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Owen Chadwick

Excerpt

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## I

## Introduction

By common agreement all governments restrict access to their papers. For a time at least reason of state demands that historians be allowed no access. The British government has brought this time down to thirty years – but only for that majority of papers which reason of state allows. The needs of government and the wishes of the historian conflict.

Acton, who was as personally engaged in the problem as any historian, defined it as *the enmity between the truth of history and the reason of state, between sincere quest and official secrecy*.<sup>1</sup>

Two different kinds of institution generate special difficulty of this nature. One is a personal monarchy. The Queen makes the Royal Archives available to authorized enquirers. But the Royal Archives contain not only some records of government but the papers of a private family, and a family is entitled to that privacy conceded to every other less prominent family. The other special case is a Church, especially the Roman Catholic Church.

Certain key-words made fanatics more fanatical: words like Pope, Jesuit, Index, Inquisition. If you open all the archives until thirty years ago, you open them to historians. You open them also to minds eager to find what discredits. Is it possible that the impartiality of history is better served if the archives are closed than if they are open? Since feelings roused by religions run as deep in the human soul as passions roused by national conflict, the events of the past live in the present. Whether agents of the Church punish a man for saying that the earth went round the sun – whether the Council of Trent was no true ecumenical Council because the Pope controlled

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marionette bishops on invisible wires – whether a Pope was personally immoral – all these might afford matter for the obsessed, and might even affect attitudes among minds which were not obsessed. They all happen to be questions which only the archives might answer. In this argument between *truth of history* and *reason of state*, reason of state could be found arguing for a much longer closure of archives than that which advanced liberal governments came to adopt.

Modern history, sometimes called loosely 'scientific' history, made such progress during the middle of the last century that its new face affected all men's attitudes towards the past, and therefore some men's attitude towards the present. The principles or beliefs inherited in European tradition came under a new kind of examination. This touched all European culture. How and in what ways it affected culture is an intractable problem of intellectual history; whether it had its impact in ideals of education, or in personal approaches to literature, or in the evolutionary stances adapted from biology into other sciences, or in the analysis of politics and systems of government. To find tests of influences like these is doubtful work. Men's perspective towards life or society changed because they gained a more informed perspective in looking at the past. But how it changed, and how a picture of the world was altered, what difference was made to culture or viewpoint or morals, these aspects of the question are hard to test and not easy even to illustrate.

But religion is a realm where the enquiry sees results. The two akin religions of nineteenth-century Europe, Christianity and Judaism, are in their different ways religions in which history matters. The context of devotion and prayer, though of this moment, is nourished by the memory of past events. The body of doctrine is linked to men and women who lived, and to experiences which they endured, and records bearing the evidence concerning their human destiny. The Jewish and Christian memories were once identified with the historical perspectives of Europe. Religion had more sense of continuity with the past than any other element in the heritage which

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made up culture among the peoples. The ablest writers among early modern historians were students of Church history.

Therefore the coming of modern history, with its organization of libraries, and publication of manuscripts, and founding of learned journals, and slow creation of endowed posts for historians, could be seen to foster a view of the past which must influence religious attitudes, doctrines, and prayers. This happened in all the Christian Churches.

Among the Churches the Roman Catholic Church faced the challenge in ways which specially interest the historian of ideas. Conservative by inheritance of centuries, more conservative by resistance to radicals in the age of Reformation, ultra-conservative because in many countries a society of peasants or labourers who of all classes had minds least open to disturbing ideas, it was nevertheless a Church committed to history; that is, it could not sweep the challenge behind the door or pretend that it all sprang from infidel illusion. Some of the founders of modern history – Mabillon, Tillemont, Muratori, to mention only three – were dedicated priests. *Tradition* was important to the structure of doctrine which fed men's faith. To Protestant warriors tradition sounded like a way of closing the eyes to history – accept whatever most men believe today and refuse to ask whether they believed it yesterday. Catholic writers gave too much occasion for this charge. But tradition was continuity, and continuity was history. Commitment to tradition was also commitment to history, and a main reason why the study of Christian history was inescapable in Catholic teaching.

