

THE RELEVANCE OF HISTORY AND SALESIAN HISTORIOGRAPHY – A PHILOSOPHICAL APPROACH

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Introduction

History may best be defined as the past and the present in an unending dialogue for the sake of the future – a dialogue realized through the continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts. Such a dialogue is conditioned by the person of the historian, on how he is conditioned by his times and the values of his times and how he selects facts and interprets them in line with his own value systems. History begins with the handing down of tradition – recorded or oral – and traditions are remembered and maintained for the benefit of the future generations. Besides the questions regarding the “Why?” and the “How” of the past the true historian asks also the question “Whither?” indicating a progress towards the future – and a thought or philosophy behind the process.

The term philosophy of history used for the first time by Voltaire has to be seen in the context of Enlightenment. Voltaire, one of its main protagonists, in his *Essai sur les moeurs et l'esprit des nations* used it to indicate that the leading principle in history was the will of man and human reason and thereby overcoming the theological interpretation of history so prevalent in the medieval times influenced by Augustine's *City of God*¹.

The term philosophy of history, invented by Voltaire, has been used in different senses². In general it can be understood in two senses as critical philosophy of history and speculative philosophy of history. Critical philosophy of history is the theory aspect of the discipline of academic history and deals with questions such as the nature of historical evidence, the degree to which objectiv-

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¹ Karl LÖWITZ, *Meaning in History, The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History*. Chicago (University of Chicago Press 1949), p. 1.

² Edward Hallett CARR, *What is History*. London (University of Cambridge & Penguin books 1961), p. 19. Henceforth CARR, *What is History...*

ity is possible etc. Sometimes critical philosophy of history is included under historiography. Speculative philosophy of history is an area of philosophy concerning the eventual significance, if any, of human history³.

Speculative philosophy of history is more concerned with answering such questions as: a) What is the proper unit of study of the human past – the individual, the family, the city or a nation; civilization or culture or the whole of the human species? b) Which are the broad patterns that one discerns through the study of the human past – are there for example, patterns of progress and is history determinist..? c) If history is indeed progressing what is its ultimate direction?

This paper in the context of the present seminar will treat of philosophy of history in the sense of the critical philosophy of history as indicated above.

1. The elements required for philosophizing on history

1.1. Documented Facts

Modern historians who were against the theologisation and moralization of history demanded with Leopold von Ranke (1795 – 1886) the German historian and the founder of modern source-based history focused on archival research and analysis of historical documents, that the task of the historian is to simply show how it really was (*wie es eigentlich gewesen war*)⁴. This approach to history is based on what could be called the cult of the facts – ascertaining the facts first and then drawing one's conclusions from them.

The facts had however to be corroborated by documents. The belief gained ground especially in the nineteenth century that 'if one had found it in a document it was so.' It appeared that the documents were indeed the Ark of the Covenant in the Temple of facts!⁵ But no document – decrees of Popes and kings, treaties between nations, official correspondences or private letters – even those ascertained as true with the help of auxiliary sciences of history – archaeology, epigraphy, numistics, chronology, etc. – form no more than the raw materials for the historian rather than being a part of history itself. The facts whether found in documents or not, have still to be processed by the historian before he can make any use of them: the use he makes of them is what may be called the processing process.

³ William Henry WALSH, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*. New York (Longmans, Green & Co.1951) ch.1 s. 2.

⁴ CARR, *What is History...*, p. 8

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

1.2. The Historian

In fact the necessity to establish these basic facts rests not on any quality of the facts themselves, but on an *a priori* decision of the historian who has the task of selecting and arranging these facts. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor as it were and that in what order or context. Thus for example what we know as “facts” of medieval history which present the people of the middle ages as people deeply concerned with things of the Catholic religion have almost all been selected by generations of chroniclers who were professionals occupied in the theory and practice of religion and who therefore thought the Catholic religion to be supremely important and related everything in relation to it, and not much else.

