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## GOD AND HISTORY

### An essay on the interface between historical and theological method

Even historians who hold that God reveals himself in history would not today feel entitled to use him by way of explanation.(1)

A serious historian may believe in a God who has ordered, and given meaning to, the course of history as a whole, though he cannot believe in the Old Testament kind of God who intervenes to slaughter the Amelekites, or cheats on the calendar by extending the hours of daylight for the benefit of Joshua's army. Nor can he invoke God as an explanation of particular historical events ... I shall assume that the historian must solve his problem without recourse to any such *deus ex machina*, that history is a game played, so to speak, without a joker in the pack.(2)

Such quotations as these, from two leading historians of our times, no longer jar the theologian's sensibilities. Both contain an explicit denial of the appropriateness of using God as a category of historical explanation, and the second hints as to why that is so. But while many of us accept what we are here told that the 'serious historian' can and cannot believe, we still may draw back from total abstention when it comes to excluding God from causal descriptions of human history. This dilemma is a serious one. We need to discover a way in which we may, with integrity, speak of God as active in history - a way in which historians may make reference to him if they so wish - while yet continuing to accept the objections made with force and justification to the 'Old Testament kind of God'.

This paper presents a survey of thought on the historical problems facing the theologian who seeks to make some of the Christian faith's most central assertions: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, that God's Holy Spirit gave birth to His church, that this God has throughout history been involved in human affairs and that he still today is active in the life of individuals, the church and the world. For the historical, or perhaps more properly when viewed from this perspective historiographical, problem raises another issue: is there a way in which contemporary Christians can speak of God's influence or action with integrity, and if so what 'ground-rules' must they observe when they do that?

When theologians attempt such a task as this their resources are often unnecessarily limited. The work of theologians is of course considered, and sometimes those who have written in the 'philosophy of history'. While these writers raise very important questions, and offer stimulating suggestions, they often lack the practical experience of writing history which a 'working historian' can offer. As part of my investigation I shall call upon a powerful figure in contemporary historical circles in an attempt to push the debate a little further along. His contribution will also, perhaps, suggest other applications.

I hope to show how a wide-ranging debate may fruitfully be held on a number of aspects of Christian life and belief.

The paper is in two parts. The first surveys theological positions adopted on the question in a brief way, and offers some critical comments. This discussion raises many of the important issues which must be dealt with. The second part of the paper explores what 'history' is - a vast question given a modest answer in such a limited space - and most references here are made not to theological writings but to the work of historians. As I proceed with this exploration I shall summarise our findings in several 'theses'. Throughout the discussion talk will shift between talking about 'what can/did happen' and 'what the historian is able to describe' - between causation and description. Such an ambivalence of approach is unavoidable. To assert that something happened, but that the historian cannot describe it may be plainly unintelligible - but at the very least it removes the supposed event from 'historical enquiry'.

## I

For ease of discussion, I am going to summarise the main theological postures vis-à-vis history under six crude headings. I shall not give equal time and space to all six, as some positions can be stated (together with the objections to them) more succinctly than others. I shall also afford rather more space to more recent thinking.

(i) What could be called the 'classical' view rested on a clear-cut distinction between 'natural' and 'supernatural', and invoked the doctrines of natural law and intervention. This position is still the one held in much 'popular' thought on the subject. The argument is something like this. God created the world and set it running with a system of 'natural laws'. These laws govern all 'normal' events. However, God sometimes wishes to do something specific himself, and he then 'intervenes' and suspends these laws. Nowadays natural law has been redefined as a statistical generalisation, but for this reason, the argument has flourished with a new quasi-scientific appearance. Most historians, and scientists, reject it forcefully. (3) Theologically, it seems uncomfortably close to a return to the 'God of the Gaps'. It implies that God only acts when things go wrong, or that he plays a minimal part in ordinary events - a view which the biblical witness would not endorse. Further, such a belief undermines all history and human action by casting the shadow of a capricious God across it. It brings God into history, but leaves him quite beyond the reach of the historian.

(ii) Fearing that (secular) historians are unable to see God in history because of the nature of their brief, (4) and because to allow God to be used in historical debate might make him too vulnerable, some twentieth-century theologians have sought a solution in what amounts to a separation of theology and history - a 'disengagement from history'. (5) Two contrasting methods of disengagement emerged. (ii-a) The younger Barth said that the resurrection (to use a specific example) is an event in *Urgeschichte* (Primal History). (6) In *Church Dogmatics* he says that the significant events of the Christian faith lie beyond the reach of the historian - they occur in 'non-historical

history'!(7) *True* history must include non-historical (*unhistorisch*) and historical (*historisch*) elements,(8) but it is illegitimate for Christians to make reference to God in a secular or neutral discussion. (ii-b) Bultmann makes a similar flight from 'factual history' - this time into existential encounter. Cullmann accuses Bultmann of a 'gnostic flight from reality', though Cullmann himself is quite close to Barth: his *Heilgeschichte* is not real history either.(9) The neo-orthodox have espoused, though, a sort of twentieth-century Docetism with their 'seeming history', and their flight in one direction or another to an invulnerable area which the historian cannot reach to disprove anything, where 'the critics cease from troubling and the faithful are at rest'.(10) How do we attach meaning to 'historical' happenings which are *in principle* beyond the reach of the historian? If God has acted in the real world and in the real history of mankind, it is not enough to remove his action from the historian's ambit, for in so doing we remove him also from history and so defeat our object.(11)

(iii) Another group of thinkers I will call (with Harvey) the Hard Perspectivists.(12) Their argument for allowing God to do as he wishes in history is at first sight more plausible, and has three main thrusts to it. 1 It criticises the 'unhistorical' use of Troeltsch's principle of analogy - to decide what is and is not possible in advance is unsound historical method; the evidence must mould our account. 2 As all historians have presuppositions, an 'objective' account of any event is impossible - all historians write from a perspective. The evidence does not so much speak for itself as yield information when subjected to 'cross-examination' by the historian. The questions of each historian, and therefore also the answers, will reflect his perspective. 3 As every historian is inevitably selective in his use of evidence, this will serve further to underline a particular perspective. So the argument for a miracle can now run, it is claimed, like this: to say that miracles, or any divine actions, are impossible merely betrays your presuppositions and perspective, further, such an *a priori* ruling out of miracle is unhistorical; your presuppositions rule it out, mine do not; your selection of the evidence militates against such an interpretation, mine does not. One of the key ideas upon which the argument rests is that fact and interpretation cannot be separated - here some historians are called in as witnesses, Collingwood well to the fore. Judgements of 'fact', they argue, inevitably contain interpretation: they are inseparable.

