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A table of contents for *Indian Journal of Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ijt_01.php

M. Mundadan & J. Thanniyil, "History as Revelation," Indian Journal of Theology 21.1-2 (Jan.-June 1972): 52-70.

# History as Revelation

M. MUNDADAN and J. THANNIYIL

Christianity, people claim, is unique in its relation to history. Perhaps Reinold Niebuhr has put this idea strongly in a few statements. On the one hand, he asserts that 'the Christian faith is centred upon one who was born in a manger and who died upon the Cross; the Christian faith begins with, and is founded upon, the affirmation that the life, death and resurrection of Christ represent an event in history, in and through which a disclosure of the whole meaning of history occurs'. On the other hand, though he holds that 'the centre, source and fulfilment of history lies beyond history', he insists that 'the Incarnation in which is involved the whole character of Christian religion, declares that an event in history can be of such a character as to reveal the character of history itself; without such a revelation the character of history cannot be known, nor can we understand the meaning of life and history without it'.[1]

These statements of Niebuhr seem to convey two ideas: first, Christianity is a historical religion and is centred on a historical event, or a series of historical events; secondly, history gets its full meaning from a Christian perspective, when it sees history originating from, and culminating in, God, who communicates himself to man in and through time. History is seen here as a self-communication of God in time and space. Because of God's revelatory action, history assumes a similar nature. It is precisely this idea we are trying to expatiate upon in this paper; that is, how, and how far, is history revelation? Our attempt presupposes some understanding of history and revelation.

## What is History?

History has been variously understood down the ages. The eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalistic and 'scientific' approach to reality produced what is called a 'positivist' conception of history. It affirmed that the historian's task was to produce 'facts' as such and to establish their rather external interconnection. The real interpretation of history was relegated to other sciences, like theology, philosophy and social science.[2]

[1] Niebuhr, R., *Beyond Tragedy*, New York, 1937, p. x; quoted in Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane*, London, 1964.

[2] See Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

But the Romantic influence of the nineteenth century slowly asserted itself and a more wholesome outlook on history came to prevail, at least in the twentieth century. As a result, today history in its full sense could never be concerned with facts alone; it has to be interpretation too.[3] People became sceptical about the possibility of a purely positivistic history. Every age (even historians, like Ranke, who had a reputation for their absolute detachment)[4] has its own 'myth' or interpretation to give to history. The so-called positivist historian who is concerned only with bare facts without any interpretation, hardly ever exists; but it is probable, that beneath the academic interest, there often lurks a deep concern for the present which redeems historical research from irrelevance and triviality. In the last analysis it would generally be conceded that nothing can be *historisch* without being in some way *geschichtlich*; no facts can be 'mere facts', and every fact that can be discovered is worth discovering, because all history is somehow significant.[5]

The trend of contemporary thinking about history seems to be against making a distinction between 'facts' and 'faith', or between history and interpretation. It appears to be widely accepted that there are no such things as 'bare facts', and that history is, from first to last, interpretation. Benedetto Croce and Collingwood have sponsored such a view.[6] It may be objected that they are harbouring illicit and idealistic notions. But Carl Becker[7] cannot be accused of cherishing any ulterior ambitions as a philosopher. He was pre-eminently the historian for whom history was 'just history' and nothing else. He is highly critical of the generally accepted view that facts are not one thing and interpretation another.

What we want to emphasize is that history is to a large extent interpretation, interpretation from specific vantage points. It is these vantage points (the 'myth' of an age, or a group, or an individual) which give a specific character to the history of an age, distinguishing it from that of another, which tell one type of history from another. One such vantage point is the religious perspective. It gives rise to a unique form of history, the religious history which may be broadly defined as the interpretation of historical facts in the light of man's relationship with God. It is the oldest and the newest of its kind. In every age can be observed man's inner urge to discover the display of a superhuman power in the daily occurrence as well as the rare incidents. This urge helped to formulate the structure and system of a total

[3] See Casserley, J. V. L., *Toward a Theology of History*, New York, 1965, p. 3.

[4] Richardson, p. 172 ff.

[5] Cf. Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 155. *Historisch* means merely historical; *Geschichtlich* is significantly historical.

[6] Collingwood, R. G., *The Idea of History*, Oxford, 1946, especially pp. 282–315.

[7] Cf. Becker, Carl, 'Detachment and Writing of History' in *The Atlantic Monthly*, p. 106, October 1910.

religious history. This way, history or events are looked upon as a communication of God to man and man's response to God, as the rendezvous of 'two self-gifts, with all the struggle between good and evil, morality and immorality, and so on'. History, in this sense, is what happens between God and man, as the Jewish theologian, Martin Buber, once said.[8] It is man's self-understanding before God, if at all history is man's own life of self-understanding.[9]

## What is Revelation?

Almost all religious people have entertained some idea about revelation. But the understanding of revelation differs in different religions. We may group all the different views broadly under two classes. According to the first, 'revelation is the inspiration given to holy men to reveal supernatural truths through infallible oracles. Here revelation is the manifestation of some truths'.[10] As an example, one might adduce the primitive Greek religion. The ancient Greeks maintained revelation as the divine prediction through oracles. The Indian concept also does not appear to be much different. The *Sruti* is the uncreated word of God that is communicated to mankind through the enlightened mind of the *Rishis*. But this was never the concept of revelation in Christianity, although the Christian understanding was to some extent influenced by this idea till about the middle of this century.

