

The Voice of God in History.¹

THE late Mr. Ford, it is commonly reported, once declared, "History is bunk." If, indeed, this remarkable utterance was his he probably only blurted out what a great many people think. Natural science seems so much more important. Chemistry, for example, produces something, if only a smell. Yet such judgements are surely superficial. This long variegated pageant of man's evolution on this strange planet is far more wonderful than the wonders of physical science. Man's history, prehistoric, ancient, medieval, and modern is, from some aspects, the most wonderful thing in the universe that we know. It contains religion, it contains science; at least, it contains their history. It contains art and literature.

Yet history presents a formidable challenge to faith. Up to ten or twenty years ago the most serious assault on the Christian world view was being delivered by the natural sciences. Today this is no longer the critical point of the front. The real battle ground of our time is where religion and history come face to face.² The most dangerous challenge to religion, at any rate to the Christian religion, comes not from science, but from history. Does the course of historical events as we ourselves witness and take part in it yield evidence that it is under moral government? Is there a God and, if so, what is He doing in history? Such questions arise from a million hearts, and are not merely speculative but of immediate practical importance.

The view has been, and is held by some, that history has no significance and that to search for its meaning is futile. This attitude is brilliantly expressed by Anatole France in his story about the young king who wished to possess a survey of universal history that he might learn its lessons, and appointed a commission of scholars to prepare it. At the end of twenty years his learned men returned accompanied by a dozen camels bearing 800 volumes, but the busy king said, "Kindly abridge." After long periods they brought shorter and shorter editions, always to be required to abridge still further, until at last the secretary brought a single

¹ Address delivered at the Baptist Union Assembly, 1948.

² Mackay, *Preface to Theology*, 81. Barry, *Church and Leadership*, 8.

fat volume, to find the aged king on his death bed. The old man sighed: "I shall die without knowing the history of mankind." The scholar said: "Your majesty, I will summarise it for you in three words, 'They were born, they suffered, they died.'"³ The story puts in unforgettable language the view that history is but "a tale told by an idiot full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

Such a sceptical view is not uncommon among the historians themselves, from the gloomy doubts of Tacitus to those of modern times. Generally speaking historians, and in particular British historians, have been suspicious of all large historical generalisations. "When I hear a man say, 'All history teaches,'" confessed a great historian, "I prepare to hear some thundering lie." Turn, for example, to the great *Cambridge Modern History* that Acton planned. From its Catholic author to his agnostic successor in the Chair of Modern History it affords a thousand angles of vision; but it appears to start from nowhere and to lead to nothing. The facts are chosen on no system; the praise and condemnation bestowed derive from no principle, and the whole apparatus resembles nothing so much as a transport train ploughing its way through the sands of time.⁴ If you say this is a composite work, turn to the brilliant *History of Europe* by Herbert Fisher and you find that in his preface the author observes that, "Men wiser or more learned" than himself have "discerned in history a plot, a rhythm, a predetermined pattern," but that these harmonies are concealed from him. He sees only the play of the contingent and unforeseen.⁵

But the Christian cannot afford to leave the matter like that. As Berdyaev observes, the tie between Christianity and history is such as exists in no other world religion. Truth that is specifically Christian is historical truth, not the timeless discarnate truth in which idealistic philosophers revel. Not by the pathway of abstract speculation, but through the historic person of the Carpenter of Nazareth living and dying in this world of time did the faith that God is Holy Love break upon the human mind. Hinduism may regard history as belonging to the sphere of illusion; Buddhism may regard events in this world order as of no lasting meaning, but Christianity can never ignore history because the truths of the faith are inseparably connected with historical events. The phrase "suffered under Pontius Pilate" in the creed bears witness to this. If it be true that at a given

³ *Les Opinions de M. Jerome Coignard*, 169ff.

⁴ A. Cecil, *A House in Bryanston Square*, 75.

⁵ Fisher, *History of Modern Europe*, Preface.

point in space and time God in the person of His Son has entered the field of history; that as Forsyth puts it, "the Eternal Finality has become historic event,"⁶ then whatever else is true of history this is the supreme fact about it, in the light of which it must all be understood.

Thus, there can in the long run be no accommodation between Christian views of history and Greek or semi-oriental views. No Christian can presume to treat the happenings of history as of no lasting significance. Its facts and events, however, trivial, have an eternal import; they mean something to the living God. To Christian faith history is not a meaningless process in which individuals and nations struggle for the mastery according to the law of the jungle. It is the scene of God's continuing self-revelation in which God is saying to His children what it is necessary that they should hear for their own good. He is saying it not in words alone, though from time to time prophets have arisen who have some clear word of God to speak. He is saying it in the more impressive language of deed. History is the story of God's self-revelation in action. It is the stage in which He unfolds His mighty acts in the majestic drama of war and peace.

