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# THE PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY AND THE HISTORIAN

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With most of what Professor McNeal has said there will, I think, be no serious disagreement. We are indebted to him, at once for his initiative in prompting this discussion, and for his clear and concise statement on a question that is, or ought to be of interest to us all. As a historian I would also express my thanks to Professor Dray for the aid he has given us in clarifying the ambiguous and somewhat confusing terminology with which the subject is surrounded, and for his judicious estimate of what the philosopher of history can hope to achieve. We are all conscious of the need of an adequate explanation of the ultimate meaning of history, or at the least, of some agreed principles by which we can test the validity of what we are trying to do; and most of us, I suppose, would agree that nothing so far offered by the historicists or the meta-historians is entirely satisfactory.

There are probably few among us who share the optimistic view of many nineteenth-century scholars that a final and complete history of man's life on earth could be written, a history that would explain all and perhaps pardon all, and that would provide mankind with an infallible guide to the road which he had travelled in the past, and which he would, or must travel in the future. History may be philosophy teaching by example, as Carlyle was so fond of proclaiming; but we are less certain than many of our predecessors about what it does teach, and less confident of our ability to reduce that teaching to a neat set of formulas by which the infinitely varied and unpredictable actions of man can be explained. Of one thing only can we be reasonably sure, that whatever wisdom history has to teach, it has had singularly little effect on the generality of mankind.

My knowledge of the literature on this subject is too uncertain to enable me to speak with much confidence on the problems that have been raised. It is, I think, only those who limit the meaning of history to little more than the purely materialist aspects of human life, or who, like Professor Carr, interpret current developments and the events which had led to them as the prelude to a sort of technological utopia operated by persons effectively indoctrinated with theories suited to their condition, who can speak of these matters with complete confidence. My own reading has been too limited and too unsystematic to provide me with anything that can with propriety be described as a philosophy of history;

but, such as it is, it does not persuade me to accept that simple interpretation of the historic record. Any ideas that I have on the subject are perhaps the result of my teaching experience, of my conviction of the necessity of some standard or scale of values by which to judge the events, and more particularly the men with whose actions I have had to deal. It probably amounts to little more than what Professor McNeal has called an assumption about human nature. Yet, on reflection, it seems to me that an assumption about human nature is one of the most useful tools in the historian's kit.

It need hardly be said that it must be tested by common sense and by what we can learn of men's actions, and of the motives which inspire them, in the present and in the past. But so tested, it is perhaps the ultimate foundation upon which most of our judgments are based. It is, I think, indispensable for an understanding of much of the material with which we have to deal: of such theories, for example, as the law of nature and natural rights, or of the endless number of reforms or panaceas, utilitarian, utopian, or pseudo-scientific, propounded in all ages for the solution of human problems. None of the great works which have influenced the course of history and our thinking about it, from Aristotle's ideas about the polis and the good life which it existed to further, to Hobbes' theories about man and society, or Bentham's notions of how best to "rear the fabric of felicity", is intelligible except on the assumption of certain ideas about human nature and what can or cannot be done with it. And it is only by reference to our own assumptions, which we hope are more than simple assumptions, that we can presume to judge the validity of these ideas.

In considering some of the more fundamental issues raised by Professor McNeal, it will be useful to begin with his definition. History is a branch of humanist learning. It is that, but I think it is rather more than that. It is, at least ideally conceived, not merely a branch, it is the essential and comprehensive foundation of all humanist learning. That is to say, it is the record of man's activities, physical, intellectual, artistic and spiritual, as a being endowed by God with reason and with the gift of free will; and able therefore to make decisions, to choose the one course or the other, and, within limits, to act upon these decisions.

Whatever the social or political or other form of unit chosen for study — city state, feudal hierarchy, nation, empire, or civilisation in Toynbee's meaning of the term — each of these is in its essence, in the only sense in which it has meaning for the historian, an aggregation of human beings; and the actions which make up its history, positive or negative in their results, admirable, base, or even criminal in their character, are the products of decisions made by men. In many cases the range of choices is narrowly limited, often by circumstances over which

man has little or no control. But a choice does remain; a decision is made; and that decision enters as one of the events which influence, and may indeed largely determine the history that follows. This seems to me a fundamental datum for any historical inquiry or explanation. Without it I do not see how we can regard history as a truly humanist study.