The other class subscribes to the view that revelation is the intervention of God in history to communicate Himself to man through words and actions.[11] This is exactly the Christian concept of revelation at least according to modern theology. The Protestant theologian Barr writes: 'Revelation through history is the conventional wisdom of modern theology. Historians of theology in a future age will look back on the mid-twentieth century, and call it the revelation-in-history period'.[12]

This point needs further clarification. We should remember that revealing acts do not constitute full revelation. To be revelation these acts are to be interpreted by the human mind, aided by the spirit of God, as divine revelation. When man comes to know what the events mean, then it is history. When the meaning of these events is interpreted as a communicated relation between God and man it is revelation. In other words, as mere events alone do not constitute history, they also do not

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[8] See Dimont, Max I., 'Jews, God and History' in *New American Library*, 1962, p. 21.

[9] See Collingwood, *op. cit.*, p. 314.

[10] See Casserley, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 3.

[12] Barr, J., '*Revelation Through History in OT and in Modern Theology*' in New Theology No. I, (ed.) Martin E. Marty, N.Y. 1964, pp. 61–62. This existential and personalistic idea of revelation gained greater momentum with Vatican II which recast the ancient definition of revelation.

become revelation by themselves. For revelation presupposes the acceptance of the same by man. That is why Casserley writes: 'If there is any stage in the communication in which we have mere events without interpretation, it is merely a conjectured stage in which revelation is held to be revelation, before it has in fact revealed anything.... What is experience, before anyone has experienced it?'[13] Dr. Temple adds: 'The principle of revelation is the co-incidence of event and interpretation. Before we come to appreciate the event, though revelatory in its own character, it is not yet fully revelation. Even if no one had recognized Christ, the incarnation would have occurred, but it would have failed to effect a revelation of God'.[14]

### History as Revelation: Two Mentalities

The consideration of history as revelation is very much dependent upon how one understands history and revelation. If revelation is accepted merely as manifestation of truth without any regard for historical events, history can hardly be thought of as revelation. But, if revelation happens in and through historical events, history easily becomes revelation; historical events are revelatory events. Even more important is the way in which history is conceived. There have been various approaches to history, in successive ages and among different peoples. Two typically opposite tendencies are that of the classical Greeks and that of the Hebrews;[15] these two approaches in a way set patterns for later approaches as well. One type of approach to history makes it difficult to consider history as revelation; while another type renders such a consideration quite plausible. The Christian attitude to history in the ancient period, from Iraeneus to Augustine, and up till the early Middle Ages, follows in general the biblical or Hebrew approach. The High Middle Ages, influenced as it was to a large extent by the Greek world view, show symptoms of a shift towards the classical Greek attitude to history. In the hey-day of Rationalism and 'Scienticism' (from the eighteenth to the early twentieth century) it was the fashion to look up to the Greeks (especially Thucydides) as the inventors of the science of history.

What the classical rationalists liked about Thucydides was that he shunned supernatural explanation, at least on the surface of his mind though perhaps not at a deeper level. Thucydides is the most rational of all Greek historians. Beneath his 'scientific' attitude lie the philosophical presuppositions of classical naturalism, that the changeless is the real, that reason is able to detect the abiding patterns amidst the vicissitudes of

[13] Casserley, *op. cit.*, p. 5.
[14] *Ibid.*, p. 7.
[15] Cf. Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 54–82. The whole chapter, entitled 'The two world systems', discusses, compares and contrasts the Greek and Hebrew view of History.

history, that the circle is the perfect form of point of origin. It is St. Augustine who dealt a hammer-blow to this view. The rationalists despised the Hebrews because they wrote history unashamedly in terms of their encounter with the will of God in time ('mere theocratic history and myth', as Collingwood states). In our day there is a shift back to a certain appreciation of the Hebrew way of understanding history.

This static view of the Greeks prevented them from regarding history as a source of real knowledge. The Hebrews constantly held that history was the *locus* of all our knowledge, both of God and of man, and that in nature only the 'whisper' of truth concerning our existence was to be heard (Job 26:14). The classical view never developed beyond the identification of man with nature; the historical process was only the human counterpart of the periodic rotation of the heavens or seasons; the repetitive patterns will go on for ever, thus making a 'scientific' view of history possible. This pattern is regulated by an ineluctable nemesis (the law of compensation which continually restores the balance of things).[16] But 'the Hebrews, unique among the ancient peoples, were aware of themselves having had a beginning as a nation and as having a historical destiny which was being fulfilled in successive stages'. In ancient Israel historical-mindedness was the result of the prophetic awareness of the inevitable accomplishment of the divine purpose in history. This did not depend upon, or was not measurable by, any secular standards of progress (democracy, literacy, etc.). The belief in divine purpose makes it impossible for them to accept the unhistorical, the naturalistic attitude of the other ancient peoples. The Greeks are rational. Rationalism in all its forms is fundamentally unhistorical. It looks at history not as the *locus* of insights into our own existential condition, but as something secondary, a means of corroborating or illustrating generalizations about human nature which have been derived from other sources (e.g. social sciences and psychology).

In our subsequent analysis of the Old Testament and New Testament ideas of history, of the Fathers and of medieval and modern writers, these two radically opposite approaches to history, based as they are on two opposite world systems, have to be borne in mind. It may be said that in general the classical Greek view is closed to the question whether history is revelatory, but the Hebrew view is wide open to it.