The case against the Hard Perspectivists can be outlined under five points. 1 The complete subsumption of fact under interpretation is not satisfactory. In everyday life we continually have need of recourse to this distinction (in law courts, newspapers, politics) and the working historian continually repairs to it. Neither does it do justice to the question of events having different significance for different people (e.g. Hitler's death). It is edifying to note that certain NT scholars are eager to press the inseparability into use in order to 'prove' the resurrection, but make the distinction quite happily on other matters.(13) 2 It may be doubted whether the definition of truth implied by the position (that of the 'coherence of a perspective') is adequate. Richardson says that objectivity is God's alone, and that to want to be like God is sinful.(14) But the call for objectivity is a call for ruthless honesty and open-mindedness.

Cullmann recognises that all scholars have presuppositions, but says that we should keep them in the back of our minds rather than the front, for to turn this necessity into a virtue is more dangerous than not to observe the fact at all.(15) His point seems valid. 3 Furthermore, the notion of selectivity here uses as its 'foil' an irrelevant standard of objectivity - carried to the position's extreme, we could know nothing at all. Here the idea of a scientific history resurfaces, though the Perspectivists profess to reject it.(16) 4. How do we know which perspective is true? Richardson claims that the Christian perspective enables us to see the facts 'as they really are'(17) and that it is differentiated from other interpretative 'myths' in its universal application and because its base is in a witness to actual history.(18) But surely any such assertion of the superiority of one perspective over another begs the very question it seeks to answer, and assumes that the criteria on which the judgement is made transcend both perspectives: Richardson has qualified only God for such a role. If this is not accepted to be the case (and its acceptance would require considerable modification of the position) then we lapse into a complete relativism where 'anything goes'. 5 Also at issue is the nature of our presuppositions. Harvey objects that these may be said to take two quite different forms. Firstly what he calls the 'cultural furniture of the age' (e.g. its scientific know-how). Secondly, these presuppositions may include very specific and conscious 'beliefs' about e.g. Scripture, that it is inspired and that events described in it must be accounted 'historical'. So NT scholars often ask us to abrogate one set of presuppositions - which we share with our contemporaries - in favour of these specifically held beliefs. Harvey's distinction between these two kinds of presupposition is of course too simple, and fails to address itself to the question of the legitimacy of either set of presuppositions. But he is right to comment on the breadth of the so-called 'Christian perspective' which must embrace Bultmann and Cullmann, Barth and Gogarten, Pannenberg and Ebeling: and that list is only of those who write in German! Add in the whole gamut of Christian perspectives, including crude Fundamentalism, and we see that NT scholars and theologians do not share presuppositions - even about the NT. Harvey concludes that no specifically *Christian* warrants are being used collectively by scholars, but that normal ones are often suspended.(19)

Much stress is laid on the fact that the historian judges the truth of events according to his own 'experience'.(20) This may well be true (and it is an issue which we will return to at some length), but it cannot prove all that it is here being asked to prove. Why do I believe an 'historical' account of the resurrection? - what in my 'experience' would count as evidence for the resurrection of a dead man in any of the postulated ways? The chances are that the most I can point to will be a 'feeling' which I may call 'renewal' or 'resurrection' - it may parallel the gospel accounts of Easter in some ways (not least in my interpretation of the experience and the relation of it to the gospel stories) but it does not prove a bodily resurrection, an empty tomb, or anything else like that: the parallel is not that close. The Hard Perspectivists seem unaware of this.

(iv) Harvey himself puts forward a more reasonable case for what he calls, by direct comparison with the above, 'Soft Perspectivism', which

accepts the distinction between fact and interpretation. The Christian sees the 'dimension of depth' in an event and interprets the meaning that a public event has for faith. Thus communities adopt certain 'paradigmatic events' which symbolise, focus, certain truths about life in their experience.

Harvey gives an example of such a paradigmatic event in the history of the U.S.A. - the assassination of John Kennedy.(21) But one is given the uneasy feeling that the interpretation which Harvey gives is foisted upon the event, as it were, from the 'outside'.(22) Event and interpretation are separable, but when we seek to interpret events we must try to make sure that the move from event to interpretation is made legitimately. Harvey's insistence that there is no one true interpretation of an event, but that an event has different levels of significance is true to the extent that the same event may look different to different eyes, and that the dimension of depth may in fact be a case of depths; but this raises questions such as whether the valuation of an event is to be given the same status as the interpretation. Perhaps valuations are subjective, whereas interpretations are right or wrong - albeit at their own 'level'.(23) What we seek to establish here is how an event reveals God not by accident, but because there is something about the event (not just in my, or your, perception of it) which *demand*s the interpretation. (Ian Ramsey's 'disclosure situations' may more nearly fit the bill at this point.(24)) Harvey's position is inadequate at this juncture.

