

CHRISTIAN AND SECULAR REMEMBERING: A COMPARISON

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A great deal of work has been done of recent years on the subject of that type of remembering which is the heart of history itself, as a sphere of being, and also on the theme of secular historiography. Much work is also in progress on the subject of remembering in the field of Judaeo-Christian religion. I would suggest that the newer views of historical understanding have shown it to be more closely related to that kind of remembering which we encounter in Biblical thought, than might have been realized in the days when historical positivism was dominant. A general study of these two themes, their resemblance, and also their striking and decisive differences, might accordingly be worth attempting.

Today many Biblical and liturgical scholars declare the Biblical concept of the Memorial to be much richer than the secular concept of remembering, and to be quite central for the understanding of the Bible. Other scholars, if only by the slightness of their references to terms such as *mnemosune* (e.g. Michel, *T.W.N.T.*, IV, 685), clearly do not regard the Biblical concept as so distinctive and central for the understanding of the Bible.

Among those who emphasize the centrality and distinctiveness of the concept in its Biblical form is Max Thurian, who gives a most detailed study of it in his book *The Eucharistic Memorial*. Though no specialist in the liturgical field, it will appear from this lecture that I accept in general the case so thoroughly presented by Thurian, though without committing myself to the fanciful and somewhat arid detail which is occasionally to be found in this important book.

After these introductory remarks I wish first to say something about the modern secular understanding of history, both history as a sphere of existence, and the historian's way of thinking and writing about historical realities.

Memory is of the very essence of historical existence, since it is man's destiny to live as a being within time. Without the consciousness of the identity of the self through different times, our being could neither exist, nor be intelligible. What is true of the individual is true also of society. Memory here too implies the awareness of that identity in difference through duration which constitutes the experience of

man in the world. Here three factors come into play. First, there is tradition, the act of passing down through time the memory of what has been experienced; second, the act of receiving, assimilating, and remembering what has been passed down, and assessing its vital significance for the present and the future; and third, there is the tradition itself, which is passed down, received, and reformulated in terms of its new context.

The existentialists sometimes talk as if the value of history was that it enabled us to have a self-understanding – we may take it, a right self-understanding. So long as this is not interpreted as the central thing, and history, the memory of the past, is not regarded merely as the match which sets our self-understanding alight, this is true enough; but there is a danger of subjectivism in this emphasis. But there is also a wider interpretation of the nature of history, which is not tainted by subjectivism. The story of the past is of great importance, because the events which are recorded were not just imagined, they actually happened, and in order to know what human existence really is, it is necessary to be acquainted with them. For whatever man may create by his imagination, he has but the one infinitely rich and varied story behind him, the story of what he has done and suffered, and in so far as he knows and appreciates this, he knows what it is to be a man, what is the common inheritance in which he shares. For man does not exist save as a historical being, and in order to know what man is, it is not enough to detail the information that the sciences can give about him, his powers and limitations, physical, mental, and spiritual. We have to tell his story, the story of his past. We are reminded of the saying '*Homo sum: nihil humani a me alienum puto*'.

This importance of the truth-content of historical knowledge is what made Ranke say that his task as a historian was to report 'what actually happened'. Were there no such constraining ideal, there would be no difference between historical work and dramatic or literary work of the creative imagination, though even this latter is bound by certain ties, to 'what actually happened'. As Aristotle said, a drama must appear credible, and narrate such things as 'might have happened'.

And yet it is very easy to draw from this longing for actuality a false conclusion. It is said that Lord Acton, the great historian, believed that ideally there might be a history of a period which would say the last word – in fact, a history to end all histories. But as soon as we begin to hope that this might be possible, we forget the historic character of human existence. Instead of the historian being 'a spectator of time and eternity', piecing together, as it were, a complete picture from a myriad photographs of an Alpine Range taken by a satellite, the historian himself, together with all mankind,

is a traveller on the journey through history, like a passenger on a train through the same mountains. He necessarily sees things from the perspective of his Observation Car, as it winds its way through defiles and over gradients, and at last out of the mountains on to the plain beyond. What seemed of huge importance when seen from very near, may later turn out to have been the mere spur of a great mountain, whose peak, hidden at the time, only became visible from a later perspective. Thus both what we see, and our representations of it, will vary very much according to our particular place and perspective in the journey through time.