The essential point is what Isaiah Berlin calls the "reality of choices" and man's freedom to choose. That does not preclude, nor in any sense minimise the importance of evolution, growth and adaptation to changing circumstances in any organized society. Constant change, bringing growth or decline, is the essential characteristic of human history. But the way in which change occurs is not predetermined. That depends ultimately upon human will and human freedom. M. Maritain explains it in what seems to me an apt summary of the historical process: "Man cannot bend history according to his arbitrary will or fancy; but he can cause new currents to surge up to struggle and compound with preexisting currents, forces and conditions, so as to bring about a new orientation", a change of condition or direction that was not determined in advance by what may be called the "evolution of a particular period". It is the function of the historian to discover and to estimate the importance of all the elements, political, economic, social, religious and cultural, of which these currents are compounded. The value of his work will depend upon his ability to understand and to give due weight, and no more than due weight to each of these elements. Above all it will depend upon his knowledge of human nature in all its richness and variety.

That is as far as the historian can go. It is perhaps farther than most of us can hope to go. What cannot be asked of him, what it would in fact be wrong for him to attempt is to determine the extent to which these particular changes are in accord with the will of God, and can therefore be explained as the working of divine Providence in history. This whole problem of divine guidance or intervention in human life is a matter for the theologian, not for the historian. For the historian or the philosopher of history to attempt any such thing would not only be an unwarrantable presumption, an effort to do something that is beyond the range of his technique; it would in fact be to adopt a sort of providential determinism, an *a priori* concept, no more valid and no less subjective than any other form of determinism.

Many Elizabethans, we are informed by Sir John Neale, were convinced that their escape from the perils which surrounded them was due to divine guidance. Oliver Cromwell was no less convinced that the Providence of God had cast upon him and his victorious army the duty of disposing of the "man of blood", and that the "mighty things that have been wrought in our midst are the revolutions of Christ". Burke believed profoundly that the evolution of the European community, and more particularly the English political organism, was in accord with God's plan

for the government of mankind. Hegel persuaded himself, and may have persuaded many of his countrymen, that this plan had reached its perfect consummation in the Protestant Prussian state of the nineteenth century.

These are but a few examples of the efforts of men to interpret the will of God, and to apply their judgments to historic events in what Professor McNeal has called a "fairly literal sense". They could be multiplied endlessly, but the result would be no more satisfactory. To ask the historian to essay the same task is to lay upon him a duty that is not and cannot be brought within his province. To say that is not to question the reality of divine purpose in human life, and therefore in history. It is simply to recognize the limits of what can be achieved by the intellectual processes upon which the historian must rely.

If I read him correctly that is the conclusion which Professor Butterfield, speaking as a "technical historian", wished to impress upon an audience, whose members were trained in a different discipline, and who may have been more disposed to see the judgment of God in such an event as the fall of the German Empire in 1918.[1] His belief in divine Providence as an active force in human life is evident in all his work. There are passages which lend themselves to the view that he regards the defeat of Germany in 1918 as clear evidence of the judgment of God, a judgment that was prolonged and intensified by the failure, or the refusal of the German people to see the "verdict" for what it was, and to make an honest and sincere effort to discover how and why they had "offended Heaven". But the case is not so simple. On a wider view this appears to be a case of moral judgment, a striking example of "that moral retribution which seems to be worked out in the very process of time". The records of history are filled with such cases; and however conspicuous the folly or wickedness of one particular group or nation, it is in the defects and inadequacies of human nature itself that the ultimate cause is to be sought.

"History", says Butterfield, "is always a story in which Providence is countered by human aberration", and the results, like the cause, cannot be confined within definite limits. Looking at the present condition of the world, in particular the divided and chaotic state of Europe after two world wars, he is led to remark that, "if Germany has come to judgment, so have all of us", and with us the "whole of our existing order, and the very fabric of our civilisation". It seems clear however, that he regards this, not as a historical judgment in the accepted sense of that term, but as an opinion based on the conviction that the cause of such disasters lies ultimately in the sin and folly of mankind in general. "Within the privacy of this room", he remarks, "I may say that

[1] H. Butterfield, *Christianity and History*. These lectures were originally delivered to the Divinity Faculty of the University of Cambridge in 1948.

