Historical Relativism

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'Whereas a few years ago the most significant intellectual distinctions among Christians had already moved from those determined by confession or denomination to those between "conservatives" and "progressives" or "radicals", it is becoming more and more accurate now to place them between those who have become more aware of the overarching fact of historical relativity and those who have not'.[1] How far this is a correct assessment of the theological scene (the context makes it clear that it is theologians in particular who are being considered) is for others to decide; but the very fact that such an assessment can be made at all is good enough reason for considering the whole question of 'historical relativity' and its possible effects.

No-one in his senses has ever denied the obvious fact that Christian thinking has throughout its history been seriously affected by its environment – social, cultural or intellectual. The rediscovery of Aristotle, for instance, in the Middle Ages, or the scientific advances of the nineteenth century, or the Marxist revolutionary movements of the twentieth, have each in their turn affected what theologians were saying, those who disliked these influences as much as those who welcomed them. It is not possible to do theology as if such movements had never taken place – or if it *is* possible, the theology will be very bad theology, inadequately informed and irrelevant to the needs of its public.

But it is fairly clear that the sort of 'historical relativity' to which J.L. Houlden is referring wants to say more than this. It seems to involve the claim, first, that the influence of these cultural and historical factors is so great that it is not possible to maintain any continuity of doctrine over the generations; and secondly, that this impossibility is not only inevitable but desirable. If we are anxious to explain why we, twentieth-century people, can properly be called Christian theologians in the same sort of way as (say) Origen, Aquinas or Calvin could be called such, the explanation must be sought in one of two ways. Either we point out that we stand in a certain tradition, that we are successors, in some sense, of Origen, Aquinas and Calvin, and do not stand in the tradition of (say) Jewish rabbis or Muslim *'ulama;* or we insist that we, like earlier divines, are committed to basic

Christian affirmations, perhaps the affirmation of God and of a way of relating to God which is rooted in Jesus. These affirmations must be deliberately left vague, in order to allow historical factors their proper scope. This is not to say that an individual theologian may not make more specific and detailed affirmations of God and his relationship to Jesus; but the details must be recognised as mere details, to be worn away in the passage of time.

These two 'explanations' are not of course independent. A present-day thinker is unlikely to see himself standing in the 'Christian' tradition unless he does in fact affirm some 'Christian' affirmations. Theoretically, he might stand in the tradition only in the sense of occupying a post described as one in Christian theology; but even the most uninhibited theologian will usually have *some* affirmations in common with *some* of his predecessors. (They need not be ones those predecesors would have regarded as essential.) Conversely, it is unlikely that a theologian will affirm the importance of God and of Jesus, or any other recognisably 'Christian' affirmation, without seeing himself as in some way standing in the 'Christian' tradition. Again, it could theoretically happen. There are one or two writers whose main affirmations are of a political kind, and who would recognise strong affinities between them and corresponding affirmations made from a Marxist viewpoint. And it might come about that such a person came to regard himself as affirming something that *ought* to have been central to Christianity but has not in fact been any such thing, and so to deny that he stands in the Christian tradition. But in general the two will probably go together. I shall refer to these claims as 'historical relativ*ism*', reserving the word 'relativ*ity*' to describe the generally accepted facts which give rise to such claims.

Relativity and Relativism.

The main problem raised is this: Is historical relativism of the sort I have been describing (not, I hope, caricaturing) the true consequence of the facts of historical relativity? Do we say merely that it is possible psychologically to pass from recognition of these facts to acceptance of relativism, or do we think that it is also a logical step to take? Relevant here will of course be consideration of the tenability of historical relativism considered on its merits; for if it turned out *not* to be tenable, then clearly it could not follow logically from a justifiable recognition of genuine truths. If I ought to recognise the facts, and the facts entail relativism, then I ought to accept relativism; and so if relativism is definitely unacceptable, then either I ought not to accept facts (which is absurd) or they do not entail relativism after all. But we might look at the aguments for relativism first.

Some are surely psychological and no more. We may well find some ideas hard to understand which earlier generations took for granted. In the

words of Bultmann's famous aphorism, 'It is impossible to use electric light and the wireless . . . and at the same time believe in the New Testament world of demons and spirits'.[2] This is an exaggeration, no doubt, and meant as such; but that is not the point. The point is simply that, however true the aphorism, it describes a psychological fact, not a logical one. (Bultmann himself appreciated this, continuing 'We may think we can manage it in our own lives, but to expect others to do so is to make the Christian faith unintelligible and unacceptable to the modern world'.) It is impossible for someone who has lost his sense of smell to detect the fact that the bacon is burning in the kitchen, but the bacon burns on just the same.