### History as Revelation in the Old Testament

It seems, as already mentioned above, that the Hebrews were the first people to replace a cyclic concept of time with a linear concept. This was possible for them because they recognized

[16] It was Heredotus who conceived this theory of balancing between the forces of nature and of man.

God in and through history. They came to know from the experience of certain historical events that history has a beginning from God, and that it tends towards a goal determined by God. With his promise or blessing God gets the movement under way, supervises it, and eventually intervenes when he finds it necessary. This movement which animates the cosmos is linear and irreversible. Outside Israel we do not find a firmly established idea of a continuous succession of temporal events, which embrace at once the past, the present and the future and which unfolds in the direction of a goal.

For the biblical man history is the terrain or *locus* of God's self-disclosure. It consists of a series of what Richardson would prefer to call 'disclosure-situations', disclosures of God's designs for Israel.[17] The function of history, therefore, is to unfold gradually the plan of God. Consequently the biblical man always looks forward to its ultimate realization in history itself. The history of Israel may therefore be called a 'revelatory history'. It reveals by actualizing the salvific promises of God. The history of Israel is thus salvation-history. 'History becomes salvation-history not only in the sense of a series of moments of revelation but in the far deeper and more decisive sense that history itself is the realization of salvation and its future, that history itself is a theophany.'[18] Historical events manifest the working of God's salvific designs. 'They are signs referring to a meaning which transcends them, a meaning which it unveils but hides, concerning which it speaks and yet is silent.'[19] Thus the Israelitic history took meaning from this knowledge of God's action in history. History for them is a succession of meaningful moments or *kairoi* chosen by God, and it actualizes and reveals his salvific plan.

For Israel this revealing history does not coincide with universal history. It is only a part of it. For revelation progresses little by little, in quantity and quality, through centuries as God intervenes. Still, Israel's history was of profound significance for universal history, because God's revelation to Israel through her history was the light which was some day to illumine the history of all nations, in every age.

Biblical history is a process or actualization from promise to fulfilment. This process is set in motion with the promise and blessing given to Abraham: 'Go from your country and from your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make you a great nation; and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who curses you I will curse; and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves' (Gen. 12:1–3).

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[17] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 224.
[18] Monden, L., *Faith: Can man still believe?* New York, 1970, p. 95.
[19] *Ibid.*, p. 89.

It was their subsequent history that gradually revealed to the people of Israel what this promise meant. The meaning of this promise given to Abraham was fully understood by Israel only after the Exodus and Covenant. The Covenant gave meaning to the Exodus itself and constituted Israel as the people of God (Deut. 7:6; 26:17–19), and the entry into the promised land was the culmination of what God had begun in Egypt and the accomplishment of the promise to Abraham. It was history, therefore, that revealed the meaning of the promise by actualizing it. Israel confessed this belief in her credal statements (Deut. 26:5–9; 6:20–24; Josh. 24:2–13), and in her hymns (Pss. 78, 105, 107, 114, 136).

Israel did not discover God through a process of metaphysical reflexion, but through the actions of God in their history. It is the historical experience of Israel that revealed to them the characteristics of God—His righteousness demanding the same from men; His mercy and love, delivering those who put their trust in him; His justice, punishing those who disobeyed him.[20] The deliverance from Egypt and the establishment of Israel in the land of Canaan showed them that God is the master of history and peoples; the miracles of Exodus proved that he can mobilize nature according to his will. When the third plague fell upon Egypt, the magicians said: 'The finger of God is here' (cf. Exod. 8:19).

Thus all the characteristic biblical beliefs about God's nature and his salvific plan are distillations from Israel's historical experiences. Perhaps nothing miraculous happened—which we would today explain away as natural phenomena. But for Israel what happened was miraculous, a disclosure of the divine purpose and an act of divine redemption in the midst of real secular history, so that Israel could say 'this is Yahweh's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes' (Ps. 115:23).[21]

Even the idea that God created the world was an inference from history. It was not an axiom of the Old Testament, but it was a conclusion drawn from the historical experience of Israel. It was history that manifested to them that God was their creator. God's mighty and merciful deliverance of the people from Egypt, the Covenant he made with his people at Sinai, the many victories that he gained over the enemies in the land of Canaan—all these infallibly demonstrated to Israel that YHW is the Lord of nature and history. Although these events, as part of world history, might be quite insignificant, yet through them Israel experienced YHW's unlimited power over the cosmos. This historical realization of YHW's sovereignty over everything is well expressed in Deutero-Isaiah (cf. Isa. chs. 40–45). All this so convincingly and strongly proved to Israel that YHW is the creator of all. The making of the Covenant was the *Kairos* when

[20] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 223.
[21] *Ibid.*, p. 224.

Israel understood fully the meaning of their existence and their role in the world. It made known to them that they are the chosen people of God, a holy nation, a kingdom of priests (cf. Exod. 19:5–6).

The periods of the Judges and the Kings were seen and interpreted by the historians of Israel as part of the actualization of God's promises. The promise of making them into a big nation was realized under the Kings David and Solomon. The Jahwist, Elohist, Deuteronomic and priestly histories are the interpretations of history in the light of new events.