Germany has come to judgment" for the excesses of her Prussianism or militarism. "I know however", he adds, "that I have no right to say any such thing, and I very much doubt whether it would be within the competence of the technical historian to assert it". Most historians would agree. Many, and not least those who share Butterfield's belief in Christianity, would perhaps express the doubt in even stronger terms.

The role of Christianity in history is too large and too difficult a subject to be considered here. To discuss it at length would in any case require knowledge that I do not possess; but one or two points may be suggested. As a necessary element in a generalising theory it may be classified with other so-called "universal religions", and its origin may be explained as a spiritual or psychological reaction among a group conveniently described as an "external proletariat". But this explains very little. Considered simply as a historic phenomenon — although for many of us it is much more than that — it differs in some essential features from any other religion of which we have record. It is a historic religion. Unlike many, if not all the religions which Toynbee identifies with earlier civilizations, it did not emerge from the mists of pre-history. It dates from a particular series of recorded events. Men have differed and will continue to differ in their interpretation of those events; but on one result there can scarcely be any disagreement. They led at once to the creation of a community that has been one of the most powerful forces for change in the entire course of human history.

In a recent essay on History and Christianity Dr. Brookes Otis suggests some of the more profound and far-reaching effects of Christian influence on the societies in which it developed.[2] The Christian attitude towards nature differed from that of any religious group then known to exist. Nature ceased to be vested with the character of divinity, and to be treated as something awesome and mysterious. The Christian did not identify himself with it. He stood apart from it, regarding it as something to be "observed, utilised and controlled". The attitude towards community life — "the relations of men in all kinds of groupings" — was perhaps less original. But in fostering the idea that their religion involved a "sacred obligation of the community of believers to act as responsible agents of God's justice and love", Christians presented an ideal of human relations very different from that which prevailed almost everywhere at the time. With these was combined the distinctive attitude towards history. Dr. Otis describes this as a "positive view", in which time ceased to be "merely disintegrative", and became "the stuff of the drama of God's plan". These attitudes, spreading with the growth of Christianity, have, in Dr. Otis' judgment, contributed powerfully to give to western

[2] Brookes Otis, *History and Christianity,* I. The Problem; II. The Answer. Episcopal Church: The National Council. New York. N.D. I am indebted to Professor Wm. Kilbourne for calling my attention to this essay.

culture its distinctive character. The dynamism of western civilization, he declares, is essentially a "Christian creation" — a phenomenon that could not have been produced under the aegis of any of the static and conservative "nature religions", which tended everywhere to confer a "sort of sacro-sanctity" on the existing social and political order. At least it can be said that these "attitudes" are essential ingredients of the intellectual tradition of which we are the heirs. They have entered into, and have deeply influenced the social, political and legal thought of every community into which Christianity has spread; and they have been powerful factors in shaping the institutions which in the past have distinguished European society from that in any other part of the world.

In considering these questions, or in reflecting on the problem of divine Providence in history, it is important to remember that Christianity is not, and was not intended to be a chart or blue-print for any particular type of social or political organization. In the strict and literal sense of the term, only two things were provided: first, the means of salvation for all men, and the rules or precepts by which they could live in peace as sons of God, not primarily as Englishmen or Frenchmen, and could create the conditions necessary for the attainment of that degree of perfection that is possible in this world; and second, absolute freedom to accept or to reject those precepts, to perfect or to pervert the law of justice and love laid down as the model for all.

The utmost that the historian can do is to discover and explain the manner in which men have used that freedom, and the consequences that have followed. And it behooves us to be humble; for, apart from what M. Maritain calls the mystery that lies at the heart of history, we are to remember that the data on which we base our judgments are very limited. We can discover the truth, or what, after much searching and sifting will be accepted as the probable truth, about a great many events in the past. But beyond the events for which we have usable records there lies a vast area of human endeavour and achievement that has undoubtedly influenced what Butterfield calls the "quality of life", which is not the same thing as the material apparatus within which life is lived; and of all that we know very little, and can never hope to know very much. That is one reason, in my own case not the only, nor perhaps the most important reason, for regarding with doubt any idea that history, as we have it or are likely to have it, can give us anything more than a partial explanation of man's past, or can provide us with a philosophy of life, or a religion, or a substitute for religion.