But there are more serious arguments than the psychological ones. The fact that our understanding of Christianity is influenced by all sorts of ideas coming into our minds from the world around us means that our form of Christianity is indissolubly tied in with those ideas; it is inevitably different from the Christianity of any other era (and to some extent from the Christianity of other cultures even in our era). When Paul said 'Christ set us free, to be free men'[3], he was writing with freedom from the constraints of the Law in mind. But many generations of Christians have taken it more in the sense of freedom from the burden of guilt and failure; and a modern 'liberation' theologian might take it in the sense of freedom from oppression and tyranny. We cannot pick out a particular theme of Christian theology and trace it through the history of the Church in isolation from all other thought. Consequently, our understanding of the faith is and must be quite different from that of Paul, or Augustine, or Bernard, or Luther, even where we think we agree with them. Indeed, so fast is cultural change that it is unlikely to resemble that of theologians even a few years ago: the changes mentioned in our opening quotation are evidence enough of that. Possibly we ought to be more emphatic still: to borrow a vivid illustration from Houlden's book (not quoted as adequately representing his own views) 'if a sensitive enough instrument could be devised, every reciter of the creed could be shown to be meaning something different by it, however strenuously he affirmed his solidarity with the Christian past and present'.[4]

Changing One's Framework.

There is quite obviously an element of truth in this position, but whether it is strong enough to bear the weight of historical relativism is another matter. One is tempted to open off with the suggestion that realativism is one of those theories that refutes or subverts itself. If I cannot mean the same thing as X when we assert 'I believe in one God the Father almighty', equally I cannot mean the same thing as him when we assert 'It is not possible to maintain continuity of doctrine over the generations'.

We could never be united even in our reading of the 'sensitive enough instrument' that was supposed to reveal our differences. Similarly, if it is true that sensitivity to the effects of historical change has become much more widespread in recent years, so that the recognition of this has become the main intellectual divider of Christian theologians, may it not well be the case that in a few more years this division will be completely forgotten about except among the obstinately old-fashioned? 'If', it has been remarked in a slightly different context, 'the proposition that "every item of our knowledge is relative to an interpretative framework" is known to be true, non-relativistically, then it is itself an exception to the rule it states: but if it is itself true only relativistically, then it might be untrue in another perspective'.[5]

This might be objected to as mere logic-chopping, a specious cavilling which does not really meet the point the relativist was making. And if we left it as it stands, the objection might be just. But in fact the logical difficulty thus raised points beyond itself to a more serious reply to relativism: Unless I can to some extent step back from my own framework, I cannot know that I *have* such a framework at all. And since I do know that I have one, it follows that I can and do step back from it, that I am freer of it than the relativist allows.

Indeed, it is surely true that I cannot recognise that there is a difference between my own natural framework and that of (say) St Paul unless I can not only step out of mine but also to some extent step into his. Otherwise, though I may recognise the way my own thinking is affected, I cannot know how far Paul's was, nor in what way; for all I know, it may have been in exactly the same way as mine!

This must not be overstated. There are obviously some cases where the differences are so great that I never even think I understand what the other person's outlook was. This is most obvious where he is using a technical vocabulary I do not understand: I recognise that a biophysicist's framework differs (in part) from mine because of the presence in what he says of biophysical terms which mean nothing to me. If I am to share his framework, I must learn biophysics! And when it is a matter of understanding someone from a different culture, such as the writers of the New Testament, it is the task of the scholar and the historian to enable me to enter into a framework that is not naturally my own. They may fail (through their fault or mine); but they may fail in either of two ways. They may fail to give me any real idea of what the writer meant, so that I am still left bewildered by his language. To make a personal example, I have not yet come across an interpreter of Taoism who leaves me even thinking that I understand it. Or they may give me a *wrong* idea. An example might be those

interpeters of Paul who, in times past, conveyed the impression that by 'faith' he normally meant assent to certain theological propositions. But we cannot even agree that this misinterpreted Paul unless we have some sort of reasons for thinking that our own interpretation is at least nearer the truth. Exactly what form these reasons would have to take cannot be dealt with here; but there can hardly be a single theologian who doubts that such reasons exist.