As history progressed, it unfolded more and more clearly the meaning of the plan of God for man. The Exile was a decisive disclosure-situation for Israel. Although the experience of Israel in exile was a bitter one, slowly they came to realize that in it God was working for their good. The Exile was interpreted as the consequence of their breaking the Covenant with YHW. It was a reminder to them that disobedience to YHW will be met with destruction. The collapse of the nation brought about an intense awareness of the uniqueness of Israel's calling. They understood that they were called to be a worshipping community, a holy people separated from the rest of the nations. This exilic experience spoke to them that the promise given to their forefathers was not to be understood in a material sense but in a spiritual sense. The contact with other nations during exile also awakened a new world-consciousness in them. They realized that they must look beyond their own circumscribed community to the whole civilized world if they should behold the glory and majesty of YHW's purpose in history.[22]

For history to become revelation, the events of history need to be interpreted. For the language of history is the language of models, of signs, which needs explanations. The deliverance from Egypt would no doubt be nothing more than a migration of people without Moses' interpretation of it (cf. Exod. 14:31; 3:7–8). Prophets were the qualified witnesses and interpreters of Israel's history. They pondered over the events of history and discovered new dimensions. They could read the signs of the times. The destruction of the Monarchy and the exile were interpreted as signs of God's displeasure with his people (cf. Jeremiah and Ezekiel). They recalled to the people the salvific intention of God which remained concealed in their history. The return of the exiles and the saving of the remnant were interpreted as the sign of an eschatological hope for Israel. The notion of the remnant itself was the fruit of Israel's meditation on her history. For, all through her history Israel saw that a remnant was spared (during the bondage in Egypt, sojourn in the desert, wars of conquest, exile). The eschatological vision was possible because Israel knew its God as a living God, who

[22] Anderson, B. W., *Understanding the O.T.*, New Jersey, 1966, pp. 395–396.

in his holiness does not abandon the world, but goes on working in history. This hope of a future was again a disclosure of history. And eschatology in its turn gave the history of Israel and that of the world a goal, a perspective.

The Psalmist recalls God's deeds in the history of Israel and thanks him for having manifested his power and saving will through them. He sees all those events as the fulfilment of the salvific promise to Abraham his servant (Ps. 105:42; cf. also the whole of that Psalm and Ps. 106). Psalms 136 and 138 praise the love and faithfulness of YHW, which are manifested through his actions in history. The Psalmist referring to the wondrous deeds of YHW sings: 'They shall pour forth the fame of thy abundant goodness, and shall sing aloud of thy righteousness' (Ps. 145:7).

According to the Book of Daniel the various stages of the world's history become stages in the operation of God's purposes, so that these world stages (past, present, future) themselves become prophetic of a future era, since all are reflected in the eyes of God 'who controls all times and seasons' (Dan. 2:21). By this double vision, at once in time and transcending time, the author reveals the prophetic significance of history.

In short, it may be said that the Old Testament consists essentially of a series of reappraisals of Israel's history in the light of new experiences. The events of her history are not isolated, single events, but they constitute a unity. Each historical event sheds light on the past which necessitates, then, a reappraisal of the past in the light of the new experience. Thus we have a 'new history' of the former prophets, and again a 'new history' of the Deuteronomic school and afterwards that of the priestly circles. For, new historical developments produced new insights into the relationship of God and man. The most profound of the many re-interpretations of Israel's history is the one that is given to us by the prophets of Exile. A new vision of history was gained in the light of the destruction of the Monarchy and the consequent exile. And the unknown prophet of the return (Deutero-Isaiah) supplies this in its most profound form. Israel's history revealed to him that the disobedient nation could be reborn only by a new divine act of creation-redemption.[23]

### The New Testament Approach to History

History bears within itself the divine promise and brings it to fulfilment.[24] The promise of the Messiah was ever present in the history of the chosen people; their history lived in and from this expectation. But the character of the messianic hope was not evident; it is again history which unfolds it. The historical event of incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ revealed what this messianic expectation meant. It gave the

[23] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 222.
[24] Bonhoeffer, D., *Christ the Centre*, New York, 1966, p. 63.

ultimate meaning to the salvific history, which started with creation. The Christ-event is the mid-point of the long salvific process. It is the central event of history which illumined all other events of the past and sent its rays to the future. It revealed that the election, covenant and the prophetic hope of a saviour were fulfilled in the midst of a secular history. The mysteries of Christ were *kairoi* which effected and manifested God's salvific plan. In the very fact of Jesus' appearance and, above all, in his works the Kingdom of God was ushered in.[25]

The disciples were unable to give a clear description of Jesus in the beginning. They saw miracles and signs, but they did not clearly decipher the message given to them. It was a disturbing experience for them. But the Easter event shed light on the words and actions of Jesus and clarified their vision of him. Pentecost was the decisive moment of disclosure. In this light, all the events of Jesus' life received the full meaning. It was the moment of true significance for those who had listened to it in faith.[26] It may be called the 'shock moment' of Pentecostal experience. All the events which had taken place among them, to which they had been eye-witnesses from the beginning, suddenly ripened into the fullest meaning, into an overwhelming 'Christian revelation'.[27] Illumined by the Holy Spirit the disciples began their mission of announcing the Good News.