Facing this challenge in the realm of doctrine, Catholic thinkers began to analyse that relation between a belief and its definition in language which Newman called *development*. The idea of development had more than one ground, and was variously expressed, and had diverse consequences. But the momentous part of it was the recognition that history makes a difference to the religious understanding of the world.

A Church committed by principle to historical enquiry, and simultaneously committed by its members to conservative

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attitudes, must experience inward tension. The worst tension was generated by the argument over the relation between history and dogma. A lesser argument developed over the archives. Because we are committed to historical enquiry, is it our duty to allow free access to private archives, even if we are afraid that those who use the archives might change the understanding of the past, or injure the Church of the present?

The Vatican possessed a famous archive which touched the history of Europe over a thousand years, and specially illuminated the past behaviour of Popes and other leaders of the Catholic Church. About access to this archive the argument became warm.

The political mind argued:

We have enemies in the world. Bad things happened in the past. If we open our archives, we let in not only neutrals who want to understand, or friends who have that sympathy which enables men to understand better, but antagonists seeking to stir up dirt. Such hostile enquiry, especially if misused, hurts the institution; and in hurting the institution, hurts the world which the institution serves.

The historical mind argues:

The Church is committed to truth. The opening of archives is a necessary part of the quest for truth in an age of historical enquiry. Truth is an absolute good. No plea of political welfare can override the commitment. The Church wants to know what really happened. For the sake of that quest it must run the risk that fanatics misuse its documents. Misuse is of the moment, truth becomes a possession.

This is the theme: the argument in Catholicism between the ecclesiastical statesman and the historian in need of truth. Each side had its case to advocate. Each side had inarticulate feelings even where its case was hard to argue. And if I think the historian to have the better cause, you will subtract some bias for the circumstance that it is the historian and not the ecclesiastical statesman who must describe what happened.

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From the earliest times the Pope, as head of a great administration, needed papers and books. Perhaps the example of the Roman emperor's civil service in Constantinople still ruled Rome, and the Pope kept a repository of papers in the Lateran. But, like other sovereigns of the Middle Ages, he often carried his papers round on his travels. As with secular perambulations of this sort, it was an easy way to lose letters. He probably had no systematic arrangement to collect and preserve letters and copies of letters until the pontificate of Pope Innocent III (died 1216) who was a lawyer.

The Pope, being bishop of a city, was more stable in one town than most medieval rulers. Nevertheless, even early in the fifteenth century, his main collection of papers was stored not in Rome but at Avignon. Probably the bulk of his registers moved from Avignon to Rome before 1431.<sup>2</sup>

Then the invention of printing increased the number of books, and all earlier forms of keeping books were made obsolete. Simultaneously the learning of the Renaissance began interest in manuscripts. In 1475, therefore, the Pope created a 'library' or rather extended the old library, gave a regular endowment and better buildings, and appointed a librarian, the humanist Platina, with a staff.

It was already the best stocked library in Italy. No library was yet large. It had under 4,000 volumes by 1484, but was important enough in 1527, when the emperor's army sacked Rome, to attract looters; less however for the value of manuscripts in a market or in scholarship than for seals in the making of bullets or for parchment as litter for horses.<sup>3</sup> The soldiery had no idea of the value of what they tore or burnt. But several accounts describe the mass of original papal documents lying with precious manuscripts in the street. A lot was recovered later, or appeared elsewhere in Europe – one important Roman manuscript, perhaps lost during the sack, is still in the Bodleian Library. One of the registers of Pope Alexander VI Borgia was returned in two pieces, with many pages missing, five years later.<sup>4</sup>

From 1548 the status of the library was raised because

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henceforth the librarian was always a cardinal. But the cardinal's work sometimes took precedence over the librarian's work. The first Cardinal-librarian, Marcello Cervini, collected books with passion, created new catalogues, and opened the library to scholars at fixed hours. The second of the Cardinal-librarians was a boy of 14 when he was appointed and, though well-educated for his age, was otherwise qualified by being a nephew of Pope Julius III. However, the existence of a cardinal as figure-head of the library helped the real librarians, custodes, to get more of what they wanted; in this case Guglielmo and Girolamo Sirleto, who in succession, from 1554 to 1572, were excellently fitted to extend the range of the library and its manuscripts. The first steps to collect scattered documents began. Marcello Cervini, formerly the Vatican librarian, became Pope, and searched for manuscripts lost during the sack of Rome, and brought some volumes from Avignon.

