

Making Room in History for the Miraculous part I

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The question of the relationship of miracle to history has been brought into sharp focus in the public mind by the recent remarks of the Bishop of Durham on the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection. Behind this debate, however, lie philosophical considerations about the nature of history and revelation which must be explored if we are to put the matter in its proper context.

Modern historiography in the nineteenth century tended to be based upon certain scientific assumptions about the world which appeared to rule out the miraculous. In the twentieth century historians have been inclined to the view that history must establish its own criteria for judging the authenticity of historical events, criteria based not so much upon science as upon the study of history itself. But this also, since the subject matter of history is regarded as what man has accomplished, was given a man-centred orientation which was inimical to revelation and miracle in a truly religious sense.

The response of theology generally to this humanistic and secular bias in the historical method was to retreat from the objective world and 'real' history and to regard accounts of the miraculous as religious readings of natural events. Such a dichotomy between the secular and the sacred, between ordinary history and religious faith cannot really be maintained and theologians have been forced back to the problem of the relationship of miracle to history. Thus we find Alan Richardson in his Bampton Lectures, 1962, entitled *History Sacred and Profane*, declaring that it was time to reopen the question of revelation and history and ask 'whether there are any good *historical* reasons for supposing that a Divine revelation, such as the Bible attests, cannot have been vouchsafed in the midst of ordinary, everyday "secular" history, the history which working historians handle. Such an enquiry', he continued, 'raises the whole question of the miraculous. How do we go about answering this question in the light of contemporary attitudes towards history?'¹ How, in other words, do we deal with the humanistic and secular bias that is built into the historical method and modern historiography?

History and Interpretation

Richardson believed that in answering this question the theologian has an ally in modern historiography. He rejected the notion that historical questions can be settled in advance of the evidence. 'The

integrity of history as an autonomous discipline demands . . . that the historian should reject all ready-made answers; and this is true whether the answers are offered by actual participants in the particular events or by philosophers discoursing upon the nature of events in general. The question whether a particular event happened is a historical question, and cannot be settled by philosophical ratiocination; it can be settled only by the employment of the methods which historians use in the assessment of historical evidence'.²

What then is the nature of the evidence for that greatest of miracles — the Resurrection? The first thing, Richardson says in such an enquiry is to recognise that the trend of contemporary thinking seems to be against the distinction between facts and faith or between history and interpretation. 'It appears to be widely held today that there are no such things as bare facts and that history is from first to last interpretation.'³ He reminds us that 'Croce somewhat obscurely and Collingwood more incisively' criticised the theory that facts precede interpretation. But in case they should be thought of as tainted with idealism, he turns to Becker, who regarded History as 'just history' and nothing else, for the justification of the contemporary view that the distinction between fact and interpretation is untenable. The facts are only the interpretation of evidence and to that interpretation the historian must bring his own individual experience. Thus 'the historians' facts are mental in the sense that they are nowhere if they are not in someone's mind; as such they are present facts, and how they are related to noumenal or immutable past facts is a question not for the historian, but for the critical philosopher of history.'⁴

This, he argues, has a considerable influence upon our thinking about the evidence for Christ's Resurrection, because how the evidence is interpreted depends upon the standpoint taken by the historian, the attitude, understanding and experience which he brings to the consideration of his subject. Two things are necessary if the resurrection is to be regarded as an historical event, judged by the canons of modern historiography. First, there must be 'credible attestation on the part of witnesses to the happenings which could not be more rationally accounted for by some alternative hypothesis.' Secondly, the attestation must accord with the 'deepest understanding and experience of life' of the historian. He has not, as was formerly thought, an open, impartial mind and no preconceived ideas. His preconceptions are determined by the climate of opinion around him. Living in this climate of opinion he has acquired unconsciously certain settled convictions as to the nature of man and the world. This means that it is not purely technical and critical judgement that determines on which side of a question such as that of the resurrection of Christ the historian will come down. It is

determined by the personal stance, attitude and faith of the individual who examines the matter, and attitudes and experience can be acquired not merely from the positivistic spirit of the age, but also from the faith of the Christian community. Thus what we have is a plurality of attitudes, bodies of opinion and settled convictions from which the evidence may be judged. However rigorous and critical the appraisal of the case, in the last resort, the historian's judgement is determined by what kind of man he is.