The Pentecostal experience made the first Christians aware that they had been constituted the congregation (the *Kahal*) of the 'New Israel'. Recognition of this status made the disciples know that the last days foretold by the prophets had actually become a reality, that they had been assisting at the consummation of Israel's religious history. This event also opened their minds to the momentous revelation of Christ's divinity and of the personality of the Holy Spirit. Since they realized that the Spirit had been sent by the risen Christ, they knew that Jesus himself had taken his seat at God's right hand; i.e., he is the Son of God. They realized that the Spirit whom they knew from the Old Testament was a divine person.

History, as we pointed out earlier, involves a continual process of interpretation and re-interpretation in the light of reflexion upon subsequent developments. For these new developments bring to the foreground the elements which were implicit in the original situation and whose meaning could be perceived and understood only in the light of them.[28] The New Testament is a re-interpretation of Israel's history in the light of a new historical situation brought about by the coming of Jesus (cf. Luke 1:1). Within the very first generation of Christians one can easily observe the process of interpretation and re-interpretation of the

[25] Cullmann, D., *Christ and Time, Primitive Christian Conception of Time and History*, London, 1962, p. 41.
[26] Monden, *op. cit.*, pp. 126–127.
[27] *Ibid.*, p. 119.
[28] Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 234.

Christ-event, continually growing in the light of ever-growing Christian experience. For example, the earliest generation of Christians (Jews and Gentiles) interpreted the life and intentions of Jesus in terms of his near return upon the clouds of heaven. This was only an early stage in the development of the Church's historical awareness of the mission of Jesus. This stage had to be surpassed soon. For, in the light of new historical situations a reappraisal of the meaning of the works and words of Jesus was necessary. The four Gospels give similar appraisals of the Christ-event. Historical developments, such as the existence of the Church in Rome and in many cities within and beyond the Roman world, would have brought out the significance of many formerly neglected elements in the works and deeds of Jesus, which could now be understood, because there was a context within which their implication had become obvious.[29] The letters of St. Paul are classical examples of such re-interpretations.

The NT history, similar to that of the OT, is only a part of the general history. But this history is able to render a final judgement even on the facts of general history and on the course of events of any period. For Christ is also the meaning and standard of the general history or the so-called secular history.[30] The plan of God is now actualized through the history of the Church. It is the task of the Church now to reveal through her unfolding history the meaning of the eternal salvific plan. For the Church is now the sign of salvation and revelation. God's love expressed through the Son, must now be shown through the Church. And in the Apocalypse the Church is presented as the place of God's final revelation.

### Post-Biblical Attitudes to History

How the mood of the age creates a 'myth' which explains historical events is beautifully illustrated in the growth of the theological and philosophical understanding of history in the Christian era. The earliest mood of the Christians was one of persecution by, and isolation from, the world. This resulted in a pessimism in regard to 'this world' and its history.[31] The situation may be compared to that of Israel after the collapse of the Monarchy and during the exile. The exile played a purifying role in the vision of Israel; it spiritualized their hopes and aspirations to a great extent; still the people looked forward to the day when their God would, after a period of punishment, again restore them to new heights of glory.

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[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 236–237.

[30] Cullmann, pp. 20–21.

[31] Cf. D'Arcy, M.C., *The Meaning and Matter of History, A Christian View*, New York, 1961, p. 84. 'In the first centuries when the Christian had to live a catacombal life... he paid little attention to the world around him.' His main theme of preaching was 'Seek ye first the Kingdom of God'.

For the early Christians, on the other hand, persecution and antagonism were not punishment of their own sins; they were attributed to the sinful world which thwarted the will of God. The sinful world would soon be ruined and the sinners given up to eternal damnation.[32] The elect would be taken up by Christ whose second coming was considered imminent, and would enter his Kingdom which lay beyond history. The optimism of the Christians was based not on the establishment of an earthly city but on its final destruction and the appearance of the 'heavenly city'.

Further, the feeling that the Christ-event marked the end of time, the *eschaton*, created the impression that nothing more was to be expected in history. It is on account of this attitude that the early Christians, though they inherited the historical-mindedness typical of the biblical or Hebrew tradition, did not elicit interest in the on-going history. History till the Christ-event was meaningful and revelatory; but history after it contained nothing, according to their point of view,[33] and this view is shared largely in our day by many Protestant theologians of the so-called 'neo-orthodox' school, and to a lesser degree, by the so-called eschatological Catholic theologians. The meaning of the period of the Church, of the growth of the 'body' of Christ, somehow eludes them.

Gradually, however, it dawned on many that, though the advent of Christ brought the world to its climax and completion, life had to go on, and Christians had to find meaning in the time-process. The OT people were under the shadow of the Law, according to St. Paul, and Christ's advent removed the shadow. 'But, although we are no longer under the shadow of the Law, we live in the shadow of Christ among the nations', said Origen.[34] Though Christ came, his presence in history still constituted a shadow, a mystery, which had to unfold itself in history. St. Augustine observed: 'They (the Apostles) saw the Head (Christ) and believed in the Body (the Church); we see the Body and believe in the Head.' Time-process was to reveal the 'body' of Christ. This attitude grows as the centuries pass, as the Church expands and settles down in the cultures of the world. The primitive Christians, under the impact of the expectation of an imminent parousia, hopped, as if on one leg, ready to quit this world at any moment. When this expectation increasingly proved to be unrealistic, Christians began leisurely to balance on both legs and settle down in history.