One cause of this interest was the desire to publish scholarly editions of ancient texts, partly to meet the pleas of Protestants about the primitive Church. The old documents in the Library were far more important than the new. Despite the collections of medieval popes, the current archives were evidently in poor order when Cardinal Borromeo *started* an attempt to collect the papers of the secretariat.<sup>5</sup> Though papers already existed, and were kept, they were scattered here and there in bundles almost as they came to rest. The archives could not be put into order until they were given a home to inhabit. On 15 June 1565 Pope Pius IV ordered the Cardinal-librarian Mula to make an archive – that is, find a room or rooms where the papers should assemble. They transferred more documents from Avignon to Rome. They did not intend to make access easy or even possible, except to the administrators. The times were bitter, and a brief of 1570 made it more difficult to consult, and impossible to copy, the old manuscripts in the library. They intended more efficient business, not scholarship. Pope Pius V (1566–72) brought 158 more volumes from Avignon to Rome, leaving about 500 volumes still at Avignon.<sup>6</sup> The Vatican was still looking for space adequate for storing these

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papers in any way that would enable them to be consulted at need.

Throughout Europe printed books poured into men's libraries and by 1575 forced heads of institutions to build new libraries to house their growing collections. In these years the colleges of Cambridge University built their first libraries – one may still be seen almost unchanged, in the old library at Trinity Hall. Between 1587 and 1591, just when the old library at Trinity Hall was under construction, Sixtus V built the Vatican Library as it was to survive until near the end of the nineteenth century; Fontana's magnificent edifice. At first the change was no improvement to those who wished to consult books or papers. It took twenty years before everything was in order after the move; and even then large numbers of books were still uncatalogued. The needs of the library outgrew the endeavours of its exiguous staff, who were paid irregularly, and largely in kind.

The library was open for two or three hours in the day for scholars to consult, though it was shut on frequent holidays. In 1591 Pope Gregory XIV issued a stern order against using documents without his permission.<sup>7</sup> But visitors gained access easily enough. In 1581 Montaigne saw what he liked without difficulty. In 1600<sup>8</sup> Schott talked of the crowds of scholars working in the library, apparently with complete freedom, and only lamented the lack of a proper catalogue. It was a good time, with a dedicated librarian, Domenico Ranaldi, working at arrangement and access, both in the library and the archives. Privileged scholars borrowed books comfortably. Cardinal Caesar Baronius took away a precious Greek manuscript for two months.<sup>9</sup> But these freedoms varied according to the administration, and the excellent works of scholarship which appeared were mostly due to officers of the library or the Curia. In 1652 Heinsius did not arrange to stay long in Rome because (he thought) they would hardly show manuscripts to foreigners.<sup>10</sup>

The archives were seldom accessible in this way. Only privileged members of the Curia consulted them, usually for

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business, but on rare occasions for history. Odorico Rinaldi used the archives to continue the Annals of Baronius, Pallavicino to write the official history of the Council of Trent.

Slowly library and archive were seen to be incompatible. The library became a treasure-house of ancient manuscripts and rare books, and clamoured to be used. The archive was full of the secret papers of government which unscrupulous men could misuse if they got copies; and the stringent precautions against consulting the archive spilled over into the attitudes to harmless scholars who needed the library. At the end of the sixteenth century Pope Clement VIII started to move archives away from the library and into the Castel Sant' Angelo. This was intended for security. But the papers were not stored in dungeons. They were needed. Busy men wished to find documents quickly. An ornamented hall on the upper floor of the castle was reserved and decorated and furnished with presses.<sup>11</sup> A bull of 1593 was prepared to transfer all the archives to this repository. But second thoughts came, and the bull was never published. It was more convenient to have many of the papers in the Vatican, and the castle was considered a place of special safety for documents of exceptional value or secrecy.

