

CHRIST IN HISTORY

HISTORY in a general sense is concerned with past human events. But it does not consider them simply as bare facts succeeding each other in the unrolling of time; it gathers them together as vital parts of a variegated and complex unity and deals not merely with the subject matter of these events, but with their cause and effect, by which they are welded into a whole. The historian, who is both scientist and artist, must gather the seemingly chaotic and accidental succession of events into a synthesis. Knowledge must always ultimately unite; and it is in this process of unification that the Catholic historian is bound to differ from any other kind of historian.

The past events with which the historian is dealing are human events, not the eruptions and radiations of the mineral world, not the burgeonings and seeding of the vegetable world, not the fights and amours of the animal kingdom, but the successive actions of MAN. Man is the subject of this science and so it is in man that we may find the guiding principles of historical unity. Certainly we are not here concerned immediately with the nature of man. That is the field of psychology which considers man according to his constitution with his intellect and his will. Nevertheless, the historian depends essentially upon rational psychology to describe to him the nature of man, as well as upon revelation itself to give a concrete view of that nature. The silversmith must understand the nature of the metal he proposes to work. If he treats silver in the same way as pewter his efforts will prove conspicuously unsuccessful. The subject of history is man and if the historian treats of man as though he were a cabbage or a rhinoceros he will not be able to form the history of any man or any human period. He is concerned immediately with man's deeds, with his loves and hates,

his murders and his sufferings. All these things, however, flow from the nature of man who has a spiritual soul, a rational mind, and a free will. If we are to write history we must approach our subject matter, therefore, with some knowledge of its general make-up. A determinist will inevitably write a different story from a voluntarist. A materialist views human events quite differently from an historian who really knows what man is.

The historian ought to bring to the study of his subject other considerations about man. Man, with his mind and free will directing and informing his fleshy substance called Body, is the lord and master of the physical universe; he is the Head of Creation. Human deeds, flowing from human nature, have a significance that points beyond the boundaries of individual men or their societies, beyond the city, the town or the homestead, where man's actions have their immediate repercussions; they embrace in some way the whole of creation and the whole expanse of time. Modern philosophies have made us familiar with the idea of the relation of all creatures one to the other, of how there is a difference in the cobbler of Shoreditch when a leopard is shot in the jungle. But the 'perennial' philosopher sees the wholeness of creation from a higher viewpoint; he sees man as the supreme creature round whom the rest of the material universe revolves. The lower creatures serve the higher in due order and proportion, so that all eventually serve mankind at the peak. And the deeds of the master necessarily leave their stamp upon his servants. There is no lack of example—how the human intellect conveys something of its character to domesticated animals that can laugh and talk, how man's greed blights a whole countryside with unsightly buildings and mountainous slag-heaps, how man harnesses the elemental energies of nature. The deathly march of the increasing desert in the United States steps out to the tune of man's deeds, or rather his misdeeds. Elsewhere the marshalled ranks of

trees in plantations of all kinds have sprung from the intangible substance of the human mind.

But it will be objected that these are superficial examples and do not suggest any unlimited effect of man upon the universe as a whole; nor do they appear to have more than minor import in the history of the human race. Yet if we leave the realms of the philosopher who views history under wide but limited horizons, and mount to the supreme vantage point, we stand looking down upon all created reality, including the passing human events, with the vision of Faith and Divine Wisdom. Thus the Christian historian knows that the first human deed that set the entire universe rocking was the sin of Adam. That action so disturbed the working of creation that all the disorders even of inanimate matter may eventually be laid to its charge. Saint Paul tells us that 'the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him that made it so . . . and every creature groaneth and travaileth in pain even until now.' To an atheist who yet believes the story of Adam and Eve, the scene is simple: one woman plucks one apple and presents it to one man; and there it ends. The Christian, on the other hand, sees the whole expanse of time and space coloured by that black crime. No synthesis of human events could claim a hearing that excluded this first key to the unification of the time process. It stamps the very material of the historian's art with a new character. He is not dealing simply with the events of man with a soul, a mind and a free will; he sees stretched out before him the story of fallen man, man with a kink, man with a destiny.

The process of history, then, is the process of mankind wounded in its vitals by the mortal thrust of Adam. Human deeds spring from a contaminated source, and it would be impossible ultimately to weigh the actions of man or a group of men without realising that they must have some relation to this mortal weakness in character. They may be virtuous, but they are virtuous as the result

of a struggle against an evil tendency. Socrates' death is not seen in full perspective unless it is seen next to Socrates' love of life. David's mercy towards Saul in the cave could not be weighed without putting in the balance his surging desire for revenge. History would not know true heroism or malicious crime unless it knew also of the fall of Adam.

