

## INTRODUCTION TO THE DISSERTATION

During the debate on papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council, Cardinal Guidi of Bologna argued that it is not the person of the pontiff in isolation which is infallible, but the dogmatic definitions of the pontiff in union with the episcopate. Pius IX called Guidi to a private conference on the afternoon of his speech, June 18, 1870. There he reportedly declared to him in some heat that, “La tradizione, son’io!”<sup>1</sup> This remark, however dramatic and suggestive, is usually criticized as valueless for theology. But it illustrates, after a fashion, the principal characteristic of the so-called modern theology of tradition. That theology related the concept of tradition so closely to the infallible teaching of the magisterium that the definition of tradition was drawn from that relationship. Tradition was defined in terms of the magisterium. Fighting the tides of an age fascinated by theories of evolution and development, the Church proclaimed the immutability of its tradition and the infallibility of its teachers.

While the debates on papal infallibility were underway at Vatican I, Friedrich Nietzsche was lecturing on classical philology at the University of Basel. His reflections would bear fruit in the essay of 1873, “The Use and Abuse of History.” There Nietzsche takes a position which, despite his protestations of being a thinker out of season, nevertheless breathes the spirit of his age and seems the direct opposite to that of the council fathers. “Every past,” he writes, “is worth condemning.”<sup>2</sup> Nietzsche delivers this verdict as the spokesman of critical history. The past is worth condemning because it is condemned already, he says, condemned by the present, which will in turn be condemned by the future. Nothing exists which does not decay, in Nietzsche's opinion, and the best one can do is forget this cynical wisdom and surrender to the blind forces of life. Undue meditation on the inevitability of decay would bring all striving to an end. This, Nietzsche says, is the disadvantage of historical knowledge. To be sure, monumental history can spur one to great deeds, and antiquarian history can teach one reverence for the past. But they can also incite fanaticism and distrust for the new. Rather than inculcating a sense of history in young people, Nietzsche would prefer that they forget

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted by Roger Aubert, Le pontificat de Pie IX (1846-1878), vol. 21 of the Histoire de l’Eglise, founded by Augustin Fliche and Victor Martin (Paris: Bloud et Gay, 1952), p. 354. A slightly different version (“‘Witnesses of tradition?’ said Pius; ‘there’s only one; that’s me.’”) is offered by Cuthbert Butler, The Vatican Council: The Story Told from Inside in Bishop Ullathorne’s Letters, 2 vols. (London, New York, Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1930), 2.98.

<sup>2</sup> “[J]ede Vergangenheit aber ist werth, verurtheilt zu werden.” Friedrich Nietzsche, “Vom Nutzen und Nachteil der Historie für das Leben” (chap. 3), the second of four Unzeitgemasse Betrachtungen, in Nietzsche, Gesammelte Werke, Musarionausgabe in 23 vols., ed. Richard Oehler, Max Oehler, and Friedrich Chr. Würzbach (Munich: Musarion Verlag, 1922-1929), 6.255. Translation: The Use and Abuse of History, trans. Adrian Collins, with an Introduction by Julius Kraft, vol. 11 of The Little Library of Liberal Arts, Oskar Piest, general editor (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1949), p. 28.

the past. Unlike the fathers of the First Vatican Council, who not only saw the Christian tradition as the transmission of saving truth, but the pontiff as its infallible teacher, Nietzsche regarded the attempt to preserve the truth as perverse and doomed to failure: perverse, because opposed to the flux of history; doomed, because history is more powerful.

Is it fair to see the claims of truth and of history in opposition? Doubtless they can seem to contradict one another. This is the case if by truth we mean a proposition whose conceptual world remains unaffected by time, whose language never changes, and whose meaning is univocal. The longing for such propositional truth has expressed itself in a variety of ways. One sees it, for example, in the refinement of theses in the Catholic manuals of theology and in the search by Enlightenment thinkers for an indubitable foundation of science.

There is, however, no propositional truth which cannot be understood in numerous ways. If truth were conceived as a perfectly clear and distinct proposition, history would indeed be its enemy. History would never rest until it had transformed the meaning of the proposition, teasing from it a sense antithetical to that of its first speaker. Given such a conception of truth, Nietzsche quite properly read it the death sentence. It is worth condemning, for it has yielded its life to a formula which will be superseded.

But truth is never a proposition alone. The proposition comprises only the raw material of truth, one can say, which achieves finished form in the mind. There it must be understood. The classical distinction between matter and form was well known to the neo-scholastic thinkers who predominated at Vatican I. Far less well known to them was the nature of understanding, that is, of understanding in history. The investigation of the historical nature of understanding fell to other, mainly non-Catholic, philosophers. One thinks of Hegel who, though vilified by Nietzsche and condemned by Catholic theologians for ascribing to the human intellect what is proper to God alone, nevertheless sought to show the worth of history as the expression of the human spirit. And one thinks of Heidegger, a one-time Catholic seminarian whose philosophy, often called atheist, transformed ontology by showing its intimate connection with time. Above all, one thinks of Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose philosophical hermeneutics has built a bridge between the thought of Greek antiquity and the historical consciousness of modern times. Spurred by the insights of Hegel and Heidegger, Gadamer has expounded the historical nature of understanding at length and with great subtlety. The present dissertation shall apply his analyses to the Catholic theology of tradition. The aim is to renew that theology by means of a reflection on its bonds with history.