We do not require, in order to understand Paul (or whoever it may be), to think exactly as he thought. It may be true that 'every reciter of the creed could be shown to be meaning something different by it'. But this is true only in a quite artificial sense of the word 'meaning'. There may be all sorts of mental images and associations or emotional overtones in our reciter's mind which are not in his neighbour's; but it is only rarely that this matters. If I tell you 'The train leaves at 12:15', my mental picture may be of a sleek streamlined express and yours of an elderly, puffing steam-engine; my associations may be 'modernity' and my emotions 'approval', while yours may be 'scruffy' and 'fear of boredom'. Yet this is of interest only to the psychologist or the British Rail publicist; it does not imply that I failed to get my meaning across. 'When I think in language', said Wittgenstein, 'there aren't "meanings" going through my mind in addition to the verbal expressions: the language is itself the vehicle of thought.'[6] *A fortiori* this will be true of speech and writing. You find out what a man means when reciting the Creed by what he has in common with other reciters, namely the words he utters and the general pattern of their use, and not by the way in which he differs from them. Of course, he may have some mental reservation; or he may misunderstand, as I remember doing when young, supposing 'according to the Scriptures' to be a cautious addition in case Christ didn't really rise again; but these are and must be exceptions, or communication would be non-existent.

The very existence at the present time of people who call themselves Calvinists, Thomists, Marxists and the like should give the relativist pause. He may want to say 'It is foolish to stick with such obsolete patterns of thought'; but if he says this he has abandoned his relativism, by conceding that it is possible, even if undesirable, to stick with an obsolete pattern. On the other hand, if he says 'This man *thinks* he is a Thomist or whatever, but really he is a twentieth-century European like me', he can hardly accuse the other of being stuck in the Middle Ages. The fact that adherents of Calvin, Aquinas, Marx and the rest do exist and do differ from one another and from the rest of us strongly suggests that they do genuinely have something in common with their founders, that there *is* continuity of thought across the centuries.

And this is true *a fortiori* where Christianity is concerned. Time brings

the church new sources of information, and loses others. It also brings and loses ways of thinking. The latter, however, may to some extent be recovered when lost, and shaken free from when brought. (Indeed, it is often advisable to do so. 'Two heads are better than one', wrote C.S. Lewis à propos of a very similar problem to ours, 'not because either is infallible, but because they are unlikely to go wrong in the same direction.' Contemporary ways of thinking will go wrong in places like any others, and the best corrective may be to assume temporarily the ways of thinking of some other age.) But there is a continuous element as well: not only the external continuity, in that we do our thinking in a church of Christ which has historical continuity with that of the Apostles, the Fathers and the Reformers, but also an internal, in that we are thinking, in our different ways no doubt, about the same things.

Three Layers in Thought.

But 'the same things' is an ambiguous expression. The relativist may suggest that it refers simply to God and Jesus. It does of course refer to them, but to more as well. We may imagine theology as three layers deep: there is the way of thinking, there is what is thought, and there is what is thought about. The real difference between the traditional Christian and the relativist comes in the second layer. About the first we can be in general agreement; it is quite true that different times and places have different ways of thinking, even if the relativist is inclined to exaggerate the importance of this fact. About the third we are also *probably* in agreement, though there may be room for differences. (Do we include 'man' as well as 'God' and 'Jesus'?) But the relativist wants to treat the second layer, what is thought, as if it were really a kind of subdivision of the first, the way of thinking; while the ordinary, non-relativist Christian, though he recognises that there is a logical distinction, wants to associate it more closely with the third layer, what is being thought about. Let me take an example. St John says of the Word 'He entered his own realm, and his own would not receive him'.[8] Now it is very likely that John's way of thinking was in terms of spatial descent, even though he doubtless realised this was not literally the case. But there is a fact, or alleged fact – let us say a state of affairs – which he is thinking (in his own way) was true; it is the state of affairs known as the Incarnation. And there are also two individuals about whom he is thinking this – Jesus of Nazareth and the Word.

Now there are some states of affairs which cannot be understood except in terms of a particular way of thinking. The Greek legends of Phaethon and Icarus do not make sense unless you realise that those who told them supposed the sun to be travelling round the earth not very far above it.