Admittedly, if we take a broad survey of history it has to be frankly recognised that it does not fit into any tidy little scheme that our small minds can comprehend.⁷ "We cannot discern the divine plan of campaign."⁸ There is always in it a wild "irrational element." There is what has been called "a senseless side to history."⁹ There are whole tracts of history that appear to us to be meaningless. There are elements of what appears sheer chance in the events of history. "The nose of Cleopatra," said Pascal, "had it been shorter, the whole face of the earth would have been changed." Further, we do not know how much of history has yet to run. "We see but a small area of time as yet."¹⁰ We are reading a story of which we know only a part, and that a very fragmentary part; and even if we knew it all it is but part of an unfinished process without the final result.¹¹ That history should present, as Newman said, perhaps too pessimistically, "a vision to dizzy and appal," inflicting upon the mind the sense of profound mystery which is absolutely beyond

⁶ Forsyth, *Justification of God*, 43.

⁷ F. R. Barry, *Faith in Dark Ages*, 69.

⁸ Forsyth, *op. cit.*, 225.

⁹ Farmer, *The World and God*, 295.

¹⁰ Forsyth, *op. cit.*, 17.

¹¹ Wheeler Robinson, *The Veil of God*, 27.

human solution,"¹² is not really surprising. For we are, as has been said, like a man in a railway carriage reading a detective story that has been torn in two. He has the first half which states the problem and elaborates the mystery. But the second half, which contains the full solution and the conclusion of the story, is missing.¹³

History none the less is not dumb, but when we seek to hear what God is saying in the events of the human story we must beware of glib interpretations. Yet, interminable and confusing as are the records of history, God, the righteous Lord of history, is ceaselessly on the field. "What," cries Oliver Cromwell, "are all our Histories . . . but God manifesting Himself, that He hath shaken and tumbled down and trampled upon everything that He hath not planted?"¹⁴ The phraseology may be obsolete, but the sense of these words is eternal. Men have not been mistaken in believing that the revelation of God is found in the confirmation afforded by history to the maxim that only righteousness exalteth a nation. To this indeed, some historians have drawn attention. "Judgement," says Carlyle, "for an evil thing is many times delayed for a day or two, some century or two, but it is as sure as life, it is as sure as death! In the centre of the world-whirlwind, verily now as in the oldest days, dwells and speaks a God. The great soul of the world is just."¹⁵ "History," says Froude, "is a voice for ever sounding across the centuries the laws of right and wrong. Opinions alter, manners change, creeds rise and fall, but the moral law is written on the tablets of eternity. For every false word or unrighteous deed, for cruelty or oppression, for lust or vanity, the price has to be paid by someone. Justice and truth alone endure. Injustice and falsehood may be long lived, but doomsday comes at last to them in French Revolutions and other terrible ways."¹⁶

History is thus the manifestation and working out of the judgement of God. If men serve God they receive His blessing; if they defy His laws then, by an inevitable destiny immanent in world history, they receive the penalty of their disobedience. The great civilisations and empires which have arisen have fallen by many contributing causes, but invariably they seem to have decayed from within. Their failures, as Arnold Toynbee points out, involve more than mere weakness or age.¹⁷ Moreover, the great

¹² *Apologia* (1907), 267.

¹³ Matthews, *Purpose of God*, 151.

¹⁴ *Letters and Speeches*, Everyman Edition, Vol. III, 81.

¹⁵ *Past and Present* (1870 ed.), Bk. I, Chap. II, 76.

¹⁶ *Short Studies in Great Subjects*, 1st Series, 27.

¹⁷ *Study of History*, Vol. IV, 260.

catastrophes which bring down venerable systems and mark the end of epochs are not mere accidents. They have many concurrent immediate causes, economic, social and political and even geographical, but it is a true insight that sees in them the terrible judgement of God. The crisis makes overt what is implicit, for the ultimate causes of the great crashes of history are moral and spiritual.

This view has been seriously criticised, and it must be admitted that the judgement is upon human error hardly less than upon human perversity; yet the mistakes are never prompted by ignorance only. The "vain imagination" of sin is in them. It is also true that when ruin and disaster follow unrighteousness they are wrought out in the lives of a surprisingly large proportion of the good, the true, and the unselfish. The chief culprits are not the chief victims. We are, indeed, all so much bound together in life that disaster cannot hit one and miss another. Sin and disaster are not linked in automatic mechanical sequence.¹⁸ It is of course true, as the author of *Job* protested, that particular calamities are not necessarily judgements. World history is world judgement only through long vistas of time. We cannot draw conclusions about humanity or divinity from a six acre field. In the case of a whole civilisation or culture it may be that only in the course of centuries is God's judgement registered beyond all possibility of mistake. None the less, in the long run evil acquiesced in bringing its penalty; pride and arrogance are self-defeating. Disasters in history set limits to the multiplication of filth and injustice. Sooner or later the price has to be paid in catastrophe and degeneration, world wars and revolutions when, as the Psalmist says, God answers us by terrible things in right. The mills of God grind slowly; the consequences may be long delayed. "God does not pay at the end of every week, yet at the last He pays."