This does not necessarily lead to relativism, for what Acton is reported to have thought of as an attainable ideal, is valid, and indeed necessary, as a regulative idea. In order to judge one historical account as over against another, we must believe that somewhere, though unattainable by us, there is a final truth which enables us to assess our various competing historical judgements.

There are certain interpretations of history which do not so much contradict, as complement, each other; other assessments are more or less mutually contradictory. Sometimes the passage of time enables us to see the past in better and truer proportions.

Yet the work of writing history is never complete; what the historian sees, is never a finished picture. If he is a good historian, what he sees was really there in the past, but the influence of his environment, and his own viewpoint in time to some extent control what he sees. What he is trying to do, is to see the past in the light which his present throws upon it, and to learn the lessons which it has to teach our time, and men of the coming years. And, in general, the historian believes that only by such interpretations as he and others can give, even though they are at best tentative and provisional, can meaning and continuity be disclosed in the story of human affairs.

We pass now from the secular concept of remembering to the Biblical one. My thesis in this second part of the paper is not so much that Biblical and Christian remembering is something entirely different from secular memory. What I am seeking to maintain is that in our special field, memory is exhibited in an indissoluble connection with a whole structure of thought and experience which give to it new possibilities and functions.

Take the concept of the Memorial as we find it first in the liturgical worship of the Old Testament. I hope that I shall not be belabouring the obvious if I use Thurian's material to support the contention that in its Biblical context, memory has its part to play in a much more intensive dialogue than that envisaged by the secular historian.

Thurian claims that in the Old Testament the word 'Memorial' is a liturgical concept basic to Hebrew thought, and is considerably

richer than the concept used in the secular sphere. He further claims that there is such continuity between the Old Testament and the New, that in his institution of the Sacrament, Jesus was saying something different from, and much more pregnant with meaning than, the sense we might read into 'Do this in remembrance of me'; something that his disciples, with their background and training in Hebrew worship, would understand very well. Thurian also concedes that the words 'memory' and 'remembrance' or 'memorial' have also a considerable range of significance in the Bible, often approximating to their meaning in secular contexts. But he claims that, on the other hand, the richer liturgical significance, at home primarily in the worship of the great historical Feasts, and in the field of sacrifice, spilled over into a wider field.

He further claims that in this special use of the terms, the dimensions of the transcendent are present from the beginning. For this kind of remembering is a cultic act which is performed not only before man, but before God. In it some past event is recited or dramatically re-enacted. Here, for example, the re-enaction may be that of the establishment of the Covenant with Israel at the Passover Feast, or the establishment of the Covenant of God with David and his descendants at the Autumn Festival. By virtue of its proclamatory nature the setting forth of the Memorial is both an act summoning men to God, and an act of praise to God for what he has done. At the same time it is an intercession with God that he will show himself in the present and in the future to be true to his revealed nature, his Covenant and his promises made in the past. In this act, the past is regarded not as over and done with, for in a singular manner the worshippers involved are enabled to transcend the interval between past and present, and to become contemporary with the events commemorated, and to share in the deliverance achieved through them.

Further, in the cultic act of the Memorial, not only the gap between the past and the present is overcome, but the future is laid hold of as being in a manner present, though only under the form of promise and of hope. While the past events commemorated are various, according as the occasions remembered and interpreted by the eye of faith as divine acts are various, so the future events prayed for may also be various. For example, in sacrifices offered by individuals, the events remembered may be deliverances of that individual, for which thanks are given to God, and the blessings sought may also be blessings for the individual. But, in essence, the blessings of the past are subsumed under the great fundamental act of God in establishing the Covenant – they are Covenant blessings – and the blessings prayed for are summed up in one great future event, the consummation of history in the transcendent Kingdom of God.