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[32] D'Arcy, M.C., *op. cit.*, p. 87. Orosius, the famous disciple of St. Augustine in his 'Seven Books of History against the Pagans' attributed the fall of the great empires of the past to the sin of Adam and his descendants. 'God is Merciful to the Roman empire because of the part it has to play in the coming of Christ.'

[33] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

[34] *Ibid.*, p. 84.

St. Augustine and his disciple Orosius, perhaps the first theologians of history, are deeply wedded to the Hebrew attitude and fought a relentless war against the classical cyclic view and the ancient belief in chance or accident. Still they manifest a pessimism, characteristic of the early Christians. The history of peoples and empires were a sad spectacle, a spectacle of man at variance with God and with himself, chasing false hopes and dreams.[35] In spite of this pessimism, history for them is revelatory. God who made man exercises continual providence over mankind; and this is shown in his justice, which punishes sin, and in suffering which disciplines man to repent and correct himself.

This 'Providence' view of history became the conventional Christian view until the eighteenth century. And even now it remains the uncritical spontaneous reaction to history of many religious men and women. In the seventeenth century Bossuet championed this view with great force but with obvious naivety; his 'Finger of God' explanation was just grist for the mill of the rationalist Voltaire.[36] There is an exception to this conventional view; and that is in the High Middle Ages. The Middle Ages had immense respect for Greek scientific intellect. The medieval cosmology was more Aristotelian than Christian. The naturalism of the Middle Ages was Christian only in so far as it had been modified to accommodate the idea of creation by a personal God.[37] 'The Bible nowhere argues from the world to God and does not suggest that nature provides us with analogies of truths concerning a divine realm. The heavens may declare the glory of God (Ps. 21:1) to those who had been obedient to his word in their own history, but 'nature' (for which there is no Hebrew equivalent) was not the source of a knowledge of God which was independent of, or supplementary to, his word in history.'[38] The medieval mind did not regard history as a source of significant knowledge. Nature, not history, was the mirror of the divine realm. Rationalistic theology of the Middle Ages, like the rationalistic philosophy of the eighteenth century, looks through nature at nature's God. 'St. Augustine's strong sense of revelation of God's will in the events of world-history, gave place during the succeeding centuries to the conception of a divine revelation written down in a book about history; the revelation was located objectively, so to speak, in the events narrated in the Scriptures, but it was apprehended subjectively by medieval men not in events, which were no longer present, but in the written record of those events, a present possession divinely guaranteed. The task of the theologian did not consist

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[35] *Ibid.*, p. 87. Cf. No. 31 above also.
[36] *Ibid.*, pp. 94–96. D'Arcy gives a summary of the 'Providence-Theology' of Bossuet. Cf. also Richardson, p. 99.
[37] D'Arcy, *op. cit.*, pp. 90–91; Richardson, *op. cit.*, p. 75.
[38] Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 75–76.

in an engagement with history, but in a systematization of the proportional truths of Scriptures and in the rational conclusions.'

The full impact of the Greek rationalism is yet to be made on the men of the eighteenth and nineteenth century. In the Middle Ages the Christian biblical view of revelation acted as a moderating agent. Isolated cases of extreme rationalism might have existed. For example, Raymond of Sebon would maintain that the whole content of revealed truth could be discovered from nature. But the more common view was that of St. Thomas: revelation was necessary for the knowledge of saving truths, such as Incarnation, Atonement and so on. The eighteenth century Enlightenment in its complete disregard for any revealed truth fully subscribed to the classical Greek view of history. They hailed Thucydides and other Greek historians as inventors in the sphere of historiography.

Nothing could happen in history which philosophical thought could not understand. 'History was static; man's hope of progress lay in understanding and living according to the unchanging laws of human nature, the violation of which in the past accounted for the melancholy story of mankind.' Just as the rationalism of Thucydides led only to the irrationalism of Polybius, who virtually abandoned the search for historical causality and acknowledged Fortune (*Tyche*, the unpredictable) as the hidden controller of human destiny, so the rationalism of the eighteenth century often fell back on what is known as the 'Horse-shoe Nail' theory to explain history.[39] In a sense it was the negation of rational explanation. It reintroduced into modern thought the whole conception of 'fate' or blind chance which St. Augustine had once exorcized from history.

Two isolated voices which dissented from this general mood of the eighteenth century were those of Montesquieu and Vico. The historical relativism of the former went unheeded then. 'Jan Battista Vico is the Melchizedec of the Age of Reason, without ancestors and also without progeny. He rejected the Cartesian view that the only knowledge was to possess the certainty and clarity of mathematics; he held that history possesses its own certainty, and that it is of an altogether different order.'[40] Vico viewed history as an evolution from the primitive to the advanced. For him the sacred and the secular formed one history: History is man's work, in contrast to nature, the work of God. But the progress and change brought about by man is in accordance with the law written in his heart. And God is the author of this law. Thus history reveals man's powers and God's purpose.

During the nineteenth century the rationalistic doctrine of static human nature was gradually abandoned, or at least modified. Montesquieu's preliminary intimation of historical

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 98.
[40] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

relativity, and Vico's suggestion of the organic growth of nations, at last attained explicit recognition in the European mind. The concept of history became dimensional; the past was no longer viewed from the vantage-point of 'constant and universal principles, valid for all nations and epochs', as it had been viewed by Voltaire, Hume and even Gibbon.[41] The Hegelian dialectic evolution of the Spirit, and its antithesis, the Marxian dialectic evolution of Matter, were extreme reactions to the static view of the rationalists. From the point of view of Hegel, Marx and Darwin, history constituted absolute revelation, independent of any external agent.