The Christian makes his judgement of the evidence upon the basis of his own 'settled convictions' concerning God, man and the world. But these are different from those of the secularist age in which he lives. 'Apart from faith in the divine revelation through the biblical history, such as will enable us to declare with conviction that Christ is risen indeed, the judgement that the resurrection of Jesus is an historical event is unlikely to be made, since the rational motive for making it will be absent. Historians are not provided by their critical studies with a technique that enables them to escape the decision of faith; and in this matter, as in others, everyman is (in Becker's phrase but not quite in his sense) "his own historian".'⁵

Richardson believes that this contemporary approach to history can be used to justify the view that the resurrection is a historical event. Historical in terms of the ordinary understanding of history, and not some special realm of salvation history that is immune from the canons of ordinary historical judgement. Whether this argument is quite as satisfactory as Richardson claims it is, we shall consider later. First we have to notice that another writer, also basing his examination of the historical evidence of the New Testament upon modern historical method, comes to a different conclusion.

The Historical Method

T.A. Roberts in his book *History and Christian Apologetic* examines the principles of historical methodology. The problem of deciding whether a document reports what is true is that of comparison. At the bottom of nearly all criticism there is a problem of comparison.⁶ Another side of this problem is assessing the probability of historical events having taken place. In assessing this the historian must assume that 'the universe and society possess sufficient uniformity to exclude the possibility of overly pronounced deviations.'⁷ If this assumption is made the historian accepts as his guide of what happened in the past the knowledge of the universe and of the world which modern science has given him. The growing body of scientific knowledge has contributed to the gradual evolution of the idea of the world governed by natural laws. The historian must assume that these laws applied equally to bygone times, and this allows him to sweep aside as fictitious many of the accounts of alleged events which the past bequeathed.

When the historian has thus critically examined his material his task is not finished for he must then seek to explain it. He must not simply describe, but understand the past. 'To say why some event happened is as important for the historian as to be able to say that it happened.'⁸ One of the chief characteristics of historical explanation is that it is predominantly an attempt to explain human behaviour. In this respect, despite the difficulties which the historian sometimes faces, his task to explain human conduct is not essentially different from that of everyday life. It depends upon the shrewdness, sympathy and understanding with which he reads human nature.

Roberts takes these principles of contemporary historical method and applying them to the subject matter of the New Testament comes to distinctly negative conclusions about being able to assess the historical character of the events relating to the life of Jesus. The reason for this is implicit in the historical method itself. It would appear that Richardson too readily assumed that the method in its contemporary form is favourable to Christian apologetics. Roberts' conclusion is that pursued consistently it confronts the historical theologian with a dilemma: 'On the one hand, if Christianity is not to be cut adrift from its historical roots, the question . . . is the gospel true? must be answered at the first level by a rigorous application of historical criticism, with all its techniques and methods for assessing the reliability of evidence about the past. But historical criticism is essentially a secular tool, fashioned to meet secular interests, and thus by its nature useless to evaluate religious affirmations of Faith. Yet the very documents which we seek to examine historically were written from Faith to Faith, bearing witness to the Word which became Flesh, dwelling amongst us, and revealing the glory of the Only-begotten Son of God. How this dilemma is to be resolved is the most pressing problem in the field of Christian apologetic.'⁹

The dilemma ('crisis' would not be too strong a word) within historical theology arises, and this Roberts acknowledges, from the very character and orientation of the historical method, which is inimical to the question of the supernatural, raised by the documents of the Christian faith. 'Historical investigation proceeds on the assumption that a study of the past is only possible if the supernatural is shouldered out of the way, for historical study knows no techniques or methods for evaluating the supernatural.'¹⁰ This should occasion no surprise because the historical method is based on the principle of analogy or experience and the historian's task is seen pre-eminently as that of attempting to explain *human* behaviour.

