest intellectual dishonesty. This was with reference to Gasquet's handling of the case of Abbot Marshall of Colchester who was put to death by Henry VIII. As Professor Knowles points out, when Gasquet first wrote of him, the abbot of Colchester was generally thought to have died for denying the royal supremacy. Subsequently there was produced a long document, in the abbot's own hand, in which he denied that he was opposed to the royal supremacy, revoked anything he might have said in support of the papacy and asked the king's pardon. When the question of his beatification was raised, Abbot Gasquet, as the acknowledged expert on the English monasteries, could and should have done something about it. In fact, he did not. In one of his later books he qualified his original statement to the extent of saying that Abbot Marshall's courage appears somewhat to have failed him for a time but that in the end he laid down his life for conscience sake. The point is that Rome was preparing to beatify him and in view of what was, to say the least, grave doubt about his position, Rome should have been warned, but, as Professor Knowles says, 'largely as a result of Gasquet's work, the abbot of Colchester is venerated as a martyr. Gasquet was at the time the one man in England qualified to enter a firm caveat (*against beatification*) for the sake of historical truth, and to warn his readers of his earlier ignorance. Instead, he persisted to the end in a *suppressio veri* which in the circumstances carried with it more than a trace of *suggestio falsi*'.¹⁰

⁸David Knowles, 'Cardinal Gasquet as an Historian', Athlone Press, 1957.

⁹*Ibid.* pp. 23-24.

¹⁰*Ibid.* pp. 19-20.

I might add as a postscript that a little while after the appearance of Professor Knowles' final volume on the religious orders, in which there was a review of the evidence relating to the three abbots of Colchester, Reading and Glastonbury,¹¹ there was an article in a widely read Catholic publication in which the writer quite simply presented Abbot Marshall of Colchester as a martyr who died for denying the royal supremacy. I wrote to the editor pointing out what Professor Knowles had said not only in his new book but also in his lecture on Gasquet published some years earlier, and I suggested that the editor should draw his readers attention to it. He decided, no doubt for reasons that seemed convincing to him, not to do so, but I felt, and I still feel, it was a disservice to historical truth. Writers and editors are human and they make mistakes, and like all of us they have a natural reluctance to admit mistakes, but the fact remains that a large number of people must have been misled on an historical matter of very considerable importance.

It has happened that for various quite understandable reasons a great deal of Catholic historical writing in this country has been controversial. Inevitably in a country like England where Catholicism is a minority religion and where there is a great mass of national tradition and myth hostile to it, Catholic writers have been concerned with this or that attack from the other side and with presenting as favourable an image as they can of Catholicism, if only to counteract the distortions of their opponents. Now in controversy, there is an inevitable tendency for the controversialist to try to win points, to concede as little as he can, to make his cause appear in the best possible light, to concentrate on particular aspects even though this leads to distortion. Of course, truth may emerge in the process, and from time to time one finds the controversialist who has the courage and the honesty to admit that he is wrong and to concede the point at issue, but such courage is comparatively rare. The atmosphere of controversy is not favourable to a calm appraisal of the truth, to an honest acceptance of the fact that history is a complicated business, that generalizations often have to be qualified and exceptions allowed in a way that is maddening to someone who likes his history in black and white, without any greys. This weakness of Catholic historical writing came out time and again in the

¹¹David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, III *The Tudor Age*, Appendix IX, pp. 483-491. Professor Knowles referred to the new evidence produced by Dr J. E. Paul who had discovered the indictments of the abbots of Colchester and Reading. This showed that the abbot of Reading died for asserting the papal supremacy but it did not affect in any essential way the judgement on the abbot of Colchester.

great battles in which Gasquet and Coulton engaged and in some of the controversies in which Belloc used to indulge with the late Professor Pollard. Unfortunately, neither Gasquet nor Belloc was prepared to give way, even when they were clearly in the wrong. In this they were only human, but the purpose of history and of historical controversy is, or should be, the pursuit of truth, and if the historian does not admit his mistakes, either through lack of humility or through a reluctance to let the Protestant dog win, he sins against the light.

A false sense of loyalty to what is conceived to be the interests of the Catholic cause, an emotional attachment to a particular person or institution or organization within the Catholic Church may also lead to distortion and misrepresentation, often, I am sure, unconscious. It cannot, I think, be easy for a Jesuit to be quite fair to the Elizabethan government, and as Fr Philip Hughes himself admitted, it needed a strong sense of duty and a realization of the importance of the issues to enable him in his early work on *Rome and the Counter Reformation* to plumb some of the sordid depths in connection with the unpleasant business of the archpriest controversy.

A great deal of Catholic historical writing in this country has been the product of men who are not professional historians. Now heaven forbid that any one should try to establish a sort of closed shop in history, or that the writing of history should be left only to academics. That would obviously be disastrous. Nevertheless, it is true that the publicist, the journalist, the writer of biographies, whether he be professional or amateur, priest or layman, who feels compelled to rush in to attack some non-Catholic point of view, too often approaches historical problems not simply as an historian seeking to examine all the evidence but as a controversialist or as a man with an *idée fixe* anxious to establish at all costs his particular point of view, as a man so obsessed with the importance of the new evidence that he has turned up that he makes it dominate the whole picture. He may get plots on the brain and indulge excessively in the favourite English pastime of searching for the Hidden Hand. The student of recusant history devoting his attention to what Fr Caraman has called *The Other Face* of Elizabethan England,¹² may too readily forget that Elizabethan England was in fact many-faced and, like the economic historian obsessed with his own particular speciality, he may split the seamless robe of history.

¹²Philip Caraman, *The Other Face; Catholic Life under Elizabeth I*, 1960.