(v) A different position is occupied by Pannenberg. Like the Hard Perspectivists, he disallows the use of analogy to say what cannot happen in advance, and criticises the neo-orthodox flight from history saying that 'Faith is not something like a compensation of subjective conviction to make up for defective knowledge'.(25) Pannenberg advocates a new sort of historical method with God as its key element: only so does history make sense, he says. Event and interpretation are very closely related - the 'meaning of events inheres in them'.(26) The significance of an event must belong to the event itself if it is to be the basis of faith. The event's meaning is fully 'public' and should be obvious to all. The obvious meaning manifests itself whenever we consider the context of the event: the expectations and beliefs of the situation, the event's 'sitz im leben', yield the event's meaning. Thus in the context of the disciples' apocalyptic expectation, the meaning of the resurrection is plain, and, Pannenberg assumes, so is its very possibility.

It is worthy of note that even Pannenberg says that sometimes 'divine illumination' must be given so that one can see the 'obvious' meaning of an event. This admission does two things. Firstly, it makes him a lot closer to his opponents than he usually allows. Secondly - and more significantly - it underlines the problematic nature of his claim: the only thing that is obvious is that *if* the meaning of an event was 'obvious' our existing problems would not dog us. Pannenberg insists that the difference between his view and others' is that he does not see the 'illumination' as 'adding' anything to the event: it enables us to see what is really there. In so far as this distinction is valid, it reinforces some of the points we made about Harvey's work. But the word 'obvious' does seem wholly inappropriate.

Six thumb-nail sketches. There are variations on these themes, but these positions seem to be demanding attention and dictating the issues in current theological debate. Let us turn now to ask what history is, and how it is written.

## II

What is the subject matter of history? When we clarify what is being spoken about in much contemporary debate among theologians we find that disagreement is often at this early stage.(27) Again and again we are told, in one way or another, that man is the subject of history: man and his actions, his story, his possibilities.(28) Let us examine the debate occasioned by Pannenberg in *Theology as History*. Martin Buss says that history is only the study of past *human action*.(29) Thus for him, talk of *God* acting in history is a contradiction in terms. Buss *might* admit that God can act, and that he might have acted in the past, but such an assertion is not for him 'historical'. Kendrick Grobel stands apart from Pannenberg for a similar reason. He says that the historian studies spatio-temporal events.(30) As for God's action, while it may be temporal, it is difficult to conceive of it as spatial, Grobel argues. Therefore God's action is not a proper subject for the historian; it lies outside his scope. Pannenberg insists against Buss and Grobel that the historian studies all past events. It matters not if they fit into some pre-conceived 'definition' (human; or spatio-temporal): that the events happened is enough.

It would seem that Buss' sort of answer must be vulnerable to the charge that it rests upon a common but too clearcut separation of historical and natural processes. It seems too narrow to conceive of history as strictly confined to man, even though we would recognise the human element necessarily involved in history which distinguishes it from 'natural history', or paleontology for instance. But we now have a picture of man as very much part of nature. While many of his actions reflect a supreme consciousness and reflection, there are also many of his actions which have their root in man's 'natural' or biological components. We know something of the influence of genetics, environment, even biorhythm, on human action. To give an adequate account of human actions one must take account of such influences. Collingwood broadens his definition helpfully by including any natural happening which affects human actions and lives. Perhaps a more accurate definition of history can be framed along these lines as 'those events or actions which influence or are caused by humanity'.

Such an extension of the definition does not, however, leave an 'open door' to drag God in through! While we have deliberately framed our definition in such a way as not to exclude the divine action which influences human action, we must recognise the constraints which the historian is under in his recording of events. The historian, in so far as he is a 'scientist' (I use the term very broadly) involved in public debate, must always seek a 'natural' cause for events, that is, one that can be located strictly in space and time, one that is finite and quantifiable. To this extent, Grobel is nearer the mark than Buss. To say that the historian must look for 'natural' causes is another way of saying that he must try to explain events by the 'factors which are

ordinarily immanent in history'.(31) To say this is not to bar God's action, but it may indicate its mode. The historian *qua* historian is not at liberty to substitute God for an immanent cause, but may see God in the chain of cause and effect, perhaps, in some other way. For example, an historian making sense of the escape of Israelite slaves at the Red Sea may want to explain the event by the immanent causes of wind and tide, of good leadership and bad, and so on. That may not though debar the further speculation that God's action is to be observed in that event. But that action is not inserted into the causal chain as a *substitute* for an immanent cause; God's action is instead perceived within, or behind - rather than in between - such causes.

So we have two points: (i) the historian must seek 'immanent' causes, and (ii) he must not put God in as an alternative to such an immanent cause, or because he cannot find one. But here I wish to bring in another factor upon which I have already touched: historians are (almost!) unanimous in their assertion that they interpret the past according to their 'critically interpreted present experience'. This idea is given very widespread credence,(32) and has considerable implications. Allied to it is, in Butterfield's words, the fact that 'history is a peculiar science in that it depends so much on things which can only be discovered and verified by insight, sympathy and imagination'.(33)

A good deal of controversy surrounds the question of 'fact and interpretation', and a correct balance between extremes must be found. Butterfield:

If I demonstrate that my grandfather was born ... on January 1st 1850, then that thesis must be equally valid whether I present it to a Christian or atheist, Whig or Tory, Swede or Dane. In respect of points which are established by the evidence, or accepted by the judgement of common sense, history has a certain validity of its own, a certain minimum significance that is independent of philosophy, race or creed.(34)

There is a compulsive logic about this talk of 'minimum significance', even given that events come to us always 'second hand'.(35) But a little later he seems to tip the scales too far in his argument for 'bare facts': 'our interpretation is a thing which we bring to our history and superimpose upon it ... We cannot say that we obtained it as technical historians by inescapable inferences from the purely historical evidence'.(36) Indeed, for Butterfield the 'academic historian' is 'the man who will try to show what can be established by concrete external evidence, and will respect the intricacy and complexity of events, bringing out the things which must be valid whether one is a Jesuit or a Marxist'.(37) This seems a little simplistic: a history of the lowest common denominator with 'offence' to no-one may have some value, but would be insipid and of little use.