Here the Hebrew prophets are our truest teachers, nor have any teachers ever enforced the great lesson with such divine insight, such unalterable certitude, such passionate intensity as they. As we study the history of Israel we are gripped by the pervasive overmastering sense of the reality of God. God not only pervades; He dominates the history of Israel. Not chance as in Herodotus, not natural causes as in Thucydides, not the people as in J. R. Green, but God constitutes the basic reality of this history. As Massillon, the famous French preacher said: "God alone appears in this divine history. He is, I venture to say, its sole hero. Kings and conquerors appear as ministers of His will." Over the head of the enemies of Israel the prophets roll the denunciation:

¹⁸ Wood, *Christianity and the Nature of History*, 129.

of God's wrath against sin. These nations recognised no allegiance to the God of Israel, but the divine judgement awaits them because they have offended against the common conscience of mankind. Thus Hosea almost alone amongst his people refuses to bow down to the organised might of Assyria, convinced that not violence however armed, nor wickedness however entrenched, but righteousness rules the world. Nor has time failed to confirm his assurance that "the ways of the Lord are right, the just shall walk in them, but transgressors shall fall therein." Assyria was perhaps the most brutal and destructive incarnation of might the world ever saw. Yet no great nation ever vanished so utterly without leaving a wrack behind of anything to enrich mankind.¹⁹

The ways of the Lord are long ways, but since they are right they must in the end be sure. Not only so, but the prophets discern God's judgement on Israel itself in the vicissitudes of its history. The exile and the conquests to which they were subjected were not meaningless and mysterious events, but consequences of sin by which God permitted them to be judged for their eventual good. God's word of judgement is heard in the disastrous events of the Babylonian conquest, which appears as the dramatisation of the deeper disaster of spiritual and moral collapse. The Remnant that returned from exile, gifted with unparalleled insight, kept the form of religion but lost the spirit. As Toynbee points out, brooding over a talent they had buried, they "rejected the still greater treasure God now offered them in Christ."²⁰ They had for centuries been hoping for, dreaming and talking of a Messiah, and their Messiah came to be their Redeemer. A man appeared in history to be Man; history's centre because history's Lord. They rejected Him and, on the Cross, sentence is passed on that crowning act of apostacy. The subsequent fall of Jerusalem ratifies, as it were, their rejection, for Jerusalem fell for the same reason that it rejected Christ. It fell through nationalistic ambition. Called to a unique spiritual destiny as the trustees of the knowledge of the true God, the Jews preferred to cling to their secular and worldly ambitions. That preference led to their rejection of Christ. It also led to their extinction as a nation, for it made them a nuisance to imperial Rome, which was not tolerant of nuisances. So Christ read in their rejection of Himself their coming doom. "If thou hadst known in this thy day the things that belong unto thy peace" but now, "seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be cast down!" In the fall of Jerusalem, for

¹⁹ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, 464ff. Oman, *Honest Religion*, 57ff.

²⁰ Toynbee, *op. cit.*, Vol. IV, 263.

a characteristic that involved the repudiation of Christ, God speaks in judgement.

God did not cease to speak in judgement when the Christian era began. Sin bears its bitter and revealing fruit in the fall of Rome. No doubt, as Sir Samuel Dill's volumes have shown, the accounts of the low morality of the later Empire, like the report of the death of Mark Twain, may have been grossly exaggerated; yet the fall of Rome was inevitable because the Empire, despite Constantine, was not founded upon political principles that derived from the fear of God. Rome fell largely because its social fabric came to rest increasingly on slavery, and slavery is contrary to the truth about human nature as it is revealed in Christ. In the fall of Rome, because it based its civilisation on a principle alien from the mind of Christ, the voice of God is heard in judgement.

When the Roman Empire went down the Christian Church remained standing. No one can withhold admiration from the early popes like Leo III as he overawes Attila the Hun on the plain of Mincio, or Gaiseric the Vandal at the gates of Rome, nor doubt that the sense of confidence and stability that lies beneath all the turmoil of the Middle Ages was due to the Christian Church. Yet medieval Europe broke up because the Church, in its effort to make the world God's Kingdom, surrendered to the world by adopting its methods, and even its vices. Ranke, in his *History of the Popes*, expressly disclaims any intention of expressing any moral judgement; yet no considering student can fail to see that the violence and crimes of the later Papacy had long shaken the moral authority of the Papacy and added the roll of thunder to Luther's words, and provided the setting in which the power of the Vatican in its ancient form was shattered for ever. We might go on and refer to how in the French Revolution a privileged order that had abused its power was swept away and, in Carlyle's phrase, it was shown that "a Lie cannot endure for ever."²¹ But what need to go further? In our own day we have seen God entering the pulpit and preaching judgement in His own way by deeds. And "his sermons are long and taxing and they spoil the dinner."²² The operations of history in our own day reveal the divine judgement. We who have lived through the most far flung and appallingly destructive war in man's bloody annals, and are still living amidst its seething unrest, can hardly doubt that God's voice speaks in judgement. The ruins of our vaunted civilisation speak to us of His condemnation of our manner of life. "May not the very instability of our times that fills us