The same principle could be illustrated from any other recent statement of historical methodology. Collingwood, for instance, saw the autonomy of the historian as residing in the body of historical knowledge and experience that he brings to his study, and has built up out of his study of history. It is true that Collingwood is critical of

too great a dependence upon science for the criterion of history, and insists that that criterion is never a ready-made experience, but something which derives from the experience of historical thinking itself. It is difficult to see, however, how that knowledge can ever transcend the anthropocentric orientation that controls it. History, Collingwood insists, is the 'science of human nature'. It is the study of the 'inside' of events, of the human thoughts and motives that gave rise to them. Collingwood comes close to saying that events that cannot be explained in terms of human thought and motivation are not historical at all. History is the science of *res gestae*, the attempt to answer questions about human actions done in the past. So the scope and nature of the questions that will be asked are already determined. In answering the question — what history is for, Collingwood answers that it is for human self knowledge. 'The value of history is that it teaches us what man has done and thus what man is.'¹¹

What is peculiar to this whole understanding is its anthropocentrism. The historical method has built into it a distinct and inescapable orientation in the direction of the human and the natural. It is, as Roberts says, a secular tool fashioned for secular interests. It should not surprise us, therefore, that every question it discusses is coloured with this viewpoint, that in its study of every problem it must come up with a naturalistic answer. What is written into the premises must be found in the conclusion. To pursue the historical critical method, as it stands, in relation to the Christian faith, which claims a revelation in history, can only lead ultimately to the crisis that Roberts has outlined, and the choice then is that Christian theology has either to renounce its claim to a historical revelation and take refuge in subjectivism, which regards external revelation and the supernatural as simply the religious reading of natural events which in themselves are wholly amenable to historical criticism, or to continue to speak of Christianity as historical, but in inverted commas, that is, *not historical in the accepted sense of history*.

Tendency to scepticism

There is, however, another course, and that is to question the anthropocentric assumptions upon which the method is based, and which determine the whole understanding of what is historical and what is not. This is the line that Pannenberg has taken and which we shall examine, but first we must attempt to explain why some theologians have appealed to the historical method as it stands as a vindication of Christian theology. There are principally two reasons. One is that some of them have not understood sufficiently the implications and limitations of what can result from the rigorous and consistent application of the principles of historical criticism to a document like the New Testament. They have either chosen to

disregard or have been unaware of the anthropocentrism inherent in the method, which must lead to a conclusion inimical to the Christian faith as a historical religion.

Secondly, and perhaps more seriously, there have been other theologians like Richardson who have seized upon the concept of experience, which the method declares is inseparable from the historian's interpretation of evidence, and have made this the foothold for faith. The trouble with the latter position is that it leads ultimately to historical scepticism. Indeed, this is the danger inherent in Collingwood's position. E.H. Carr warns of this; 'the emphasis on the role of the historian in the making of history tends, if pressed to its logical conclusion, to rule out any objective history at all: history is what the historian makes. Collingwood seems, indeed, at one moment, in an unpublished note quoted by his editor, to have reached this conclusion: "St Augustine looked at history from the point of view of the early Christian; Tillemont, from that of a seventeenth century Frenchman; Gibbon from that of an eighteenth century Englishman; Mommsen from that of a nineteenth century German. There is no point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only possible one for the man who adopted it". This amounts to total scepticism, like Froude's remark that history is "a child's box of letters with which we can spell any word we please". Collingwood in his reaction against "scissors-and-paste history", the view of history as a mere compilation of facts, comes perilously near to treating history as something spun out of the human brain, and leads back to the conclusion . . . that there is no "objective" historical truth.'¹²

The reasons for, and the steps leading to, this decline into subjectivism and scepticism are, I believe, fairly clear. The notion that the historian uses experience by which to interpret the facts of history is all very well as long as you believe that there is a consensus in society about what that experience is. In late Victorian times when science enjoyed great prestige, F. H. Bradley and others assumed that the body of scientific knowledge supplied that consensus.¹³ It seemed a solid foundation from which to interpret history; indeed, there seemed no possibility of it changing substantially in the future. Collingwood criticised Bradley for his dependence upon science and claimed that history has its own body of knowledge which can be built up independently of science. But he seems to have moved gradually in the direction of a plurality of experiences, partly because society itself was moving in that direction, and as we have seen ended up with a multiplicity of histories, which tends to make nonsense of the concept altogether.