It is easy enough to find those who disagree with Butterfield. Marrou reviews the nineteenth-century 'scientific historians', saying wistfully that for them 'history is the past, objectively recorded, plus, *alas!*, an inevitable intervention of the present of the historian ... [a]



quantity which must be rendered as small as possible - or even made quite negligible, tending towards zero'.(38) The analogy they used was that of a 'photograph' of the past, but, says Marrou, now we recognise the subjectivity even of photography.(39)

It is Carr who warns us that the facts of history never come to us 'pure': 'they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder'.(40) This is common-place in theological studies now - accepted by gospel commentators, for instance, with little reserve. But Carr warns against 'over-sell' of this very point. He draws out the dangers inherent in Collingwood's position:

In place of the theory that history has no meaning, we are offered here the theory of an infinity of meanings, none any more right than any other - which comes to much the same thing ... It does not follow that, because a mountain appears to take on different shapes from different angles of vision, it has objectively either no shape at all or an infinity of shapes. It does not follow that, because interpretation plays a necessary part in establishing the facts of history, and because no existing interpretation is wholly objective, one interpretation is as good as another, and the facts of history are in principle not amenable to objective interpretation.(41)

He talks of the danger of interpretation 'riding rough-shod over facts', and so assumes the distinction while refusing to allow a subjective 'free for all'. 'Interpretation is the life-blood of history', he says;(42) it remains a question of balance - 'history is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts'.(43)

To be sure, the relation between fact and interpretation is complex. But, as Gardiner suggests, it would be wrong either to identify them too closely (as Pannenberg seems to) or to rend them fully asunder. Finding out what happened and why are not two distinct procedures - there is a 'procedural interconnexion' between them, and yet they remain relatively independent.(44) Such a distinction might prove fruitful in arbitrating between claims of theologians - historians would seek recourse to 'fact and interpretation' to justify or attack positions. The whole issue is important because of what some theologians have sought to 'smuggle in' with the distinction: we need to distinguish between fact and interpretation, but nevertheless to seek to establish the correct interpretation.

Before going on it may be profitable to draw breath and summarise what we have come to so far. (i) The subject matter of history includes all past events, especially as they have relevance for the 'human story'; (ii) but the historian is duty-bound to search for, and if possible locate, 'immanent' causes. (iii) It is unsatisfactory to substitute God for one of these immanent causes - as knowledge increases 'natural' explanations may or may not be found, but such an insertion of divine agency *between* historical causes is not open to the historian.(45) (iv) In both reconstructing and comprehending the past the historian inevitably uses his own present experience - subjective elements enter with the use of imagination, empathy, and interpretation - though it may be sensible to talk of certain facts of 'minimum

significance', like Butterfield's grandfather's birthday.

I want to illustrate the historian's use of his own experience now by reference to a working historian. J. H. Hexter talks about two 'records': the historian's first record is the source with which he deals; his second record is the cluster of experiences and concerns which constitute himself, which he brings to the first record in order to interpret it. He shows awareness of the dangers and sometimes inadequacy of this second record,(46) but he insists that the question is not *whether* we should use it, but *how* and *how best* can we use it?

Hexter lists six examples of historiographical problems encountered while working on Thomas More's *Utopia*. He indicates these, together with the solutions he arrived at, and the sources he used in coming to the solutions.(47) The first four problems he 'solved' in fairly 'orthodox' ways by reference to appropriate written sources. But the answers to the last two problems came by less easily defined, and perhaps less scientifically acceptable, means. The first of these problems he puts thus: 'What accounts for More's enthusiasm, clearly expressed in *Utopia*, for measures to ensure security for families in case of the premature death or disability of the bread-winner?'(48) Hexter answers:

In the record of the past the points of evidence on his situation - his standards of consumption, his income, his own sense of being under financial pressure, his family situation - were widely scattered through a variety of documents ... the scraps of information readily combined into a picture of a man with a large family, high views on what should be spent on educating children, a generous standard of expense, several daughters to provide for, and a son to start in the world. He was moreover, at the moment he wrote, short of money, and his income was cut back to the bone by enforced absence from his law practice, a practice that he pursued ably but out of necessity and without joy. In such a context the outburst in *Utopia* acquired an added dimension. It became a cry of the heart.

But what made me raise the question in the first place, and sent me to the record of the past to gather scraps that made the picture plausible? It was the precision with which the passage from *Utopia* spoke, as the theologians say, to my own condition at the time I was writing. On a meagre salary I was supporting a wife and three children under six years of age. I had taken no steps to ensure their care or welfare in case of my death or disability; and with no other secure way of providing for them in sight, I was about to undertake a writing job I thoroughly disliked in order to meet my obligation to those who were dear to me. It was this flash from my experience, my second record, that fused a couple of bits of information from the record of the past into an insight into More's dilemma and sent me back through the first record in quest of other bits that might confirm it.(49)

Hexter's own experience provided the key which opened the lock to reconstruction and comprehension. He had 'documentary evidence' from

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More for these points, but it was his own experience which asked the right questions.

The second problem he puts thus: 'What accounts for the extremely harsh and repressive character of so many of the institutions that More provided for Utopia, his ideal commonwealth?' (50) No prevailing explanation satisfied Hexter: he thought that many reflected the historian's ideological commitment rather than More's concerns. But while re-reading *Utopia*, a brief sentence referring to the human sin of pride caught his eye. He reworked the text with this sentence in the forefront of his mind. His conclusion begins,

Once we recognise that More's analysis of sixteenth-century society led him to the conclusion that pride was the source of the greater part of its ills, the pattern of the Utopian commonwealth becomes clear, consistent, and intelligible. Its fundamental structure is a great social instrument for the subjugation of pride. The pecuniary economy must be destroyed because money is the prime instrument through the use of which men seek to satisfy their yet insatiable pride. (51)

Why, Hexter asks, did he hit on this possible solution which has eluded other historians? He reminds us of the two components involved: the passage by More (first record), and his own mind (second record) - 'private, personal, individual to me, inaccessible to others, that made me perceive the passage as I did'. (52) His second record contained meditations upon Scripture, Luther, Calvin, and more recently a reading of Rheinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and an acceptance of much of their thought on the Christian doctrine of sin, especially the sin of pride. Again his own experience, Hexter testifies, illumined and explained the past:

We leave Hexter for a moment, though we will be constrained to return to him presently. At this juncture I only wished to illustrate the crucial use which an historian may make of his own experience. But now I wish to raise another related welter of issues. Talking about the historian using his own experiences to interpret the past inevitably leads us back to Troeltsch's 'principle of analogy'. Must we accept, modify, or reject this principle?