²¹ *History of the French Revolution*, Bk. II, Chap. III.

²² Forsyth, *op. cit.*, 23.

with forebodings of more awful conflicts yet to come be God's method of bringing home to us our human insufficiency, and our desperate need of Him?"²³

To concentrate attention upon the revelation of God in the moral order of history and the ruin that follows when moral truth is repudiated is not to "sell out" in favour of a naked theology of crisis. God is always at work in history in every right choice made by man, in every true prophet, in every beginning of an upward tendency. The growth of civilisations and cultures reveals His power, and the delay of judgement, His long-suffering.²⁴ Yet it is out of the crises that His voice sounds forth. Not, indeed, that the voice of God in history is one of mere doom. God's blessings are always ready for and promised to men if they will repent and believe. "His judgements are never precipitate, and the possibilities of repentance are many." History teaches us that apart from the fear of the Lord there can be no purity, stability or permanence in the life of a nation. But if the reality of faith in God is dominant in the life of a nation or civilisation, then it is not inevitable that that nation or civilisation should suffer dissolution. Judgement is never God's last word. His Word reacts in judgement to the evil in human life, but beyond judgement lies renewal. History is not only the voice of God's judgement; it is His unwearying appeal to man. His Word awaits the response of obedience to His will revealed in Christ. We Christians must not merely lie down in front of events and allow them to roll over us. We must live ourselves into history. We must hear through the events of secular history the voice of the living God, and in penitence and courage respond, "Lord, here am I. Send me."²⁵ For if history is not precisely a cordial for drooping spirits, it is at least, "a powerful stimulus to a sense of responsibility."²⁶ Carlyle, in an oddly moving passage in his *French Revolution*, describes old France, the old French form of life, under the figure of a fireship sailing away "into the Deep of Time."²⁷ The image appeals to us, for we, too, may seem to be sailing away on our own burning fireship into the Deep of Time.

But the nightmare of Plato's *Politicus* is not true; the divine helmsman has not let go the rudder of the Cosmos. If men have ears to hear His voice as He speaks through history, the organ of His self-revelation, then they

²³ Coffin, *God Confronts Man in History*, 50.

²⁴ Niebuhr, *Nature and Destiny of Man*, Vol. II, Chap. X, 316.

²⁵ Barry, *Church and Leadership*, 13.

²⁶ Gore, *Christ and Society*, Lec. I, Chap. III, 30.

²⁷ Bk. III, Chap. 2.

may yet be piloted through the drear and the dark. And if not, if as Forsyth says: "the Kingdom of God not only got over the murder of Christ, but made it its great lever, there is nothing that it cannot get over." Civilisation may collapse because it deserves to collapse, but "the Divine Kingdom is yet immune from its doom." The City of God remaineth!

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Manual of Elocution for the Ministry, by Frank Philip. (T. and T. Clark, 6s.)

This modest but valuable handbook by the Fulton Lecturer in Sacred Elocution at New College, Edinburgh, is to be heartily welcomed, and should be read by all candidates for the Christian ministry. Its scope is somewhat wider than the title suggests, for Mr. Philip touches on a number of matters, such as a minister's use of his time, his methods of sermon preparation, and so on, which are commonly included under pastoral theology. But he rightly observes that while pastoral duties may seem at first sight to have little connection with Elocution, yet they are inevitably involved as part of "the vocal background." The voice is, in fact, affected by "everything that makes you what you are—your upbringing, your education, your training, your experience, your interests, your mode of living, your beliefs, your everything." (Compare Canon Liddon's remark that "Speech is the dress which the inner life of the soul takes when it would pass into another soul.")

In obedience to this conviction, Mr. Philip discusses in simple, forceful language both the correct use of the voice, and the right approach to the various elements of a minister's pulpit work. Of particular value are the author's insistence upon the fundamental importance of correct breathing, and his explanation (with the aid of diagrams) of what is involved in developing an effective style of public address. He recognises that this sort of instruction requires to be supplemented by a viva voce training. Yet no minister who carefully studies and applies the principles here set out can fail to profit by them, and to find and give increasing satisfaction in his public work.

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