In a sense taking a cue from Benedetto Croce (1866-1962) one could say that all history is contemporary history meaning that history consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems, and that the main work of the historian is not to record but to evaluate; for if he does not evaluate, how would he know what is worth recording?⁶ This view of Croce was carried forward by the Oxford philosopher and historian Collingwood as evident from his posthumously published work *The Idea of History* in which he said that the philosophy of history is concerned neither ‘with the past by itself’ nor ‘with the historian’s thought about it by itself’, but with the two things in their mutual relations!⁷

The past which the historian studies is not a dead past, but a past which in some sense is still living in the present. The past that is dead is meaningless to the historian, unless he can understand the thought that lay behind it. Hence “all history is the history of thought” , and “ history is the reenactment in the historian’s mind of the thought whose history he is studying”. History is in fact the historian’s experience. It is “made” by nobody save the historian: to write history is the only way of making it!⁸

The above consideration has the following implications

1. In the first place the facts of history never come to us “pure,” since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder. Hence when we take up a work of history for our study, our first concern should be not with the facts which it contains but with the historian who wrote it. Collingwood would in fact state: “The his-

⁶ Benedetto CROCE, *History as the Story of Liberty*. New York (W.W. Norton 1941), p. 19.

⁷ Robin George COLLINGWOOD (1889-1943) had his book *The Idea of History* published in 1946 by the Clarendon Press Oxford.

⁸ Michael OAKSHOTT, *Experience and Its Modes*. Cambridge (University Press 1933), p. 99.

torian must re-enact in thought what has gone on in the mind of his dramatic personae, so the reader in his turn must reenact what goes on in the mind of the historian. Study the historian before you study the facts!"⁹ By and large, the historian will get the kind of facts he wants. History means interpretation.

2. The second point is the more familiar one of the historian's need of imaginative understanding for the minds of the people with whom he is dealing, for the thought behind their acts. This may be best illustrated by the fact that historians of rival countries tend not to have the imaginative understanding of what goes on in the minds of the other, so that the words and actions of the other are always made to appear malign, senseless or hypocritical. A case in point is that of the Soviet Union and the United States during the Cold War years.
3. Thirdly we can view the past, and achieve our understanding of the past, only through the eyes of the present. The historian is of his own age, and is bound to it by the conditions of human existence. The very words that he uses like democracy, empire, corporates, war, revolution etc. have current connotations from which he cannot divorce them. For instance the present day understanding of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches has profoundly altered their own perceptions about Luther, Loyola and Henry VI-II. The historian belongs not to the past but to the present. The function of the historian is neither to love the past nor to emancipate himself from the past, but to master and understand it as the key to the understanding of the present.

2. Interaction between Values and Facts

While choosing and interpreting the facts of the past the historian is guided by the value systems of the period in which he lives and those which he has imbibed.

The above statement has to be understood in perspective. On the one hand the values of a period are moulded by the facts of the environment and on the other, if we take the Christian Church, concerned with the propagation of moral values, we see that the Church itself has understood these values differently in the course of the centuries. We see this clearly when contrasting the values of primitive Christianity with the values of medieval papacy or when contrasting the values of the African churches with that of the United States. These differences in values spring from differences in historical fact. Or consider the attitude towards social or gender inequality or the exploitation of child labour

⁹ CARR, *What is History...*, p. 23.

which is considered highly immoral today while all these were in earlier times considered morally neutral.

On the other hand we can also say that facts are derived from values. When we seek to know facts, the questions which we ask, and therefore the answers which we obtain are prompted by our system of values – because we approach facts with our own moral categories.

Progress in history is achieved through the interdependence and interaction of facts and values. The objective historian is one who penetrates most deeply into this reciprocal process. In fact the historian is balanced between fact and interpretation, between fact and value¹⁰.

3. The Question of Objectivity

If what has been said above is carried forward to its logical conclusion it would appear that the emphasis on the role of the historian in the making of history tends to rule out any objective history at all or to give credence to the statement that history is what the historian makes.

Hence the study of facts and the role of the historian in the same force one to navigate between the Scylla of an untenable theory of history as an objective compilation of facts, of the unqualified primacy of the fact over interpretation, and the Charybdis of an equally untenable theory of history as the subjective product of the mind of the historian who establishes the facts of history and masters them through the process of interpretation, between a view of history having the centre of gravity in the past and a view having the centre of gravity in the present.