But further, the act of the Memorial is not first and foremost a human action directed to God, and performed before other men. In it, and underlying it, there is a divine initiative, since the reality underlying it, and the whole life of Israel, is the Covenant, by which God sustains his fellowship with his people. Further, the cultic act is not merely undertaken by the whim of man, it is part of God's continuing action by which he fulfils the promises of the Covenant, and allows, or rather encourages, his people to intercede with him, and so implement the Covenant in the world. Thus for Thurian, and surely he is right here, the Memorial, like the underlying life of the Hebrew people, is part of a dialogue between God and man, in which God is the initiating and dominant partner.

When he comes to the Memorial of the Lord's Supper in the New Testament, Thurian says, 'This memorial is not a simple subjective act of recollection, it is a liturgical action. But it is not just a liturgical action which makes the Lord present, it is a liturgical action which recalls as a Memorial the unique sacrifice of the Son, and this makes him present in his Memorial, in the presentation of his sacrifice before the Father, and in his intercession as heavenly High Priest.' Thurian continues; it is a proclamation by the Church, it is a thanksgiving and intercession by the Church, and a thanksgiving and intercession of Christ for the Church.

Here again the whole conception of memory has been enormously deepened and enriched by its interweaving with the divine initiative of grace. Here is a divine-human dialogue, in which the act of human remembering forms but one necessary strand.

Now this pattern of the divine-human dialogue appears also at other important points of Christian experience. We have just seen how in the Sacrament, in and through the memory of past events, God speaks and acts now, and man thanks and praises God for these events, and intercedes with him for future blessings.

Within the Bible itself there are constant appeals made by God, through the agency of his human servants, to his people's memory of past events, declaring himself to have been present in these events, and therefore to be worthy of trust in the present and the future.

And indeed this pattern of a contemporary dialogue with God through the medium of memories of the historical past is seen not only in the Sacraments and in our reading of the Scriptures, and in preaching from them – but right through the Christian faith; it is a mark of any religion which believes in a historical revelation of the living God.

Now, in the last part of this paper, I must point out in more detail three characteristics in which our dealing with God through memory surpasses the way in which the secular historian remembers the past and is in dialogue with it.

In the first place, in the secular historian's study of the past, and in such encounter with it as is possible for him through memory, it is the historian who takes the initiative. It is he who questions, assimilates, understands, and chooses what is significant, and finally writes. In this context, Martin Heidegger speaks of the historian as 'choosing his heroes'. It is true that in dealing with Biblical matters also, there is an important place for historical research and understanding, and how much we owe to men like Eichrodt and von Rad, and many Anglo-Saxon scholars! But the substance of history can never literally take the initiative with us, and say 'I am speaking to you'. In the case, however, of that history which is apprehended by faith, the initiative is reversed. Here, as we saw, it is not man who chooses, but God. Man remembers God, because God has first remembered man. This is what Christians have always understood by 'Grace' – this is the prerogative of him whom the Bible describes as 'the living God', who is always our contemporary.

So the Bible speaks with a far greater intensity about the things it records and remembers, than can the secular historian; it calls the hearers of its message to decision in a way that Herodotus, Thucydides, Gibbon and Trevelyan rightly never felt called to do. To say this is by no means to assert that God's grace is absent from secular history – it would be blasphemous to assert this. All that is claimed is that it is not the concern of the secular historian as such to concern himself with it.

The second of the three points of differentiation is not unconnected with the first. It is that the dialogue which the secular historian has with the past is not dialogue in the fullest sense of the term. For full dialogue involves the contemporary encounter of two living persons. But the encounter which we make with the past in the secular study of history, is encounter with something that is irrevocably past. It may, and often does, have a very important significance for the present, both in constituting the present what it is, and in standing as a challenge to it. But the element of full personal encounter is absent. In the study of a thinker like Plato or Gibbon, or of a man of action like Napoleon, we may, in a qualified sense, have communion with him – that is, by understanding his environment, his traditions, and his way of response to all of these things, we can, to a certain degree, enter into his mind. But we cannot receive from him the response 'You were quite right about me!' This is what made bizarre and comical an experience which came to my colleague, A. M. Hunter, who had a friend who was a spiritualist. Soon after Hunter's book on St. Paul came out, this friend claimed that in a recent *séance* St. Paul 'came through' with a message for him. 'Tell Hunter,' said St. Paul, 'that his book about me is quite right.'