Certainly it would seem that some sort of analogy-principle is necessary. Just as it is difficult to imagine how we could say anything about God without using analogies in our experience, it is difficult to conceive how we could know anything about the past without referring to our present. (53) For all language and conceptuality would be totally meaningless unless it could 'strike a chord' within us. Communication is something that can only take place in a community of common experience. But how rigid, how prescriptive, does our analogy principle need to be?

It is at this point that the protestations of Pannenberg, Richardson, and others, have real force. For to bestow 'omnipotence' upon analogy is surely unhistorical in the extreme. Pannenberg must be on to a real truth here: his use of analogy binds us to accept that unique events must not be ruled out *a priori*. To respect the integrity

of the past is to allow it to be treated as a series of facts, both particular and unique. Analogy merely shows the similarities between unique events. Collingwood makes a similar point in criticising F. H. Bradley's view that the historian uses only his critically-interpreted present experience to interpret the past.(54) Later in his book Collingwood talks of the historian's 'picture' - it must be spatio-temporal, self-consistent, and most important - 'what we mean by asking whether an historical statement is true is whether it can be justified by an appeal to the evidence'.(55) Alan Richardson's most compelling positive argument is his plea for an account of the resurrection of Jesus which makes the best sense of the evidence, such as it is, rather than one governed by pre-conceived notions.(56) The historian must find out what happened and is not allowed to rule out anything in advance. His job is to interpret the evidence, not glibly to discount it.

But again we find the whole issue very finely balanced: the pendulum swings back. 'Analogy' cannot operate in a rigidly prescriptive way, but it must operate. As said earlier, without it we would be unable to understand anything at all. Van Harvey puts this point nicely: any appeal to the complete uniqueness of, say, the New Testament events, undercuts all historical argument. Such a claim is just beyond our comprehension. 'We simply do not know what would 'count for' an absolutely unique event'.(57) Pannenberg may be 'hoist by his own petard'. He says that analogy can only point to similar things in unique events, but what similar element can it point to in the resurrection? He must argue more from some sort of 'universal' concept of resurrection: if such a thing exists the historian may speak of it. One is tempted to re-phrase the issue as: if a unique event is *well enough* attested (how well enough?), should we then believe such reports? But even this will not do, for if an unparalleled unique event was well attested it would be beyond us precisely because it could strike no familiar note within us. It *may* have happened but whether it did or not would be beyond our grasp and comprehension. There is no way we could know one way or the other.

So we seem to adopt a somewhat ambivalent attitude to analogy. We need some doctrine of analogy, for without some correspondence between past and present experience it is impossible to understand and reconstruct the past. But analogy cannot dictate totally what we 'do' with evidence, which must be allowed its own independence. The way out of this dilemma is again illustrated in the work of J. H. Hexter. He makes two points relevant for us at this stage in our discussion.

(i) Given the fact that a historian sometimes solves a problem by recourse to his second record, how can he convince others of the truth of his solution? He cannot appeal solely to documentation, he must appeal to *their* second records. He does this with 'supercharged' language, the function of which is to create emotional impact and response.(58) He says that this use of language, designed to 'expand the consciousness' of the reader, is 'psychedelic' in nature(59) and also 'translational' - 'it aims to assist the reader to translate his experience from a familiar accepted context into a context strange and perhaps initially repugnant'.(60) This use of language does not just show history to be 'art' rather than 'science', it is an indispensable

means for communicating about the past alongside the more logical type of argument.(61) 'As a result of the impact of the translational and psychedelic language on their second record, readers indeed learn things about what happened in the past that they could not learn otherwise'.(62)

Immediately this account of historical writing seems to reverberate in other areas. It may provide, for instance, a helpful way of understanding the preacher's use of language, and so prove useful in working through a theology of preaching. The preacher aims to 'expand the consciousness' of his congregation by beginning where they are, and leading them to something new - continuous with but different from their existing experience. The normative example of this is in Jesus' own teaching by parable, which first operated in spheres well-known to his listeners (the sower's field, etc.) but then 'translated' into the world around and within them, offering new motivation and interpretation. With the possibility of a new interpretation of events comes, of course, the possibility of seeing that something else other than one had previously understood to have happened actually did happen. Hexter's point about 'psychedelic' language leads into his second point which we ought to consider.

(ii) He asks what is the criterion of credibility in historical accounts? Like Richardson he believes it to be the historian's job, quite simply, to give the most credible account of the evidence. But how does one judge that credibility? He gives an example of what he considers a frankly implausible explanation (a small boy blames his muddy pants on the devil!) and a credible account of the same event. He ruminates on why he believes one and not the other, putting it down to 'common sense'. He is not very obliging as regards unpacking the meaning of this phrase 'common sense', but it seems to mean something similar to 'critically interpreted present experience'. Broadly interpreted this recognises history as a 'field-encompassing field', and sees this to include the sciences and all branches of knowledge(63) - the whole of our modern totality(64) - the sum total of 'what we know, or are compelled to believe, as modern western beings'.(65) It is a phrase which resists the atomisation of truth, recognising that the historian is a scholar working in an atmosphere that must take into account the claims of other disciplines, for truth is one. This 'common sense' is not infallible, says Hexter, but it is all we have. And neither is common sense *closed*, a completed set of experiences.(66) He admits that the common sense of 'Everyman' in the USA in the 1970s (his place and time of writing) is not an entirely sound instrument for judging what it was like to have been Luther at Worms, or Paul on the Damascus Road, nor (he says) can common sense alone render credible here and now what these men experienced there and then. But 1970s common sense must neither be abandoned nor transcended, instead it should be transformed. Historians