(Even here, of course, we can imagine ourselves into this belief for long enough to enjoy the legends.) But these are probably exceptional, certainly where Christianity is concerned. The doctrine of the Incarnation can be, and has been, stated without the metaphor of 'Entry' or a three-decker-universe way of thinking. The meaning can remain constant through a change of mental associations and emotional overtones, just as the meanings of 'The train goes at 12:15' can.

It is another matter when we come to the links between the second and third layers. Obviously the second cannot normally exist without the third. (In a few cases it may be possible: it is usually thought that we can believe man to be fallen without believing in Adam and Eve.) But attempts to do this sort of thing on a grand scale, though they have been made (the names of Bratithwaite and van Buren suggest themselves), fail to convince; it is too obvious that the simplest thing would be to scrap talking about God and Jesus altogether. What is more to our purpose is that the third layer is not viable without the second. It is not really possible to talk about God (in a Western context at least) without implicitly accepting some at least of the propositions generally asserted about him by Christians; and the same applies to our Lord. (There is of course one exception in each case: it is possible to deny the existence of God altogether, or to deny the religious significance of the person of Jesus, without such implications. But we are considering historical relativists who want to be Christians.) John thought of God as 'above' before he came to believe in the Incarnation. But if he had lost his belief in the Incarnation, he would have virtually ceased to believe in the religious significance of Jesus; and very probably the Logos too would have lost its importance to him. It is certainly possible to deny *some* of the usual Christian assertions about God or Christ and still be recognisably talking about the same persons; you can say that God is not wholly omnipotent, or that Jesus was not born of a virgin, and be readily intelligible, whether right or wrong. But this cannot be extended indefinitely, even if there is no exact line to be drawn beyond which we must not pass. The Christian theologian can break free from some traditional formulae if he so wishes and remain a Christian theologian; but he cannot break free from them all at once.

Commitment and Authority.

Commitment to belief requires a content to that belief: 'Anyone who comes to God', wrote the author of *Hebrews*, 'must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who search for him'.[9] Even believing that he exists involves some sort of belief about his nature. A child who believes in Father Christmas but is unwilling to accept any of the conventional descrip-

tion of Father Christmas is too sophisticated by half. (And it will do him no good to point out that our concepts of Father Christmas are determined by our historical and social background.) It is worth remembering that it is not only God who changes not; the same applies to truth. A statement that was true in the time of St Paul is (grammatical tenses apart) true today, and one that is false today was false in Paul's day too. The fact that we and he may have trouble in understanding one or other of the statements – or even both – is of no significance, except as an incentive, if the statement is important, to more diligent study and greater effort at getting over our difficulties.

But this is not all. Historical relativity is only half the truth. It is a plain (historical) fact that the thought all all Christian centuries has been shaped not only from the side, by the Church's environment, but also from the past, by previous generations and above all by the contents (including statements) of the Bible. Whatever our opinion of Biblical authority may be, it is the fact that this 'shaping from the past' was done almost throughout by people who accepted that authority – or, of course, people whose authority was thus accepted! We cannot see ourselves (to borrow another image from Houlden's book) as standing in a circle side by side with St Pual looking, like him, at the central fact of God in Christ Jesus, because our line of vision goes through Paul himself (and of course the other writers of the New Testament). Even if we believe we have direct access to personal knowledge of God and his Son, this knowledge is shaped by what we have learned from Paul and the rest. Even if we deny them 'inspiration' we have to grant them 'authority', simply because we have too little else to go on. An historian who doubts the reliability of Pliny has still got to use him as *the* authority for his governorship of Bithynia, because there is nothing much else to use; and so with us and the New Testament. The statements which Paul, John, Luke and the rest made are normative for the Christian understanding of God and Jesus, whether we like it or not; and to sit light to these statements entails sitting light to Christianity itself.

References

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3. Gal. 5^1 (NEB).
4. Houlden, *op. cit.,* p.16.
5. D. Cupitt, *The Leap of Reason,* London, Sheldon, 1976, p. 112.
6. *Philosophical Investigations,* Oxford, Blackwell, 1953, par. 329.
7. Intro. to Athanasius, *The Incarnation,* London, Bles. 1944. p. 7.
8. Jn.1^{11} (NEB).
9. Heb.11^6 (NEB).