We may indeed love Plato, or Goethe, or Milton, but if we were to

start speaking to them, we would rightly be suspected of derangement, unless our apostrophe were interpreted as a rhetorical device, like Wordsworth's line: 'Milton! thou shouldst be living at this hour'.

Still dealing with this matter of contemporaneity one question must be raised, and an attempt made to clear it up. Modern Biblical scholarship is almost unanimous in its assertion that in the remembering which is characteristic of Biblical religion, and in particular, in the Sacrament, the past is 'in a sense' made contemporary with the present. If this be true of the Old Testament, it is no less emphatically true of the New. Remembering our claim that we cannot have full communion with persons of the past who were dead before we were born, are we to say that a certain amount of demythologizing must be done here? And are we to say 'The God who did these wonderful things in the past, is still our contemporary today, and because he is the same yesterday, today, and for ever, we can have full contemporary communion with him today?'

Such a pattern of interpretation is indeed characteristic of a good many appeals for faith in the Old Testament, and especially in the Psalms. Is this indeed the fundamental thought in Paul's great utterance in Romans 8, 'With all this in mind what are we to say? He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all; and with this how can he fail to lavish upon us all that he has to give?' (v. 31-32).

This interpretation certainly takes us deep into the truth, but is it enough? For the life, death and resurrection of Jesus are not only a proof of how much God loves us, they are actually the foundation of all the other blessings we receive through grace under the New Covenant. It is because Christ transcends the purely human that he can be our contemporary in a sense that no other figure of the past can be. As the author of the Letter to the Hebrews says, he has an eternal priesthood (Hebrews 7: 24). To every act of faith he is present; in faith we accept his presence, but faith does not create the gift, it merely acknowledges it. And, finally, since the Sacrament received in faith is a main vehicle of God's grace and forgiveness, Christ is personally present, and gives himself to us through it. And what he did and was during his life on earth, being the foundation of God's dealings with us through grace, is contemporary with us in a way that the actions of no other man of the past can be.

When we see this to be true of the New Covenant, we can see that something similar holds good of the Old Covenant, though we must speak here more tentatively. The story of the Old Covenant is wrapped up in various traditions which have come to us out of the cultus and the story of Hebrew religion. It is linked in scripture with various incidents in the distant past, with the Exodus, and Sinai, and other reported incidents. But we have reason to believe that, obscure

though these stories are, they do refer to a reality in the past, and that the Old Testament is not wrong when it regards the Old Covenant as a historical event, and not merely the greatest of God's acts of grace towards his people, but as the foundation of all the later blessings given under the old dispensation. Was it not this that the Old Testament writers meant when they claimed that in the cultus they did not only remember the might acts of God in the past, but that they were, in a sense, made contemporary with them?

We come now to the third distinctive note of remembering in the context of Biblical thinking. The Biblical revelation is decisively oriented to the future in a way that the stuff of history secularly understood is not. Herodotus wrote his histories 'to prevent the great and wonderful actions of the Greeks and the barbarians from losing their due meed of glory', and Thucydides wrote his history, 'Not to win the applause of the moment, but to be a possession for all time'.

But when we question the secular historians' reference to the future, beyond their hope of recording great things so as to keep their memory alive down the ages, we find that their words become uncertain and faltering, and Herodotus can find no better summary of what history teaches than to suggest that nations and individuals should bear good fortune with moderation and modesty, since the nature of the gods is envious, all things human are uncertain, and nothing endures.