However it need not necessarily be so. The historian is neither the humble slave or the tyrannical master of his facts. The relation between the historian and his facts is one of equality, of give-and-take. If the historian stops to reflect what he is doing as he thinks and writes, the historian is engaged on a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. As he progresses in his work of writing both the interpretation and the selection and ordering of facts undergo subtle and perhaps partly unconscious changes, through the reciprocal action of one or the other. And this reciprocal action also involves reciprocity between the present and the past. The historian and the facts of his history are necessary to one another. The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless... hence the need for the continuous dialogue between the past and the present – between the facts of the past and the historian of the present.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

4. Salesian Historiography – An Evolutionary Progress

There is an abundance of material on the history of the Salesian Congregation and they can be traced back to Don Bosco and down to our own times. We shall now briefly indicate how the philosophy of history as exposed above has affected the Salesian history moving away from a religious and value-based analytic-hagiographic-narrative to attentive historical reflection of the scientific mode¹¹.

4.1. Don Bosco and His Writings

Don Bosco was a man with a liking for history and with a historical bend of mind and a third of his 150 books and booklets is of a historical narrative. However they cannot be considered works of a strictly historical nature as the historical value of his works are in a way compromised by the lack of “objectivity” in his writings due to his declared adherence to certain principles like his insistence on “morality” in narrating history or the incompatibility of Christian justice with any sort of rebellion against the fatherland or against legitimate authority in the context of conflicts related to the unification of Italy and with specific reference to the Papal States.

Don Bosco was primarily a popular religious writer who sought to instruct, edify and amuse. Events in history and the happenings in his own personal life were indicative of the providence of God. A clear example of this his approach is seen from the *Memoirs of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales from 1815 to 1855*.¹² This was meant to explain to his sons how God had guided him at every step in the realization of his work and indicated to them that his experience would be helpful in overcoming the future difficulties in their own life and work taking lessons from the past.

4.2. Writings on Don Bosco – the First Phase up to 1960

Already from 1858 some of Don Bosco’s young collaborators began to write down what they saw and heard from Don Bosco convinced as they were that they

¹¹ Francesco MOTTO, *History of the Historiography of don Bosco*, in Stanisław ZIMNIAK (a cura di), *Storia e identità salesiana in Africa e Madagascar. Questioni di conservazione del patrimonio culturale*. Atti del 1° Seminario Internazionale di Storia dell’Opera Salesiana per Africa e Madagascar – Nairobi, 11-14 ottobre 2011. (= Associazione Cultori Storia Salesiana – Studi, 5). Roma, LAS 2012, pp. 233-249.

¹² *Memorie dell’Oratorio* was composed by Don Bosco between 1873 and 1875 and transcribed into current Italian by Teresio Bosco in 1985. This book was edited with a historical introduction by Aldo GIRAUDDO and printed by LAS, Rome in 2011.

were witnessing something supernatural before their very eyes. In 1860 a group of them came together and formed a society for the purpose of gathering and verifying together all what regarded the life and activity of Don Bosco. They also wanted as far as possible to document events of the past of which they had not been witnesses. This society gave life to many chronicles, memoirs, annals and souvenirs which were used by later authors like the first biography of Don Bosco by Charles D’Espiney in 1881, *The History of the Oratory of St. Francis de Sales* written as episodes in the Salesian Bulletin by Don Bonetti from 1879-1887, *Don Bosco and the Pious Society of the Salesians* by Albert du Boÿs, 1884¹³, *Life of Don Bosco Founder of the Salesian Society*, by J. Melchior Villefrance, 1888¹⁴ and then *The Biographical Memoirs* by Lemoyne, Amadei and Ceria¹⁵. All these works attempted to show that the life of Don Bosco was a marvelous complex of facts in which the finger of God is clearly manifested for the sake of our ineffable consolation!

The above-mentioned works as also others till the 1950s in line with the *Memoirs of the Oratory* were intent on projecting the finger of God and the plans of providence in the life of Don Bosco as well as in the expansion of the Congregation. The desire to see the divine in the life of Don Bosco and the fascination for the person of Don Bosco himself resulted in overlooking the reality of his milieu, the forces that were alive and active at the time, the context in which Don Bosco inserted himself with his initiatives, as an organizer and propagator of activities, which often already existed and were being realized by others like for example of his being acclaimed as the founder of the oratories in Turin or the first to introduce work for apprenticeship contracts. This often militated against the beneficial interaction between facts and the historian as understood by the philosophy of history as enunciated in the earlier part of this paper.