The Christian, however, has only taken the first step towards his synthesis of human events when he presupposes the true nature of man and his fall. The dark background to his picture can only be seen in contrast with the glory of human destiny, in which man is called to be the child of God through the Incarnation and Redemption. Every individual human person is a man of destiny. He is no fitting figure on the stage of life, a figure that merely ceases to be when he finally disappears into the wings. There is not one individual of the millions that crowd the pages of the story of mankind that has not been called to be a saint, to be an adopted son of God, to be a sharer of the divine life in the vision of beatitude. Darnley's murder brims over with significance in the history of England and Scotland, but ultimately its full significance can only be appreciated when seen in relation not so much to temporal kingdoms as to the eternal kingdom of Heaven. If this seems an extravagant claim, we might point to one who examines with a magnifying glass the colours of Venus' big toe in Botticelli's masterpiece and ask whether he, not having seen the picture as a whole, has any ultimate understanding of the significance of those colours. We are right in condemning theologians and philosophers who discuss *ad nauseam* the possibilities of man in a state of pure nature that never existed, but to exclude the ultimate purpose of human life from the human story is only one degree better. The Christian must take the integral view of human reality and in that view he sees the sons of men as following or refusing the call to be sons of God.

Yet this integral vision can only be acquired by regarding the unique and central fact of history round which the whole of time turns as the hands of the clock that indicate the hour without leaving their pivot in the middle of the clock-face. The kernel of the whole history of the world is contained within the pages of the greatest history book, the Bible; and the Bible story was only told and eventually written down to relate one historic fact, the Incarnation and Redemption. Christ the Lord comes striding across the years that divide the moment of Creation from that moment of second Creation when the Word was made flesh in Mary's womb. Or rather in one bound He leaps from the first fact of history—'All things were made by Him'—to the central fact—'And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us'; and the whole of pre-Christian history is synthesised in that leap. The revelation of the Godhead which became ever clearer until the Word Himself came to lighten the world is contained for the most part in histories, which would be pointless without the final event that unifies the whole book. It is God's Book, God's history book. That is the only reason why its pages tell one story and not many disconnected insignificant anecdotes about an insignificant Eastern tribe. Take one example: on the first day of time the Spirit broods over the waters and the universe is created: later Noe rides the waves of the flood and man's world is re-created, a new start is made; then the sacred tribe passes through the waters of the Red Sea and they are re-generated in freedom; water flows from the rock and brings them life; a network of ablutions and purifications becomes a part of their daily history; they enter into the inheritance of the promised land across the river Jordan; out of the brook David chooses five smooth stones to deliver Israel from the enemy. All these facts may be the object of laborious historical research that may show one or other to differ in literal fact from the way in which it had first been understood. But the most painstaking search will

reveal nothing unless all the results be finally referred to the one Event. The synthesis appears when seen from the banks of the Jordan where the Baptist pours water over the Messiah, or from the foot of the Cross where water flows with blood from the side of the same Messiah. It is the Redemption.

In this way all human events before the birth of Christ should be gathered into a whole, the final unification at which history aims. And Bible history is not unique in this respect. The story of every tribe and every individual whether in the East or the West, whether cognisant of Israel and its God or wholly ignorant of all save the grinning wooden image worshipped through the haze of sinister sacrificial smoke, leads up to the climax in Palestine. The ultimate significance of all these countless human events is seen only through the unique human Event of the birth and death of the Saviour. Not merely the ages upon ages that preceded, but all that has since occurred and will occur, are joined by the power of that Event.

There is not an action of man throughout the whole history of the world that is not related by some intimate tie to the event on Calvary when the Man who was God offered the whole world, not only in its expanse of space, but also in its expanse of time, back to the Creative Father. When the historian tries to reconstruct any given situation of the past he may produce many varying pictures of it, laying emphasis first on one person or event and then on another. The final reconstruction, however, is fixed and permanent, and it is only reached when he has discovered the central Figure and His significant action that colours the whole and sets it in proportion. In the complete history of the world the central figure of Christ the Lord of Ages, and His unique action on the Cross, gather all events into one picture and set all in perspective. And as the world continues in the passage of the years we do not have to look to an event entirely past, any more than mankind before Christ had to look to an event entirely in the future.