can take their readers with them, over the path they went, to where they got to. After all they started their own journey, long ago perhaps, with only the equipment of here-and-now common sense. And if they were worth their salt, without ever wholly abandoning that common sense they extended and

intensified it, till they did begin to attain some intimation of what it was like to have been Luther at Worms or Paul on the Damascus Road. The certification that they had attained such an intimation was the credibility of what they said and wrote not only to those who followed after them along the path of understanding they discovered but also to those who had hewn out not quite identical paths themselves. By remaining in close contact with his own second record as he writes, a historian stands a chance of carrying his readers, their common sense transformed but not excised, with him to where he has been in the past, and of enlarging their understanding so that they can grasp what he has understood. (67)

Here then we see how our consciousness can be extended and expanded. By having only the merest inkling of a past event, or by having none and instead having read a historian with whom we do have something in common and who in turn has established a link with some past event (using the historian as the 'middle-man' between ourselves and the past), we can hope to have our 'present experience' transformed to take it in and comprehend it. This reminds us of the so-called hermeneutical circle. We cannot understand a love poem without some previous understanding of love, but the text then deepens and enriches our comprehension of the theme. And so also our understanding of previous historical events may be deepened as our 'common sense' is transformed. Similarly, our understanding of the possible may come to be enlarged.

This sheds some light on our ambivalent attitude to 'analogy', but what does it tell us about the *possibility* of events? We have, it will be observed, had to move the discussion away from the possibility of events pure and simple, to our possibility of understanding them and therefore of being able to assert them coherently. It may well be that we will have to put a question mark against some evidence because there is nothing in our experience which can make sense of it; or we may have to seek a 'rationalisation' of the evidence that does not make sense. Some echo in our experience is essential for us to grasp an event. But, as Hexter shows, that does not immediately limit the past to what our experience contains. What might this enable us to say, for example, about the resurrection of Jesus? It does not enable us to speak *easily* of it, to be sure. Hexter's two factors both must be considered, held in balance. The likelihood, therefore, of an historian with a commitment to Christian faith 'expanding our consciousness' with 'psychedelic' language about the first Easter events must be weighed against the historian's commitment to the unity of truth - but even so, when we understand the way in which historical persuasion operates it may make us less pessimistic about the problem than we otherwise would be. Perhaps it is still virtually impossible to claim certain things, *qua* historian, about the Easter event - such as a 'full' bodily resurrection; but maybe other claims seem less likely to dislocate the unity of truth. (68) The assumption can be made now that we are able to speak of God's action in history in a way that has some analogy with our experience: if we experience God at work in us, then we posit his analogous action in others, though this not in a proscriptive way. Hence one man or woman's second record may speak to another's.



Let us take stock for the last time. (i) History takes as its subject all past events; (ii) the historian must seek immanent causes; (iii) God must not be substituted for an immanent cause; (iv) the historian uses his present experience in reconstructing and comprehending the past; (v) some analogy must be affirmed in order for any sense to be made at all; (vi) the evidence must be accounted for adequately; (vii) while analogy must be affirmed, there is a circular motion in which our arbitrating 'experience' or 'common sense' can be transformed and expanded.

Point (iv) above is crucial. For a historian who 'has' God as an element in his experience (if the reader will excuse a rather clumsy phrase) it may be legitimate for him to use this factor in interpreting events, and discussing them with other historians, *provided* that all other conditions are met. Every other historian uses all his 'experience', and to ask a Christian historian to try to ignore part of his 'second record' would be wrong. Hexter uses his commitment to the Christian doctrine of sin in order to interpret a document of the past. As long as the principle of critically-interpreted present experience arbitrating in historical study is accepted (and it seems to be universally so), it is difficult to see how a Christian who feels God at work in his life and in the life of the Christian community, will be able to refuse to consider God as an element in history. However, the other theses on method arrived at above put severe constraints upon such recourse. .

It might be asked: in what way does this position differ from the Hard Perspectivists criticised earlier? It does so in significant ways, not least in the greater tentativeness of the approach. The Hard Perspectivists try to make experience do too much, and would not have felt bound by theses (ii) and (iii). Neither did those writers see sufficient ambiguities in historical interpretation; they were too confident of their success in the arbitration of perspectives. We are speaking here of the way in which different events are open to different types of description - that is, that amongst other possible descriptions an event might be described as an act of God: it is only one description and offered cautiously. (69) Hard Perspectivism can easily collapse into a supernaturalism which jettisons history instead of respecting it. But with the Hard Perspectivists, we recognise presuppositions, and insist on the integrity of the evidence. The Soft Perspectivists leave themselves open to the charge of reading meaning into an event, whereas we wish to insist on the meaning belonging to events; Pannenberg and Harvey must be held in creative tension here! We also reject that commitment is a prerequisite for understanding, while it is in itself no bar to it; some commitment to something is inevitable. One must be committed to something and yet honest and 'objective' enough to take one's commitment into account in making judgements.

The discussion which has been sustained above has several possible implications. It was noted that Hexter's understanding of historiography may have light to shed on a theory of communication which might be particularly helpful for theologians and for preachers. But the principal purpose of this paper was to attempt a conception of historical understanding and writing which left some room for the

Christian, while retaining historical integrity, to bring to bear the full resources of his faith and in particular his faith in a God who is active in human affairs upon his subject. Similarly, such an attempt also enables the theologian to make reference to the *Magnalia Dei* without suspending normal rational thought. Certainly, the position achieved will not satisfy all Christians; the possibility of reference to God is too hedged in by other constraints, too restricted by other considerations, to be acclaimed by some. Nevertheless, it is put forward in the hope that it does retain a belief in the unity of truth, and also retains academic integrity alongside the compulsions of faith.