This approach must also be attributed to the lack of adequate archival information and the resultant lack of the required degree of knowledge of facts. Added to this was also the fact of authors not having sufficient freedom to write critically when Don Bosco was considered a popular saint who had realized prodigies in life and was continuing to work ‘miracles’ through his sons. The experience of Don Borino who in 1938 authored a little volume entitled: “*Don Bosco, Six Writings and a Way to see them*”¹⁶ only to have his work promptly placed on the index by the superiors.

¹³ *Don Bosco e la pia società salesiana*, translated from the original French by Guiseppe Novelli, by the Tipografia e libreria Salesiana di San Benigno Canavese.

¹⁴ *Vie de Don Bosco, fondateur de la société salésienne*. Paris, Bloud et Barral, 1888.

¹⁵ *Le Memorie Biografiche di Don Giovanni Bosco* in 19 volumes. The first ten volumes were written by Giovanni Battista Lemoyne, the eleventh by Angelo Amadei and the last eight volumes by Eugene Ceria. Ernesto Foglio prepared an index of 333 pages which is referred to as vol. XX. The first volume was published in 1898 and the nineteenth volume in 1939. The Index was published 9 years later in 1948.

¹⁶ *Don Bosco sei scritti e un modo di vederlo*. San Benigno Canavese 1938.

However with more complete information based on documents, with greater freedom and an artistic sense intended as the art of healthy imagination and of writing well a new historiography based on attentive reflection will be ushered in from the 1950s.

4.3. Writings on Don Bosco – The Second Phase after 1950

A new historiography emerged in the post World War II and Vatican II period and must be considered the fruit of a scientific approach made possible by the changed circumstances – the result of what must be considered a remarkable “hermeneutic (interpretation) effort” both at the level of the Church and that of the Congregation. This approach took cognizance of the fact that “historical concepts” are always contingent in every aspect and related to the socio-cultural ambience that gave rise to them even though there is a “substance” or nucleus of an enduring value. And it is the task of the living tradition to “interpret” it and to express it in the current language à la the dialogue between the past and the present indicated in the earlier pages of this paper.

Understandably the Salesians prior to 1960 did not have a clear understanding of the duality of what may be considered essential or of the substance and what had to be considered relative and variable even with regard to the charism of Don Bosco. But from around 1960 a new Salesian historiography began to emerge with the accelerated evolution of the socio-cultural context, the chronological distance from Don Bosco with the passing away of even the second generation of Salesians, the awareness of the better definition of the historical figure of Don Bosco, the exigencies of the new criteria of historiography, the demands to have Don Bosco taken out of the Salesian circles and make him an acceptable figure in the field of education in a globalised world. The effort was to go beyond the sources, in the sense of surpassing what the sources seem to present at a first simple, superficial reading. The themes dealt with earlier in a religious, moral and dogmatic colouring had to be read in relation to the more recent religious, political and moral susceptibilities as also the new socio-economic reality (laws of production, distribution of wealth, population growth, emerging and subaltern social classes, and the requirements of the “cyber youth” in an increasingly globalised world.

The more prominent authors who are representative of this willingness to enter into dialogue with the present keeping in mind the experience of the past were Pietro Braido, who is known especially for his *The Preventive System of Don Bosco*¹⁷ which offered a systematic exposition of the ideas of Don Bosco on

¹⁷ *Prevenire non reprimere. Il sistema educativo di don Bosco.* (= ISS - Studi, 11). Roma, LAS 1999.

education, his educational praxis and his educational institutions in their specific characteristic and in relation to similar activities of contemporary educators and educationalists; Francis Desramaut who has written two important works viz., *Don Bosco and the Spiritual Life*¹⁸ and *Don Bosco in His Times*¹⁹; and Pietro Stella who is credited with having moved from a philological and literary approach to a more interpretative approach and to other modes of historical investigation and has written three books viz., *Don Bosco Life and Work*²⁰, *Don Bosco Religious Outlook and Mentality*²¹ and *Don Bosco in Economical and Social History (1815-1070)*²² which are considered fundamental studies on Don Bosco in the context of his socio-economic and religious ambience.