In those days Bethlehem and Calvary were already in embryo growing bigger with the years, as the central chosen tribe wrought its salvation through its Messiah. And now the person of the Redeemer continues as a reality, a tangible reality, in His Church the Mystical Body; and His unique redemptive act is enshrined in the tangible reality of the Mass. It is by this means that every member of Christ's Body is enabled to stand daily at the foot of the Cross, and to look from the heights of Calvary across the rolling hills of time. A Catholic who believes in the Church and in the Mass cannot regard human events from any other angle. He can look at partial aspects of the happenings among men; he can consider them from many points of view; but these viewpoints and aspects should always meet eventually in the one point where every man was given and is still given the opportunity to become a child of God, a man of great destiny.

Here lies the heart of historical unity. The unique and uninterrupted action from Bethlehem to Calvary explains all other human actions, and all other human characters. Men are to be judged according to their approximation to that model who is the typical, or rather the archetypal man; their actions and sufferings are to be measured, weighed and appreciated in reference to the action and suffering of that centre of human life. Men have often speculated on facts of history—what would have happened if John had not signed the Magna Charta or Caesar crossed the Rubicon, if Alexander had been content with Greece, or Elizabeth had been true to the Catholic religion? Undoubtedly certain people and events have exercised a profound influence over vast tracts of history. The whole history of the world might have been different if one individual had acted in another way. And yet that influence is uncertain and superficial compared with the influence exercised by the unique action of Jesus Christ upon the whole story of mankind. The effect of that action upon history from Creation to the end of the world is like that of

the spark passing through the jar containing oxygen and hydrogen, a new substance appears. The King of the Universe reigns over all.

The Incarnation and Redemption—

‘Th’ Abridgement of Christ’s story, which make one
 (As in plaine Maps, the furthest West is East)
 Of the Angels “Ave,” and “Consummatum est”’—

the one story that is the focal point of all true history, leads us to the final unification of history in the mind of God. The historian is concerned not simply with men and events; he is not merely a chronologer, but looks to the cause and effect which give true meaning to the material he handles. The supreme science of theology here supplies a complete perspective by taking the mind back to the Creator and Divine Providence as the Cause of human history. For in considering the Word made flesh, that first person and event in history, we see the Word in whom all things were created, and thus we see the whole story contained in one Idea. Time is but the moving image of eternity, so that now we turn at length from the image to the Thing imaged. God created the world, in time as well as in space, according to a plan that was displayed as an unique and indivisible whole in the Word. In the lower order of created being the Father wished to see a parallel to His relations with the Son, who reflected the Divinity. As the Word reflected the divinity in undivided unity and equality, so in the world the divinity was to be reflected in the multiplicity of beings in space and time mirroring what is One in the Word.

God’s providence then has foreseen all things that have happened and are to happen. Each being as it comes into existence takes its appointed place in that vast plan, each event adds light or shade to the enormous canvas. In this respect the whole material of history is in itself the multifarious and varied image of the Word. Consequently, every human event that comes under the eye of the his-

torian has a peculiar significance in relation to the vast unity of history, the Providential plan that even uses evil as a dark pigment to set forth in greater brilliance the light of the Good and the True in the created and moving picture of divinity.

Every event, then, must finally be judged according to the uniting background of creative Providence, of God's Will and Purpose in the World. In this view there is nothing that is purely and simply accidental. Many events depend upon the vagaries of the human freewill, but not one of them escapes the divine plan or is unforeseen. Everything takes its part in furthering that Divine Purpose that is the greater glory of God. This ultimate created glorifying of God by the whole universe throughout all time is the effect of historical facts that must be taken into account in the complete historical synthesis. Creation has ever been working towards that end. God created the world that His goodness might pour forth into the lower order of created being and come back to Him full circle in an aureola of created glory.

What we have already said about Man as the head of creation and destined to be a child of God fits into this progress towards finality. For that glory is to be achieved primarily through the head of creation, through the free will of man, which most perfectly represents the good will of God. It is above all to be achieved, as we know from revelation, through the head of creation raised to share the life of God by grace. Consequently we are brought back once more to the Incarnation and Redemption as the hub of the wheel of time. It is through Christ Our Lord that the Divine Plan of Providence is worked out, it is through Him that the final purpose of creation is accomplished. The world was created in the Word, the world achieves its divinely given object in the Word made flesh.