The logical end was division between library and archives. In 1612, therefore, Pope Paul V reversed the policy of moving archives to the castle, but simultaneously separated library from archive as institutions. They were given separate heads. The archives were placed in a long wing of the Vatican Palace by the library. Into this building passed various groups of archives, with a nucleus in the volumes of papal registers which were hitherto kept for ready consultation in the 'wardrobe' above the Pope's apartments. Some of the papers from Sant' Angelo were carried back. But the most valuable or secret documents were still left in the castle for security.

The creation of the Archive – not called officially the Vatican Secret Archives until later – was a sensible act of administration. For until that moment papers lay about in each office. Different bureaux of the civil service still kept what they



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used. Therefore the new Papal Archive was composed of the specially important papers in Castel Sant' Angelo (like the documents of the Council of Trent), the archive which already existed in the Vatican Library, of which the nucleus was 279 parchment registers from John VIII to Sixtus IV, the very incomplete records of the Secretary of State hitherto in the Castel Sant' Angelo,<sup>12</sup> and the archives of the different offices (especially of the Treasury) which were now put, still with many exceptions, under the control of the central archive. Pope Paul V holds the honour of first creating an independent central archive which began to act like a magnet, slowly drawing towards itself the mass of various collections from various offices.

The creation of a central archive owed nothing to the notion of helping scholars to write history. It was a business transaction intended to make the administration more efficient. The Pope's major-domo was blunt in his material view of the gain. 'Old documents', he said, 'are non-military weapons for holding on to property we have acquired.'<sup>13</sup>

At the archives the officials could not always find the weapon that they wanted. The central collection came from various sources, sometimes piecemeal, some of them already well-arranged, others in disorder, some a complete series and others part of a collection of which the rest lay in the castle or even at Avignon. The miscellany of origin controlled arrangement inside the Archive. Occasionally papers of exceptional importance could not be found. During the weary meetings leading to the Peace of Westphalia which ended the Thirty Years War in 1648, the papal envoy Chigi wished to concoct a protest against unfavourable terms. To this end he needed copies of the papal protest against the terms of the Peace of Augsburg nearly a century before. He applied to Rome. The archivists could find no copy.<sup>14</sup>

That no copy could be found might be due to ill-arrangement or negligence. The various rooms housed a lot of paper, organized by a scholarly but tiny and ill-paid staff. Since, however, they needed to serve no public enquiries, but solely

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the needs of the administration, they kept pace with the conflux of papers surprisingly. Occasionally they were capable of putting their records to dramatic use.

In the Sala Regia at the Vatican was a picture of the Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and Pope Alexander III, to which was affixed (by Pope Pius IV) an inscription praising the Venetians for rescuing the Pope from the Emperor and restoring him to power. This inscription came to be regarded as humbling to popes. The prefect of the archives proved that the supposed scene never happened, and the inscription (1635) was removed. The government of Venice was offended, and with threats demanded that the inscription be restored. It was not then the Pope's policy to offend Venice, and he was therefore humiliated three times over: first by restoring an inscription thought to be demeaning, second by doing it though he knew it to be untrue, and third by being forced on Venetian demand to relieve of his duties the prefect of the archives.<sup>15</sup>

The chief reason why the archives might be incomplete or copies might not be found, without any negligence of archivists, lay in the family nature of papal government. Nominally until 1692, but actually until later, popes used their nephews in the administration. A bulk of papers came to the Pope's nephew as representative of the Pope and so, when the Pope died and the nephew held office no longer, became part of the family papers. In this way important sections of the Pope's administrative records came to rest, not in the Vatican Archives, but in the libraries or cupboards of great Roman families like the Borghese, Barberini, Chigi, Pamfili, Farnese, Caetani, Albani. The papers of the last non-Italian Pope, Adrian VI, were lost altogether because at his death his secretary carried them away to Liège and they were never afterwards found.<sup>16</sup> The documents of Pope Marcellus II concerning the Council of Trent, collected in fifty-four volumes, remained in his Cervini family until just before the French Revolution, when they passed into the archive of the library at Florence.<sup>17</sup> Some of the Borghese papers still lie in the John Rylands Library at Manchester, whither they passed