It may be argued by some, that while I have tacitly accepted the sort of opinions expressed in the quotations with which I began this paper, I have in fact ended up very much at variance with those writers. But in fact such an impression is misleading. Take Carr: he sees something in history which he calls 'progress'. It is this 'sense of direction', he argues, which alone enables us to order and interpret the events of the past. 'History properly so-called can be written only by those who find and accept a sense of direction in history itself'.<sup>(70)</sup> This 'sense of direction' is, though, no more objective or empirically observable than God himself. Yet Carr finds it impossible to write about history without believing something about history, and implicitly, about himself too. He believes in a force, or perhaps more accurately, a movement or direction which cannot be directly observed, but which unless it is grasped will deny true historical understanding. Yet such a belief does not, presumably, give Carr the licence to treat evidence in peculiar ways, nor to abrogate accepted historical methods. Perhaps he is being inconsistent to rule out historians' talking about God - he does so because God does not (he thinks!) enter into his experience. But, and perhaps this is more important, like Harvey and Elton and others, the God whom he really rules out is the 'joker in the pack' God, who is used as a substitute for immanent causes. Our task is to use God as an historical referent without such a short-circuit in normal causal explanation. How this may be done has been hinted at earlier in this paper, when we spoke of understanding God's actions as *within* rather than *in between* historical events, using language reminiscent of Bultmann but implying rather more positive content. The full articulation of this understanding does not lie within the scope of this paper, but its possibility is enhanced by it.<sup>(71)</sup>

## NOTES

- 1 G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, Fontana, 1969, p.57.
- 2 E. H. Carr, *What is History?*, Penguin 1961, pp.74f.
- 3 Carr, op.cit., p.75; Colin Brown, 'History and the Believer', in Brown (ed.), *History, Criticism and Faith*, IVP 1976, pp.165ff; cf also Mary Hesse's article in C. F. D. Moule (ed.), *Miracles*, Mowbray 1965.
- 4 On this point the work of Troeltsch is especially important. A concise statement of his position may be gained from a reading of his article entitled 'Historiography' in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, T & T Clark 1913.
- 5 The phrase is Alan Richardson's: *History, Sacred and Profane*, SCM 1964, ch.4.
- 6 *Epistle to the Romans*, OUP 1968, pp.29f.

- 7 *Church Dogmatics*, III, 1. T & T Clark 1958, pp.78f.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.83.
- 9 *Salvation in History*, SCM 1967, is the full statement of his position.
- 10 This is Richardson, *op.cit.*, commenting on Brunner (p.134).
- 11 Van Harvey suggests that Barth wants all the advantages of history with none of its risks: *The Historian and the Believer*, SCM 1967, p.158.
- 12 *Ibid.*, pp.203ff.
- 13 See the discussion of 'fact and interpretation' below. Also: John Knox, *Christ the Lord*, 1945, pp.67f; Harvey, *op.cit.*, p.218.
- 14 Alan Richardson, *Christian Apologetics*, SCM 1947, p.107; Harvey, *op.cit.*, pp.209ff. Harvey asks whether it is also sinful to try to love like God.
- 15 Cullman, *op.cit.*, p.67.
- 16 'Scientific history' is commonly associated with Ranke, and his attempt to describe events 'as they really were', with no layer of interpretation. In removing much of the ambiguity from history, perspectivists approximate to this position.
- 17 *Christian Apologetics*, pp.105,147.
- 18 *History, Sacred and Profane*, ch.8.
- 19 Harvey, *op.cit.*, pp.113-118; cf ch.II pt iv.
- 20 e.g. Richardson, *History, Sacred and Profane*, p.203.
- 21 *op.cit.*, p.255ff.
- 22 cp Herbert Butterfield, 'Historical Scholarship and its Relation to Life', in *Christianity and History*, Bell 1950, p.23.
- 23 Harvey, *op.cit.*, p.221.
- 24 Ian T. Ramsey, *Models for Divine Activity*, SCM 1973, p.4, et al.
- 25 Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology*, Vol I, SCM 1970, pp.64f.
- 26 A. Galloway, *Pannenberg*, Allen & Unwin 1973, p.38.
- 27 John B. Cobb Jr's article (in *Theology as History*, SCM 1976, eds. James M. Robinson and John B. Cobb Jr) brings out this fundamental rift in its discussion of the reactions to Pannenberg.
- 28 Troeltsch, *op.cit.*, p.719; R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, OUP 1948, pp.209,302, et al; Carr, *op.cit.*, pp.26,33,55,86 et al; John Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologising*, SCM 1960, pp.59ff, et al; John Macquarrie, *Existentialism*, Penguin 1973, pp.221ff; Marc Bloch, *The Craft of the Historian*, MUP 1954, p.194 et al.
- 29 *Theology as History*, ch.3 (see also ch.6).
- 30 *Ibid.*, chs 4 & 6.
- 31 Macquarrie, *The Scope of Demythologising*, p.72. See the quotation from E. H. Carr at the head of this paper.
- 32 e.g. E. Harris Harbison, 'The Marks of a Christian Historian' in C. T. McIntire (ed.), *God, History and Historians*, OUP 1977, pp.334f; Collingswood, *op.cit.*, pp.210-17; Carr, *op.cit.*, p.24; E. W. Ives, *God in History*, Lion 1979, p.57. G. R. Elton says: 'In truth, historians like other people tend to judge their world from their own experiences and practice', *op.cit.* p.25. He says elsewhere that the historian's presuppositions are a 'fact of life'. 'They cannot be eliminated, nor should they be' (p.134f). They should be neither underestimated nor overestimated - they are much less important than intellect. In some sense though, each historian begins not in the past, but in his own present: George Florovsky, 'The Predicament of the Christian Historian' in McIntire (ed.), pp.410,412.