The same is true of the American historian, Becker, to whom Richardson appeals. His insistence upon the historian's interpretative role depends in the first place upon his belief that there was a

universally valid 'climate of opinion' of the age, which made some kind of objective reference possible. But once this consensus begins to break up and the whole notion of a climate of opinion is abandoned the concept of history becomes untenable. If every man is indeed his own historian then there is no history at all.

Now it is really this tendency to scepticism inherent in modern historiography that some theologians have taken hold of as a justification for Christianity being a historical religion! To invoke this mood in contemporary historical thinking, and particularly its more extreme expression, and make it a ground for establishing the historicity of the resurrection, in accordance with the principles of present historical methodology, is surely a mistake.

The notion of the autonomy of the historian depends upon his having a base in experience, but the ground instead of being solid is seen to be shifting. His problem is in saying where exactly the consensus lies. It is the same problem which Hume encountered when he tried to formulate the same thing, to give concrete expression to what he meant by a 'firm unalterable experience' which he proposed to make his criterion for interpreting history and excluding the miraculous.¹⁴ But the ambiguity of the word 'experience' defeated him. He never quite succeeded in making clear to himself or anyone else what he meant by the word experience.

Critique of criticism

There are, then, good reasons why the theologian should not accept the principles of the historical method as they stand. The methods of criticism themselves call for critical examination and assessment. In his essay 'Redemptive Event and History' Wolfhart Pannenberg offers us a critique of historical method.

Early in the development of the historical method there was a strong anthropocentrism, which tended to make man the measure of all things. Historical events being, it was assumed, produced by men can only be properly understood or reconstructed on the analogy of the universally human. It does not follow, however, that the principles of the historical method, while they do contain an essentially anthropocentric element, must necessarily be bound to this particular anthropocentric world view.

The area of conflict between the historical method and theology resides not so much in the principle of correlation or correspondence of all historical phenomena (for it belongs to the Incarnation that it takes place within the collateral relations of history, and not in some historical-redemptive vacuum) but in the principle of analogy, which is the root of the historical method.

The usefulness of this principle as a tool to cast light upon the past is indisputable, but it comes into conflict with theology when it is erected into a speculative principle for determining all historical

events, i.e. when 'instead of pointing out analogies from case to case one postulates a fundamental homogeneity of all reality with the current range of experience and research'.¹⁵ The elevation of 'analogy' to this dominating position in historical inquiry has led to a constriction of history and the impairing of the true usefulness of the principle itself, for the essence of it is to reveal the common characteristics of what are non-homogeneous things. The omnipotence of the principle of analogy has resulted in the obliteration of the particular and contingent. 'Nothing that has been said disputes the cognitive power of analogy in historical study. But this power is the greater, the more sharply the limitation of analogy is recognised in each case. Historical method has always enjoyed its greatest triumphs where it could exhibit concrete common possession, and never where it engaged in absolutizing extrapolations of analogies.'¹⁶

A proper recognition of the limits of the principle of analogy is, therefore, necessary when we approach the history of redemption, for it is characteristic of revelatory history that the stress should fall upon what is particular and new and even unique. 'For this reason, it is especially important for the historical research carried out within Christian theology that analogies between historical events should not be one-sidedly employed as expressions of homogeneity but rather used to determine in each case the degree and limits of an analogy.'¹⁷ If this understanding of analogy is retained it cannot be used in advance to determine the reality of historical events. 'That a reported event bursts analogies with otherwise usual or repeatedly attested events is still no ground for disputing its facticity.'¹⁸ Of course, the alleged factualness of many unusual events may be negated by their being compared without remainder with common experience such as hallucinations or deception; but where such analogies are pursued to the limit and still the event transcends the comparisons related to it, it may not be eliminated arbitrarily simply on the presumption of the fundamental homogeneity of all reality. The postulate of the fundamental homogeneity of all events usually forms the chief argument against the historicity of the resurrection of Jesus. For that reason the opinion which has come to be regarded as virtually self-evident, that the resurrection of Jesus cannot be an historical event, rests on a remarkably weak foundation. Only the particular characteristics of the reports about it make it possible to judge the historicity of the resurrection, not the prejudgment that every event must be fundamentally of the same kind as every other.

