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Disciplinary Brief

LOVE AND THE PRACTICE AND PROMISE OF HISTORY

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In considering how briefly to respond to Professor O'Donovan's Brief from the perspective of my own discipline – that of historical research and writing – a constructive point of convergence is with part of the working definition that he offers: love as '*directive attention to the good of persons*' and its corollary that to love, we must learn to recognise personal singularity. In what follows I aim briefly to make two points in relation to historical method and one in relation to the fruits of historical study. These points can be understood either in a weak sense—that there is an analogy between the practice of history and the practice of love; or in a strong sense—that there is an identity between good historical practice and the practice of love.

Love and the Practice of History

In contemplating the Brief during the season when the western church celebrates the ascension of Christ, I was drawn to the model provided by the stories of Jesus' post-resurrection responses to the needs of his disciples as related in John's gospel.

In John 20 we see Thomas, absent from Jesus first appearance to the disciples, pronouncing that he cannot believe unless he can first see and touch. Here, if I understand the force of the Greek '*pisteuo*' correctly, Thomas is saying not that he cannot give mental assent to the proposition that God has raised Jesus from the dead but rather something much more personal and relational – that he cannot put his trust in the one whom God has raised from the dead, unless he can first see and touch. Jesus's response to Thomas's dilemma is paradigmatically a response of love – the lover seeks out the beloved where he is to be found, at the point of his need, and meets him there. It is to this motion of love that Thomas responds with commitment as he discovers that the need to touch is superfluous.

What is perhaps implicit in the Thomas story is rendered explicit in the story of Peter in chapter 21. Here Jesus twice asks Peter, 'do you love me?', using the more comprehensive language of '*agapeo*', while Peter responds in the more restricted language of '*fileo*', perhaps usefully rendered as 'Peter do you love me? ... 'Lord you know that I am your friend'. On the third occasion as the language in the text emphasises Jesus effectively says something like: If that is where you are Peter then that is where we will make our new

beginning – and adopting the disciple’s own language asks ‘Peter, are you my friend?’

It is in this motion of love to seek the beloved in their own situatedness rather than imposing on them our own that I see the first link with good historical method. This always seeks the richest possible understanding of persons and societies in the past on their own terms and in their own contexts. It precisely seeks to ‘recognise personal singularity’ in persons in history, not construct them as cardboard characters as fodder for our own theories, or as entirely imaginary autonomous rational actors. Instead it aims, in an act of imagination controlled by evidence, to see them embedded in overlapping series of social relations of mutual obligation and exchange, with individual desires and constraints, and characteristic views of the world. In making such reconstructions, historians can still endeavour to rescue people in the past from what E. P. Thompson, in a well-worn but still serviceable phrase, termed ‘the enormous condescension of posterity’.

If we understand love as directed by ‘*attention to the good of persons*’, then we underline a second and essential characteristic of the motion of love evident in the stories of Jesus Thomas and Peter which is that it is a motion in quest of a free and willing response.

Love between persons respects, both in the sense of creating a space for and in the sense providing a richer context for the *agency* of the beloved. In the case of Thomas, his agency is displayed in his affective and effective response to Christ’s appearing; in John 21 love and agency are inseparable – ‘Peter do you love me?’ – ‘feed my sheep’. Such commitments I would argue are also intrinsic to good historical method. There have, of course been histories that abstract past actors from their contexts and so provide impoverished, if highly coloured, depictions of their agency – so-called ‘great man’ theories of history. [1] There have also been historiographical traditions that have treated the agency of people in the past as essentially irrelevant in the face of economic and social structures visualised as tectonic plates that represent the real ineluctable motive force of historical development. [2]

Neither of these are satisfactory and rich historical study has always sought to uncover and understand both the choices made by people in the past and the contexts, including structural constraints, within which they made them. This can happen on a micro scale in the study of individuals and communities which are the subject of my own historical practice. But the same commitments are also enriching on a macro scale. Take for example the difference between the judgement that the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 was caused by railway timetables, evidently facile however confidently it was pronounced by eminent historians and a realistic account of the same event. Take, for example, the work of the Cambridge Historian, Christopher Clark, who by creatively asking a different question – not why the war broke out but how it came to break out – opened up to his readers a whole world of agency among decision makers all over the continent of Europe operating within distinctive cultures of risk-taking and unique appreciations of opportunities and threats. [3] (Clark’s work is of course paralleled by a much larger literature which seeks to give due attention to the role of the actors in the ‘July Crisis’ [4] of 1914 as well as the constraints on their agency).

Love and the Promise of History

My last point, made necessarily even more briefly, relates less to the practice and more to the promise of history. O'Donovan's statement of love as '*directive attention to the good of persons*,' I would argue, not only seeks out the beloved in their own situatedness and respects and encourages their agency. It is also as a way of seeing persons that invites them to a richer wholeness a vision of a better future – in the case of Peter, the restoration to him of his vocation as part of the royal priesthood of the people of God.

So far as historical study has an urgent social purpose, directed by love, I would contend that its richest fruit lies precisely in understanding the past in order to help us imagine different and better futures. This is not, I hasten to add, by the process of trying to learn lessons from history – a treacherous pursuit which has notoriously tended to lead armies to prepare to fight the last war rather than the next one. Instead, it lies in the characteristic tendency of history to de-naturalise the present. Potentially oppressive structures and patterns of thought, for example, the modern versions of the notions of 'natural' and 'supernatural' which structure much modern thinking, [5] or the idea that human beings are divisible into races as opposed to a previous stress on their common adamic descent, [6] gain much of their power by presenting themselves to us as natural and necessary realities. [7] When historical study (as it has in both these cases) reveals that such notions are instead recent and historically contingent, so the future becomes more open, and we are encouraged to meet it by joining faith and hope to love.

Endnotes

- [1] Such theories have a long pedigree in the Western historiographical tradition with early examples like Plutarch's parallel lives. The role of the great man in the Anglophone world was given fresh impetus in the nineteenth century by the historical work of Thomas Carlyle, for example, in his history of Frederick the Great and remains the constant temptation of works of historical biography and the sort of popular Christian history writing concerned with the construction of heroes and exemplary narratives.
- [2] Typical examples would include some Marxist influenced historiography which sees history as principally concerned with the development of modes of economic production and the history of class struggle, and some of the work of the French historians of the Annales school, whose characteristic emphasis on the *longue durée* in history tended to squeeze the importance of both the history of events and the role of human agency.
- [3] Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers How Europe Went to War in 1914* (2013). It is not necessary to agree with Clark's interpretation to recognise the creative force of asking a new question and his commitment to both context and agency in this work.
- [4] The July Crisis is the general term given to the diplomatic and military responses to the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie on 28 June 1914.
- [5] For a history of the development of this idea see Peter Harrison, *Some New World Myths of Supernatural Belief in a Secular Age* (2024).
- [6] For an examination of the complex histories of this idea and their interaction with the interpretation of the bible see, for example, Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World 1600-2000* (2006).
- [7] Participants in other disciplines will more readily recognise examples pertinent to their own practice than the ones given here and sometimes the process of de-naturalisation may be best thought of as adding richness or complexity to a debate rather than gaining freedom from oppression. An example might be the recognition of the relative novelty of the idea that nation states are natural and legitimate forms of political organisation while empires are not – an idea which, often unproblematised, drives discourse in some kinds of politics and history writing.

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