- 33 Butterfield, *op.cit.*, p.17. This point again wins wide acceptance. Cf J. H. Hexter, *The History Primer*, Penguin 1972, pp.278ff. A fine statement of the need for historical empathy is offered by Antonia Fraser in an interview published in the *Observer* magazine, 23-9-79, p.47. Collingwood's theory of re-enactment of events by historians underlines the use of imagination: *op.cit.*, pp.282ff, though Patrick Gardiner offers a cogent critique of this concept in his *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, OUP 1952, pp.28ff,115ff. Carr talks of the historian's need 'of imaginative understanding of the minds of the people with whom he is dealing' (*op.cit.*,p.24). Imagination is part of the 'present' that is brought to bear on the past. It is used not only for understanding the past but also for reconstructing it, or as Hexter says 'predicting the past' (*op.cit.*, pp.50ff). (Cf Leon Goldstein, 'Collingwood on the Constitution of the Historical Past', in *Critical Essays on the Philosophy of R. G. Collingwood*, OUP 1972). Thus interpretation becomes a 'subjective', or rather, imaginative tool in the historian's task.
- 34 *op.cit.*, p.19.
- 35 cp Elton, *op.cit.*, p.80; Ives, *op.cit.*, p.29; Gardiner, *op.cit.*, p.80.
- 36 Butterfield, *op.cit.*, p.23. 37 *Ibid.*, p.24.
- 38 H. I. Marrou, 'History and the Historian are Inseparable', in McIntire (ed.), p.392.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p.393. 40 *Op.cit.*, p.51.
- 41 *Ibid.*, pp.26f - nb here his words *àin principes!*
- 42 *Ibid.*, p.28. 43 *Ibid.*, p.30.
- 44 Gardiner, *op.cit.*, pp.77-79.
- 45 Theologians in general now seem much less happy with defining a miracle in terms of its inexplicability, and will often talk of its sign-like character for example. A legion of references may be given in support of this statement, but as its significance here is of tangential kind, further justification and elaboration of the position must be put off.
- 46 *The History Primer*, p.125 (esp. the second footnote here).
- 47 *Ibid.*, pp.118f. 48 *Ibid.*, p.119.
- 49 *Ibid.*, pp.126f. 50 *Ibid.*, p.119.
- 51 *Ibid.*, p.129. 52 *Ibid.*, p.130.
- 53 This is the crux of Nineham's argument for complete cultural relativism in his *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, MacMillan 1976. The tenor of Hexter's thought would perhaps be conducive to John Barton, who replies very ably to Nineham in 'Reflections on Cultural Relativism' in *Theology*, March and May 1979.
- 54 Collingwood, *op.cit.*, p.139. 55 *Ibid.*, p.246.
- 56 *History, Sacred and Profane*, pp.195ff.
- 57 For Harvey, it is 'impossible to isolate data, to employ warrants, to offer a rebuttal, or to attach any degree of probability to a claim ... The problem no longer has to do with the truth of the claim but with its meaning. It is not about any particular step in the argument but whether one could identify what a step would be' (*op.cit.*, p.229).
- 58 Hexter, *op.cit.*, p.136. 59 *Ibid.*, p.139.
- 60 *Ibid.*, pp.137f. 61 *Ibid.*, pp.134ff.
- 62 *Ibid.*, p.141; cp Colin Brown, 'History and the Believer', p.184.
- 63 Harvey, *op.cit.*, pp.98f; cp Ives, *op.cit.*, p.11.

- 64 Dennis Nineham, *The Use and Abuse of the Bible*, pp.14ff,106f.  
 65 Ibid., p.237.  
 66 cp Collingwood, op.cit., p.139.  
 67 Hexter, op.cit., pp.361f.  
 68 I should make clear that I would want to argue for 'bodily resurrection', but by the phrase '"full" bodily resurrection' I am here referring particularly to theories which construe the resurrection as an act of resuscitation, so that exactly the same body comes out of the tomb as went into it. While much popular piety assumes this, such a position has not in fact been taught by the church through the centuries. In many respects the old concept of 'spontaneous combustion' is more helpful. It seems to me that the resurrection must be seen in analogy with the act of creation itself: so that Jesus dies into nothingness to be re-created in resurrection. Such speculation is theologically more sound, but historically more problematic. What can count for evidence for such a unique happening? Theologically, resurrection as re-creation is better because it tallies well with Paul's language about 'transformation': the seed which is buried, and rots, and from which a new plant grows. The new comes from the old, but the continuity between new and old is complete. This is not the place for an essay on resurrection. Also worthy of consideration here might be Pannenberg's account of 'non-hallucinatory visions': *Jesus - God and Man*, SCM 1968, pp.93ff.
- 69 Within the literature on the philosophy of action it is universally appreciated that actions may be described from different perspectives. Elizabeth Anscombe (*Intention*, Blackwell 1957) gives some telling examples in her work. A readily to hand example for our purpose may be the Exodus. At one level, we see the man Moses leading the Hebrew slaves from oppression; on another, we see God acting to save the people: one action, two descriptions - which are not mutually exclusive but on the contrary complement one another.
- 70 Carr, op.cit., p.132, cp p.121.  
 71 This larger task was one I began in my D.Phil. thesis 'Can God act in history?' This paper originated in work completed towards a chapter in that larger work, which was submitted to the University of Oxford in 1984.

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#### APOLOGY

The Baptist Historical Society apologises to subscribers for the late appearance of this April issue and also of the Index to Volume XXXI. The camera-ready copy for these was despatched to the printers in good time by registered post but failed to arrive. It was six weeks before the Post Office admitted to losing it. The editors particularly regret the delay in supplying the Index to those waiting to have the previous volume bound.