The Miraculous and History

It is from such historically ascertainable 'alien' events that the knowledge of God's revelation and disclosure of himself derives. We cannot either think or speak about the God of revelation except through a concept gained in such a way. This understanding of the

relation of revelation to history, and particularly the dependence of faith upon history bear a threatening appearance for some, for it has been thought in the past dangerous to expose faith in this way to the uncertainty and vulnerability of history. But the believer must not succumb to the temptation to seek out an 'invulnerable area' where faith can be independent of history. In the past this search arose from a misunderstanding of the role of the principle of analogy in historical method. It was assumed that the spheres of revelation and history were incompatible and mutually exclusive. The result was that faith was based upon itself rather than upon history. A proper critique of the historical method permits the believer to trust 'that the facticity of the event upon which he bases himself will continually be upheld throughout the progress of historical research. The history of the critical-historical investigation of the biblical witnesses, especially of the New Testament, by no means gives the appearance of discouraging such confidence.'¹⁹

If faith is to be saved from mere subjectivism, from the reproach that it rests upon illusion and caprice, it must be rooted not only in a historically ascertainable event, but that event must itself contain the revelatory and redemptive element. It must not be a value added to it by the interpretation of faith, and so removed in principle from rational investigation, but it must be something that inheres in the event itself and so gives it priority over faith. 'Only if the revelatory significance is enclosed in the events themselves will one be able to speak here of . . . an entrance of God into our mode of existence. But then it will be impossible, *in principle*, to reject out of hand the idea that historical investigation of this event, even in its particularity, could and must discover its revelatory character.'²⁰

The presuppositions, then, upon which the historical method is based call for some qualification if they are to have any viable or fruitful relationship with historical theology. Much of the trouble in the past has lain in the absolutism of the principle of analogy. It has been assumed too readily that if that is modified in any way at all it will make historical research impossible. Thus Roberts argues, the Christian may object that 'the historian is not entitled to assume . . . a certain degree of uniformity in society and the universe between the present and the past. This would counter the historian's claim that the resurrection is on his assumption a highly improbable event. To this objection, we would reply, that the historian does in fact assume a measure of uniformity in society and the universe, and that, further, without this assumption, historical activity would be impossible.'²¹ But this is the old cry of science in the 19th century, viz. unless induction can be established absolutely and its results regarded as universally binding then science cannot be carried on. It was, in fact, no more vital to what science was doing to prove that there could be no exceptions to natural law than it was necessary to orthodox

Christianity to show that the basis of scientific induction was irrational. Similarly, historical study will in no way be jeopardised by having to acknowledge that the existence of the unique and the miraculous is compatible with it, and that these, if established by the evidence appropriate to them, are equally entitled to be called historical. Experience is not an infallible guide, but also it is equally wrong to say that if experience is not a reliable guide on all occasions, it is reliable on none. This all or nothing attitude has been responsible for the impasse between the historical method and theology and there can be no real reconciliation until there is some moderation of it which is consistent with reason.

To be continued

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NOTES

- 1 Alan Richardson, *History Sacred and Profane* (SCM Press 1964), p.185.
- 2 *Ibid.*, p.189.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p.190.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.192.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p.212.
- 6 T.A. Roberts, *History and Christian Apologetic* (SPCK, London 1960), p.35.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p.37.
- 8 *Ibid.*, p.38.
- 9 *Ibid.*, p.174.
- 10 *Ibid.*, p.173.
- 11 R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford 1946), p.10.
- 12 E.H. Carr, *What is History?* (Macmillan 1961), pp.20, 21.
- 13 F.H. Bradley, *The Presuppositions of Critical History*.
- 14 See David Hume, *Of Miracles*.
- 15 W. Pannenberg, *Basic Questions in Theology* (SCM Press 1970), p.45.
- 16 *Ibid.*, p.47.
- 17 *Ibid.*, p.48.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p.49.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p.56.
- 20 *Ibid.*, p.61.
- 21 T.A. Roberts, *op.cit.*, p.160.