More recently Fr. Arthur Lenti has written a seven-volume work on Don Bosco titled: *Don Bosco: History and Spirit* which has received much critical acclaim²³.

Conclusion

The Salesian Congregation, particularly the Superiors, have been very solicitous about preserving the memory of Salesian History as evidenced from some of their very valid interventions. They wanted the confreres, as it were, to be in constant contact with the past even as they projected their lives into the future.

In 1937 through ACS No.84 (Nov.-Dec. 1937) Don Ricaldone, the Rector Major, published the circular on Libraries with a detailed technical description of the libraries and the manner and importance of maintaining them.

In 1943, through ACS No. 120 (Nov.-Dec. 1943) Don Ricaldone elaborated on the importance and the manner of maintaining the archives and considered it one of the important duties of the rectors of the communities.

Between the years 1963 and 1973 there were some important developments in the area of historical studies. In 1963 with the finalization of the plans to construct the Università Pontificia Salesiana in Rome plans were made to have in it also a department of historical studies meant for preparing the critical edition of the works of Don Bosco. Further the 19th General Chapter (1965) decided to set up a *Centro di studi storici salesiani*. Then on 6th February 1973, in

¹⁸ The French original was titled: *Don Bosco et la vie spirituelle*. Paris, Beauchesne 1967.

¹⁹ The French original was titled: *Don Bosco en son temps (1815-1888)*. Torino, SEI 1996.

²⁰ *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. I. *Vita e opera*. Roma, LAS 1979.

²¹ *Don Bosco nella storia della religiosità cattolica*. Vol. II. *Mentalità religiosa e spiritualità*. Roma, LAS 1981.

²² *Don Bosco nella storia economica e sociale (1815-1870)*. Roma, LAS 1980.

²³ These volumes have all been edited by Aldo GIRAUDDO and printed by LAS between the years 2007 and 2010.

response to the directives of the Special General Chapter (1971) a *Centro di Studi Don Bosco* was set up and entrusted *ad experimentum* to the faculty of theology of the University. That same year the Rector Major communicated to the Congregation the setting up of the *Centro studi per la Storia della Congregazione Salesiana*. The very next year saw the birth of the autonomous *Centro Studi di Storia delle Missioni Salesiane*.

Finally the XXI General Chapter asked the General Council to set up a historical institute with its own statutes and this was realised on 23rd December 1981 with the setting up of the *Istituto Storico Salesiano (ISS)* at the Generalate of the Salesians of Don Bosco.

In order to work in close collaboration with the ISS and to further relevant research in the area of Salesian heritage the *Associazione Cultori di Storia Salesiana (ACCSA)* was set up by the Rector Major, Rev. Fr. Juan Vecchi on 9th October 1996²⁴.

All the above mentioned efforts were meant not only to help study and understand the past but also to project itself into the future. To quote Fr. Vecchi, Rector Major from 1996 to 2002): "The Congregation willed the foundation of the Salesian Historical Institute. It is the manifestation of a concern which must be reflected in every Province. Neglect of memories of the past means the loss of roots. Today we are facing the expansion which has taken place over 150 years and reached every continent, and its history has still to be written. We cannot lose a patrimony which is valuable. Think of the value for us and for the confreres of tomorrow of the story of the implanting and growth of the Congregation in different contexts and in certain countries which have recently recovered their freedom. It is evidently not sufficient to have created a structure or founded an Institute if there were not the men who worked there with love and enthusiasm"²⁵.

The present seminar on Salesian Historiography organized by ACCSSA will, I am sure, further the cause of preserving the rich Salesian patrimony in India and the South Asia Region and help pass it on critically to future generations in keeping with the mind of the Congregation so explicitly expressed and concretised in such initiatives as the *Centro Storico Salesiano* and the setting up of ACCSSA.

²⁴ Cf sdb.org/ISS/ACCSA for an understanding of the various phases of the growth of the ISS and the ACCSSA.

²⁵ "Atti del Consiglio generale della Società salesiana di San Giovanni Bosco", No. 361 (Oct.-Dec. 1997), pp. 36-37.