This conception could be worked out in greater detail, but it may be thought already to have reached unjustifiable extravagances by confusing the sciences of theology

and history. Yet all that is claimed for the Christian view of history is that it should be integral, that it should find its ultimate roots in the Divine Wisdom that alone can provide the absolute unification and synthesis. In practice it may perhaps make little difference to research or immediate judgments whether the observer be Christian or pagan. Both may give an almost identical account of the murder of Julius Caesar or of Napoleon's rise to power. Their materials are the same and their science is the same. Nevertheless, the approach of the man who sees all *in Verbo, per Christum Dominum nostrum*, is so different that his conclusions and their implications cannot be in all things identical with those of one who sees nothing beyond death and observable events. The modern passion for historical research does in fact turn the historian into a pagan because it engrosses him in his material to such an extent that he turns materialist and loses sight of the life throbbing beneath the chronicles on which he concentrates, a life which comes forth originally from the Word. And this applies to all fields of history, even to history of theology in which monumental works are produced to show that some obscure mediaeval theologian did or did not write a book which has been an object of Christian contemplation for several centuries.

It may perhaps be unfair to drag in present-day history as an example of the difference between pagan and Christian historians; but it is a valuable witness. The pagan or materialistic historian can see the European struggle that began in 1939 in terms of social systems, of economic necessities, of races or ideologies. Each one of the unifications that he may make will probably be valid, but only with a partial validity. And a partial truth generalised becomes a whole error. If a man claims any absolute basis for his partially valid synthesis he is looking at a false view of modern history. The Christian, on the other hand, who takes an integral view of the situation, referring all events ultimately to the Word made flesh, will see all those

other factors, social creeds, economics, racial pride, empire, in their places in the picture. He may not, of course, grasp all the factors in their proper significance, and in details he is as liable to error as the pagan materialist. But he does see those factors in their ultimate perspective and, having a wider canvas, he always has room to insert new details and, as the accuracy of his information increases, to enlarge or diminish those already painted in. The Christian thus views the whole struggle in terms of Christianity and Christian culture. The breadth of his view is not simply derived from seeing the relations of Hitler and Stalin, of Mussolini and Pétain, in terms of a supremely important value, the ultimate value of culture. It is based fundamentally on the relation of the whole of present-day Europe to the Word made flesh and so to Providence and the Divine Purpose working in the world. The Christian can see the Church on her Cross; the pagan can but see a crowd of protesting ecclesiastics. The Christian can see Christ among the poor; the pagan only sees a shouting mob of revolutionaries or reactionaries. The Christian can see the black-out of present evils and human misery as big with the future in which God will eventually divulge His Good Purpose; the pagan can see no further than the desperate collapse of modern civilization, the devilish brutality of Hitler, the feminine hesitancy of British policy. There can be no doubt that the view of history *in Verbo Incarnato* to-day gives them an entirely different conception of historic events.

But the example of the modern war *is* unfair, and in fact claims more for the Christian view than is in general justifiable. All that is in fact claimed for the Christian historian is that if he lives an integral life he will bring to bear on historical material an apparatus that is instinct with the widest issues and deepest values, an instrument for historical judgement that will be in immediate contact with Christ. We do not expect him to be always writing a history of the world or of Europe. Nor do we suppose

that should he choose to write an economic account of a section of history it will be essentially different from the pagan's economic history. But under whatever aspect the Christian studies the Why and the How of any historical data he will always have at the back of his mind the framework of a sound philosophy that knows the nature of man and of a complete theology that knows the purpose of God. He has then at his disposal a perfect instrument that of itself should lead to balance and perspective, seeing the partial as partial, not excluding the total and integral background; and Christ will always be in his mind, even though the particular view of history with which he happens to be dealing is not *consciously* linked with the Saviour.

Jesus Christ has taken up His Cross and swept it across the total age of the universe. In that magic sweep he has gathered all into one. All history is, in a sense, Bible history, it is history of the Word being made flesh, dwelling among us and offering His life for us. The historian of any period should be able to write with John the Apostle: 'That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life.'

CONRAD PEPLER, O.P.

NEW RELIGION FOR OLD

It needed a choir of angels to explain to some Jewish shepherds that the Babe in yonder manger was Christ the Lord: it needed a special star to show three Gentile sages the swaddling clothes of Holy Wisdom. Without such startling messengers men might not have noticed Salvation as it lay at their feet.

It has needed a world war and the destruction, enslave-