Our point of departure is the philosophy of the Enlightenment. Part I of the dissertation examines the decline of tradition within the Enlightenment's concept of philosophy. Tradition declined when thinkers such as Bacon, Descartes, and even Kant began to regard it as a hindrance to reason. Their successors sought to control the pervasive influence of tradition by systematically ridding history of the values – Christian, nationalist, or otherwise – which had been imposed upon it. Such a view may be called historicist. Nietzsche shared this view to the extent that he opposed the

artificial imposition of traditional values. But he rejected historicism's deadening aspirations to objectivity. What were the consequences of the decline of tradition for the understanding of truth? This is the leading question of Part I. Part II asks how a philosophical rehabilitation of tradition might contribute to the understanding of truth. Taking up the thought of Hegel, Heidegger, and Gadamer, it investigates the philosophical relation between truth and history. From this shall emerge a concept of historical truth which is neither relativistic nor supra-historical, but rather (in Gadamer's sense of the word) hermeneutical. The first two sections of the dissertation have to do, in brief, with the philosophy of tradition: its decline and fall in the Enlightenment, and its resurrection in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

The last two parts of the dissertation concern the theology of tradition. Part III expounds the modern theology of tradition in Catholic thought. That theology, which grew out of Counter-Reformation polemics, reached full maturity at the time of the declaration of papal infallibility. It shall be characterized in terms of three central distinctions: between the object of tradition and the act of transmission, between the beliefs of tradition and the verification of them, and between the sufficiency of Scripture and tradition. These distinctions betray an understanding of truth in which the historical situation of the knowing subject plays little part. What do these distinctions mean, and why were they made? These are the leading questions of Part III. In Part IV, the concluding section of the dissertation, the theology of tradition is re-assessed in light of the philosophical rehabilitation of tradition, and particularly in light of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. This section explores the consequences for that theology of a reflection on the historical nature of understanding. It asks, in the name of what we call Catholic hermeneutics, how one can speak of historical truth in theology without conceding the historical relativism of Christian faith.

Such relativism might be the lesson one could draw from Pope Pius' identification of himself with tradition. What could be more relativistic than a tradition which is nothing other than what a pope says it is? But to suggest the relativity of tradition was hardly the pontiff's intention. His aim was more likely a repudiation of the collegiality of tradition: not what an impartial episcopate agrees, he would say, but rather what the vicar of Christ decrees, is Christian tradition in its absolute and eternal truth. By contrast, it is Nietzsche who appears the relativist. For him, there are no absolute or eternal truths. The great events, institutions, and individuals of antiquity have all died, and their history serves not to perpetuate them, but only to inspire creative spirits to emulation. Religious or pedagogical efforts to see order in history, to discern pattern in its chaos, and to reason from its parts to a whole, are anathema to Nietzsche. They stifle the creative impulse from which new life springs. If the pope had no appreciation for the finite and contingent forms in which truth is manifest, Nietzsche was so preoccupied with the transience and episodic nature of the good that he denied its permanence.

Despite the world of difference between them, however, the pontiff and the philologist are united in their distrust for the all-embracing claims of historical science. For Pope Pius and the Catholic theologians of his age, historical criticism casts doubt upon the first-century origins of Church traditions. Without claiming authority for itself,

such historical criticism becomes for many the authoritative arbiter and ultimate court of appeal in questions of tradition. The theologians felt that historical criticism can mislead because it seemingly provides a more reliable access to the past than the living tradition of the Church, whose infallible teacher is not science but a human being. Nietzsche opposed the concept of a scientific universal history for different reasons. He felt that, although such history is incompatible with human finitude, it is nevertheless pursued to the detriment of creativity. The scholarly effort to state exactly the nature and goal of history constricts, from his viewpoint, the possibilities which the past affords. Such an effort, Nietzsche felt, teaches resignation to the past rather than instilling the desire to condemn it and build anew. He was no less opposed to the absolutism of science than Pope Pius. The Roman theologians looked askance at scientific history because it discounted the faith of the Church. Nietzsche loathed it because it imputed to human beings a supra-historical wisdom which the mediocrity of the past seems to belie. The opposition to scientific history, in short, made strange bedfellows. Although the pope and the philologist approached the matter from differing perspectives, both were troubled by the seemingly impersonal claims of science. Was it not the insight of both men that the scientific distrust of a personal relation to the past signified the decline of tradition?