Still, nineteenth century historiography in its main lines of development, as Richardson points out, did not entirely succeed in freeing itself from the incubus of eighteenth century rationalism. The main reasons were:[42] (1) Many historians made little effort to see the past from the point of view of the men of the past; (2) The underlying 'myth' (overall interpretation) of nineteenth century historiography was the rationalist myth: the Greeks had laid the foundations of science and history and had kindled the torch of intellectual freedom; (3) The immense prestige of the natural sciences influenced historians. They applied scientific method (positivist method) to the study of history, and raised history to the realm of a science.

The 'scienticism' produced what is called the 'positivist' view of history. It is this attitude which was at the back of liberal theologians of the nineteenth century who were in search of the 'historical Jesus'. The same positivistic attitude inspired Protestant theologians' disengagement from history which started with Kierkegaard and culminated in Barth and neo-orthodoxy and Bultmanian existential theology.

## Modern Trends

Modern theologians may be grouped—this grouping is mainly based on their attitude to history—under the following headings. The Catholic theologians may be divided into incarnationalists, eschatologists, and those who occupy a middle position between these extremes. The Protestant theologians belong to one of the following groups; i.e., neo-orthodoxy, existentalism, biblical theology and theology of history.

Of these, various groups of Incarnational theologians would ascribe to history the maximum importance; they try to see secular and sacred history as one whole. History is continually changing and progressing, by the presence of the Word of God, of Christ and His Spirit in history. Theologians of this category look forward to a happy conclusion when the interrelation between sacred history and secular history will become most transparent.

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 103.
[42] Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 105-110.

For them history, past, present and future, is full of meaning; is fully revelatory. The eschatological theologians deliberately eschew such optimism and cautiously take up the Augustinian position. Protestant theologians belonging to the neo-orthodox group would retire even more radically to eschatology. The existentialists, in spite of their disengagement from history, are conscious of the value of historical existence; nevertheless they are the least time-conscious. The biblical theologians and theologians of history represent the twentieth century reinvolvement in history in varying degrees. Perhaps Wolfhart Pannenberg is the most revolutionary among them.[43] Alan Richardson has much in common with him.

Here we may hazard a suggestion. The incarnational tradition of the Catholic theologians was more or less firmly established by St. Irenaeus towards the end of the second century—incidently he was the most ecclesiastical-minded of the Christian thinkers of old. His key concept of Christology—the idea of recapitulation of the whole creation in and by the Word Incarnate—is of paramount significance. This theological tradition, which we would venture to call the 'Mystical Body' tradition, was never completely lost sight of in Catholic theology, though the hierarchological conception of the Church right from the Middle Ages somewhat obscured it. It was revived in the nineteenth century in the Tuebingen School by Adam Moehler. In the twentieth century it was again brought to the surface by Karl Adam, another savant of the same school. In the '30's one sees a 'mystical body' movement in the Church. It is this tradition that must explain why for Catholic theologians the problem of history was never so vexing as it was for their Protestant counterparts.

The Protestant tradition begins with a highly supra-natural and supra-historical emphasis on redemption (Luther and Calvin). This tradition underwent a change in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when an opposite tendency became current which was represented by the liberal theological movement. This movement which was a direct result of rationalism and 'scienticism' attempted to eschew the supernatural as far as possible (Schleiermacher to Ritschl to Harnack).[44] But this liberal historical position lost appeal because of its failure in the positivist quest for the historical Jesus. The failure resulted in a gradual disengagement from the historical preoccupation. S. Kierkegaard was perhaps the initiator of this disengagement movement; A.

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[43] Cf. G. G. O'Collins, S.J., 'Revelation as History', in *Heythrop Journal*, Vol. 7, 1966, pp. 394-406. He describes fairly well the theology of Revelation through history. Pannenberg's view on the theological nature of history is explained at length.

[44] Richardson, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-124, describes the transition and progress of theology of history from liberal theological movement of the nineteenth century to today's.

Schweitzer became its most vocal protagonist. The new tendency distrusted history which, they thought, was of no value for salvation, or the Christian message. It culminated in Karl Barth, the leader of what is called 'neo-orthodoxy' or the revival of the earliest Protestant supra-historicism.[45] Bultmann's existential theology too is an attempt at such a disengagement from history.

One thing appears to me most significant. It is among the Protestant theologians that the death-of-God and the religionless Christianity movement originated and prospered. We may be on doubtful grounds, still we venture to suggest that it is the Protestant theologians who felt most keenly the need to make Christianity relevant to historical progress, to make Christianity this-worldly Christianity religionless, even Godless. The religious Christianity of the liberals, which tried to be partial to history, evaporated under the impact of positivist history; the religious Christianity of neo-orthodoxy, a reaction to the former, was so unworldly that it appeared to lose touch with the world, and historical progress altogether. Man's life in this world, his efforts to build up an earthly city appeared to be devoid of any meaning before a religious Christianity. The secularist theologians wanted to save Christianity and the value of historical progress even if it meant the sacrifice of Christianity as a 'religion'. And Christianity as a religion appeared to them to stand in the way of their task in the world. Existentialist theology, though it was a reaction against liberal theology and was disengaged from history, nonetheless attributed great value to man's historical decisions and his will and effort to build up an earthly city. It demythologized much of the Christian religion, brought it down to the level of man's decision in history, here and now, in time and space. This helped the secularist theologians to a great extent.