The modern philosopher Martin Heidegger says that the historian's interest is not merely directed to the unique events of the past, nor does it aim at disclosing general laws latent in past events. He introduces at this point the concept of repetition. By repetition, however, he assures us that he does not mean a slavish copy of that past happening, as if a law could be extracted from it to apply to our future actions. Repetition is a free choice of our own possibilities under the inspiration of the example of possibilities realized by others in the past. Only the man who has chosen his authentic possibilities will as a historian be able to distinguish in the past those elements which offer a true possibility of repetition – only he will choose his heroes rightly (*Sein und Zeit*, paragraphs 74–76).

This, for all its philosophical verbiage, does not lead us very far; it reminds us of Samuel Smiles' writings on Self-Help, or Long-fellow's lines:

Lives of great men all remind us
We can make our lives sublime,
And, departing, leave behind us
Footprints on the sands of time.

– or even of the banalities sometimes found in the *Readers' Digest*,

which might come under the rubric, 'This poor boy made good, you can make good too'.

Collingwood seems to be saying something much more worthy of attention when at the end of his book *The Idea of History*, he suggests that historical research and historical knowledge can be of influence on the future, if we look at the structures and actions of the past, with due sympathy for the ideals that were being pursued, and realize how far our predecessors succeeded, and where they failed, so that our knowledge may give us a chance to preserve and repeat their achievements, and also overcome the difficulties which in the end frustrated them. Thus the study of history, if Collingwood is right, not only raises man above ignorance of his historical background, but can give essential ethical and political guidance for the future.

Yet we must admit that there are also distinguished historians, who fail to discover in history any guidance for the future, like H. A. L. Fisher, in whose Preface to his *History of Europe*, we read that he can find no pattern in history, and only one safe rule for the historian, that he should recognize in the development of human destinies the play of the contingent and the unforeseen.

It is no part of my purpose to belittle either the importance of historiography in recording the wonderful achievements and the tragic sufferings of mankind, or to belittle the guidance for the future that can be given through this discipline, surely one of the noblest of human pursuits.

But we must admit that the context of human remembering in Hebrew and Christian thought turns it far more decisively to the future, both for the individual and for the race. This is because it is concerned, not only with man, in his human possibilities, his mingled grandeur and misery, but with God, and his future. Why were the books of the Bible ever written? Why were past events interpreted as God's doing? In order that God's unique and decisive good news might be proclaimed to all men! No one has a stronger sense of this than the author of the Fourth Gospel who speaks, not only to his contemporaries, but to the men of future ages, when he says, 'There were indeed many other signs which Jesus performed in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are recorded, that you may hold the faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that through this faith you may possess eternal life by his name' (John 20 : 30-31).

So, instead of the Bible being merely a book about the remote past, we claim that it is the most contemporary book in the world. It is a book striving to escape from its covers and to walk out into the world of today and tomorrow. It is in one sense far more contemporary than today's newspapers. For they report only the achievements, the fears, the failures, hopes, and sufferings of contemporary man, while the

Bible tells us of God's plan, God's answer to man's crisis, it proclaims to us the one secure and solid hope not only for our individual lives, but for the life of the world.

There is a passage in Hebrews 2, where the writer asks his readers to consider the danger of underestimating the crucial importance of the Christian gospel. He then quotes the famous 8th Psalm, with its passionate exclamation, 'What is man, that Thou art mindful of him, or the son of man, that Thou has regard to him?'

Then the writer goes off into a Christological interpretation of all this – 'In fact,' he says, 'we do not yet see all things in subjection to man. In Jesus, however, we do see one . . . crowned now with glory and honour because he suffered death, so that, by God's gracious will, in tasting death, he should stand for us all' (Hebrews 2 : 9).

At first it may be natural for us to feel impatient at this apparently forced transfer to Jesus of words that were so clearly meant by the Psalmist to refer to man in general. But look a little deeper, and you will see what the writer to the Hebrews meant. Jesus' destiny is not to be regarded as something distinct from the general destiny of man. He is 'to stand for us all'; he does not wish to be isolated from mankind, he carries mankind with him into his own glorious future. This is the greatness of his salvation, and this is the outlook on the future which results from the Christian act of remembering the past. How then shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?

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