## Conclusion

We would conclude this paper with a few reflexions:

(1) Within the school of theological interpretation of history, two main tendencies have been observed: one opposed to the other, but not necessarily mutually exclusive. They represent the two poles of Christian faith: 'the already' and 'the not yet'. The eschatological or 'crisis' view of history emphasizes 'the already', while the opposite 'incarnational' view stresses 'the not yet'. Apart from the field of theological interpretations, two other main attributes to history are noticeable: the one represents the classical determinist approach, and the other the modern evolutionist approach. According to the former, history is predetermined by nature and is insignificant as a source of knowledge;

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 134. Richardson says that Barth, in his reaction against the liberal view, has gone farther than any other twentieth-century theologian towards the total disengagement of faith and history.

this is too barren an outlook on history as revelatory. The modern evolutionary view, which is at least indirectly inspired by the Hebrew view, sees history as constantly changing and re-creating and advancing. Each new phase of history brings forth something new, which it is not possible to recognize before history reaches that particular stage. History is most revealing, according to this view.

Related to this evolutionary approach, is also the post-positivist concept of history: history is not merely concerned with facts as such but also their interpretation. Every age has its 'myth' (or overall interpretation) which helps us interpret history. The 'myth' of the age is the creation of historical forces. Such 'myths' arise in the wake of catastrophic situations: e.g., a global war, a devastating revolution, etc. The 'myth' is thus revealed by history, and it in turn reveals history as it becomes the key to historians to interpret history. The most universal and constant 'myth' is the religious 'myth'. The religious 'myth' or theological interpretation of history, in the eyes of faith, is not merely the creation of historical forces as such but is determined by the intervention of God in history, the self-communication of God in and through history. A few of these revelatory events are spectacular (the calling of Abraham, the Exodus, the Christ-event, the Pentecost event) and have a devastating effect on history and its interpretation.

(2) Now to go back to the theological view of history, the eschatological approach makes a distinction between 'sacred history' and 'secular history'. Secular history is of no particular value; sacred history is all important. But even sacred history climaxed in the Christ-event, and nothing more is to be expected from the ongoing time after that event.

It has been claimed that the eschatological view is the only biblical view of history. We would contest this claim. There are in the Gospels diverse hints that the world itself is in some way to be brought into obedience to the divine designs. St. Paul in his Letters to the Corinthians, for instance, brings the whole world into the embrace of Christ. In Christ 'were all things created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible'. The Father is 'through him to reconcile all things unto himself, both as to things that are on earth and things that are in heaven'. He tells the Romans also that 'the expectation of the creature waiteth for revelation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity: not willingly but by reason of him that made it subject, in hope'.

(3) Creation is God's; history and progress which are re-creation by the instrumentality of man are also ultimately God's. In creation and re-creation God is realizing his purpose. Can this purpose be different from the final goal of God? God's redeeming grace acts in nature and in history as a ferment. The ferment is constantly leavening the whole dough, and history must manifest itself as the perfectly fermented dough ready for

consummation. Is not this the way of understanding the assertion that history will reveal God's plan?

(4) Still another question. History has revealed the Redeemer; will it reveal the final redemption of the world? No definite clue is given in the revelation. We have the Word of God that Christ will come a second time and unveil the mystery of history and consummate it. What part will history have in this unveiling? We are not sure. Sacred history will have a part in it. But is sacred history an isolated thing from secular history? Neither sacred history nor secular history by themselves will be able to bring about the final transfiguration. A new vertical and most catastrophic intervention of God will be necessary for it. Will that transfiguration not be a revelation that sacred history and secular history, after all, are not two separate spheres of God's action? Will it not disclose that the final act of God is to consummate the mutual interaction between sacred history and secular history?

(5) Even those most sceptical about progress must admit that, with the help of experience, experiments and new theories of knowledge, an almost infinite number of errors have been corrected. And we no longer take for granted bestial religions, savage moral systems and customs. What has this to do with the rounded supernatural perfection of the Kingdom of God? D'Arcy answers: 'Those who raise the difficulty make the mistake of supposing the heavenly society or city to be already formed, or to come into being at the end of time. It is here and now in the process of coming into being; founded by Christ, its citizens are born into and live and die in this life. The relation is to be found in the transfigured experience of this life.'

These considerations lead us to the thought of Teilhard de Chardin. The world, its history and its progress is in the process of what he calls 'Christification'. What we acknowledge as sacred history is that part of world history, the Christification of which we are aware of.[46] Till the 'Omega Point' is reached, the progressive Christification of history will be a partially veiled affair. Once the Omega Point dawns, the Christification process will be complete objectively, and even more, subjectively. History, when it arrives at this point, will reveal itself as fully Christified and all distinction between sacred history and secular history will vanish from our minds. History will become revelation, fully illumined by the *lumen gloriae*, 'And God will be all in all'.

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[46] Gutierrez, Gustavo M., 'Note for a theology of liberation', *Theological Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 2, 1970, p. 259. According to the author, Teilhard once said that the life of salvation in the Church—i.e., the strict salvation of history—is a reflectively christified part of humanify.